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Distinguishing Male Juvenile Offenders through Personality Traits, Coping Strategies, Feelings of Guilt and Level of Anger

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On the basis of a comparative, descriptive, cross-sectional study, our aim was to determine differential traits of adolescent offenders with respect to personality traits, feelings of guilt, level of anger, and coping strategies. 128 adolescent residents of Barcelona (86 high school students and 42 young inmates aged between 16 and 18 years) replied to a variety of questionnaires (SC-35, EPQ-R, STAXI, ACS). Significant differences between the two groups were found. Young offenders present higher levels of guilt feelings, neuroticism, psychoticism, and trait anger. They also tend to repress their anger or, on the contrary, express it verbally and physically and use passive or avoidance coping strategies. Education and psychological therapy focussed on guilt may contribute to reduce recidivism.

Keywords: adolescence, young offenders, coping strategies, anger, guilt.

A partir de un estudio comparativo, descriptivo y transversal, se pretende conocer algunos rasgos diferenciales de adolescentes infractores en relación a la personalidad, el sentimiento de culpa, el nivel de ira y las estrategias de afrontamiento. Se administraron el SC-35, el EPQ-R, el STAXI y el ACS a 128 adolescentes de Barcelona (86 estudiantes y 42 infractores institucionalizados, de edades comprendidas entre los 16 y 18 años). Se observaron diferencias significativas entre los grupos estudiados. Los jóvenes infractores presentan niveles más elevados de culpa, neuroticismo, psicoticismo e ira rasgo. Así mismo, tienden a reprimir la ira o, por el contrario, a expresarla verbal y físicamente y acostumbran a utilizar estrategias de afrontamiento pasivas o de carácter evitativo. El trabajo psicológico y educativo sobre la culpa puede reducir la reincidencia.

Palabras clave: adolescencia, delincuencia juvenil, estrategias de afrontamiento, ira, culpa.
Delinquency and antisocial behaviour are determined by individual and environmental factors. In recent decades, the number of studies on juvenile delinquency has increased remarkably. Far from considering young offenders as ill, it seems convenient to encourage educational actions aimed at promoting their learning of new skills, capacities, and competences, in order to enhance their social integration starting from what has been called the paradigm of social competence (Garrido, 2005). This option intensifies an individualized intervention, designed based on the learners' potentialities, which have to be strengthened, by compensating risk factors through the opportune activation of protective factors (Costa, Mato, & Morales, 1999).

The analyses carried out, linked to the duality of delinquency and personality, highlight the relationship between both constructs (Sobral, Romero, & Luengo, 1998). From an integrated perspective, those aspects of personality that facilitate or inhibit the person’s involvement in antisocial activities are analysed. Thus, for example, high scores in psychoticism, impulsivity, and sensation seeking, among others, have been identified as variables that promote antisocial behaviour (Chico, 1998; Díaz & Báguena, 1989; Lykken, 2000a; Otero-López, Romero & Luengo, 1994), and likewise low susceptibility to reward (Gomá-i-Freixenet, Grande, Valero & Punti, 2001; Ross, Fabiano & Garrido, 1990; Tremblay, Phil, Vitaro & Dobkin, 1994) and absence of fear (Lykken, 2000a). Other rigorous approaches to the phenomenon of criminal behaviour have attempted to delimit the “sensation seeking” variable, according to which offending behaviour emerges as a response to a constant need for stimulation (Aluja & Torrubia, 1996; Arnett, 1996).

In this sense, everything seems to show that those personality traits that promote uninhibited behaviour, particularly sensation seeking and impulsivity, hinder the rehabilitation process of offenders (Ardil, Forcadell, Miranda, & Pérez, 2006). For their part, Mestre, Samper, and Frias (2004) concluded that emotional processes correlate with aggressive behaviour, with emotional instability and disposition to emit anger responses standing out as main predictors of aggressiveness, whereas empathy seems to be the main predictor of prosocial behaviour. In this sense, Jolliffe and Farrington (2004), in their research on the influence of empathy in antisocial behaviour, found that cognitive empathy (ability to identify and understand the situation and/or emotional state of another person) and, to a lesser extent, affectiveness (ability to experience emotions which are similar or congruent with the emotional state observed in another person) present a pattern of negative relationship with detected or official delinquency. In other words, delinquents and/or aggressive subjects present lower levels of empathy.

One particularly promising field of analysis lies in the adolescent’s coping ability, understood as a process through which a set of strategies is used with the aim of coping with stressful or difficult situations (Chico, 2000; Ojeda, Ramal, Calvo, & Vallespin, 2001), which requires intensifying prevention and mental health support among the adolescent population at risk (Hampel & Petermann, 2005), cognitive strategies (Mohino, Kirchner, & Forns, 2004), and stable consolidation of parental bonds (Kraaij et al., 2003). In fact, the study of coping strategies is a priority when dealing with situations of stress and modulating physical, psychological and social well-being (Castro et al., 1995). Other studies detect significant differences between young offenders and non-offenders when resorting to coping styles and strategies (Ruchkin, Eisemann, & Hägglöf, 1999).

A literature review reveals different uses of the concept of coping. The coping phenomenon has to be considered within the cognitive-methodological frame of reference, where the person and the environment have a dynamic, reciprocal and bidirectional relationship. It is defined as an instrumental behaviour and a capacity to solve problems, with some balance between expected goals and society demands, and integrating skills, technique and acquired knowledge (Mechanich, 1986). In short, it is handling difficult, unusual situations, which involve developing new strategic actions and new instrumental behaviours (Rowland, 1990), thus becoming an operation that regulates efforts, aimed at keeping a desirable level of personal functioning in the face of demands and on the basis of one’s own personal resources (Valdés & Arroyo, 2002). In this sense, it is particularly important to intensify skills and competences within the same community, promoting the development of coping styles and strategies (Frydenberg et al., 2003). Nevertheless, there are still remarkable differences between authors when categorizing the cognitive and behavioural processes that make up these strategies, and there are few rigorous and sufficiently contrasted assessment procedures available (Crespo & Cruzado, 1997). It seems clear that coping requires active methods that stimulate personal growing strategies, relationship with others, and expression of emotions as ways of adapting (Pernas et al., 2001). Family coping has to be understood as something more than family responses to a stressor; it is rather a group of interactions within the family, and transactions between the family and the community (Ruano, & Serra, 2000), in such a way that coping changes over time (Olson et al., 1989) and varies as a result of the stressor and its seriousness, the accumulation of other demands, the level of disturbance in the family system, as well as the availability and use of intrafamily and community resources (McCubbin, Thompson, & McCubbin, 1996). In short, we can consider that the appropriate control of tension in the face of stressors seems to determine successful coping efforts and the concurrent well-being. As Antonovsky (1988) considered, a disturbing
stimulus creates a state of tension, which the subject has to fight against. The degree of adjustment when managing or controlling this tension in daily life will determine whether the result is psychopathological, neutral or salutogenic.

Another area of analysis has to do with feelings of guilt. Guilt usually regulates undesirable social behaviour, thus promoting self-control and leading to an awareness of bad actions, as well as a compensation for possible harm to other people (Echeburúa, De Corral, & Amor, 2001). When these feelings, in principle adaptive (Avia & Vázquez, 2001; Tangney, 1996), are experienced too frequently, with too much intensity or for too long, they may have a negative incidence in personal well-being, thus losing their regulating character and in some cases leading to pathological behaviours. In turn, those educational styles centred on physical punishment produce aggressive responses, while psychological punishment results in intense feelings of guilt (Bybee, 1998). In any case, we understand the feeling of guilt as healthy when it evolves from fear to punishment or from personal discomfort to regret about having caused pain, as it is this latter action that allows for rectification and compensation (Zabalegui, 1997), thus shifting from cognitive empathy to true emotional empathy (Echeburúa, De Corral, & Amor, 2001). This phenomenon of guilt does not appear in the same way or with the same intensity in every developmental stage, with some gender differences included. Whereas adolescent girls seem much more concerned by the fact of telling lies (Tangney, 1992; Williams, & Bybee, 1994) and looking down on interpersonal relationships (Etxebarria, & Pérez, 2003), boys show more guilt due to the aggressiveness in their behaviours and ill-treatment of animals (Williams, & Bybee, 1994). Guilt has a significant interpersonal and relational root, as well as an unavoidable social function (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Etxebarria, & Pérez, 2003; Jones, Kugler, & Adams, 1995), thus making it an emotion that ought to be considered as contributing to learning self-control and acquiring prosocial and compensating competences (Etxebarria, 2000).

As an end to this itinerary of theoretical reflection, we can consider anger, hostility, and aggression. The definition of these three constructs has at times been rather ambiguous and, in some cases, contradictory (Miguel-Tobal, Casado, Cano-Vindel, & Spielberger, 2001). Usually, anger is considered as a more basic concept than hostility and aggression. Anger refers to a psychobiological, emotional state or condition, which consists of feelings of a variable intensity (from annoyance or irritation to anger or fury), and goes together with the activation of neuroendocrine systems and the arousal of the autonomous nervous system. Thus, while anger relates to feelings, the concepts of hostility and aggression are usually used to refer to negative attitudes, as well as destructive and punishing behaviours.

Among the most notable findings related to anger, hostility and aggression in the delinquent population are those of Caspi, Moffitt, Newman, and Silva (1994), who reported a relationship between delinquency and negative emotiveness. That is, a marked tendency among delinquents to be annoyed, anxious and irritable. Krueger et al., cited by Rutter, Giller, and Hagell (1998), upon comparing people who abstained from committing acts of delinquency with people involved in delinquent acts, but only in their adolescence, found that the non-offenders were notable for their docile, non-aggressive, non-imposing social style.

Another aspect to consider, as Dodge and Schwartz (1997) point out, is that aggressive individuals have a distorted manner of processing social information, characterised by a tendency to erroneously attribute hostile intentions to neutral or ambiguous social approaches, a tendency to make erroneous negative interpretations, and a tendency to be more aware of aggressive social stimuli than non-aggressive ones. According to these authors, hostile attribution tendencies are predictive of posterior aggressive behaviours. Rutter, Giller, and Hagell (1998), note that although timidity itself constitutes a protective factor, in combination with aggressiveness it becomes a factor for antisocial behaviour.

In the light of these considerations, our study focuses on comparing adolescent offenders and non-offenders, in terms of sociodemographic characteristics, personality traits, coping strategies, and feelings of guilt and anger with the aim of improving psycho-educational therapy in internment centres.

Method

Participants

The first group of adolescents came from the educational centre Els Tíl·lers. This is a closed educational institution for young offenders with ages ranging from 14 to 23 years old, located in the town of Mollet del Vallès (Barcelona) and belonging to the Direcció General de Justícia Juvenil (General Directorate for Youth Justice - Department of Justice, Generalitat of Catalonia). Of the 76 young inmates during the months of April, May and June 2005, 44 met all inclusion criteria, i.e. they were males, with ages ranging from 16 to 18 years, who participated voluntarily, and had an instrumental command of Spanish. Thirty-two individuals had to be excluded because they were either female (n = 12), aged under 16 years (n = 13), aged over 18 (n = 4), refused to participate (n = 1), or did not have sufficient command of Spanish (n = 2). Remembering that offenders may be serving sentences for more than one crime at a time, the total number of crimes committed was 84, distributed as follows: Violent crimes (28.6%); crimes against personal freedom (5.9%); crimes against sexual freedom (2.4%); crimes
against property (51.2%); crimes against collective safety (1.2%); crimes against administration of justice (3.6%) and crimes against public order (7.1%). The average length of internment was 6.49 months, distributed according to intervals as follows: under 3 months: 1, from 3 to 6 months: 10, from 6 to 12 months: 32, and over 12 months: 1.

The control group was composed of 40 A-level students and 48 technical students from the two secondary schools Puig Castellà and Les Vinyes, both in Santa Coloma de Gramanet, a town located in a socioeconomically disadvantaged part of the metropolitan area of Barcelona. The Educational Projects of both schools explicitly state that they cover a population with medium-low socioeconomic level.

Of the initial 132 participants, 2 young offenders, 1 A-level student and 1 technical student were excluded as they met criteria of low honesty as proposed in Eysenck’s EPQ-R questionnaire: very high scores in the L (Lie) scale and the E (Extraversion) scale, and very low in both the P (Psychoticism) and N (Neuroticism) scales. Thus, the final sample consisted of 128 adolescents: 42 young offenders, 39 A-level students, and 47 technical students. None of the participants received any form of reward for participating in the study, and all signed informed consent.

**Instruments**

All the participants in the study filled in a questionnaire for sociodemographic data, with information concerning their age, country of origin, level of education, family situation, number of siblings, and number of salaries accumulating in the family home. In addition the following instruments were administered:

Eysenck’s *Personality Questionnaire* (EPQ-R), as adapted by Ortet, Ibáñez, Moro, and Silva (1997). This questionnaire consists of 83 dichotomised response items, distributed in three specific scales that correspond to the measurement of three personality dimensions: extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism. The extraversion dimension consists of nine personality traits: sociable, irresponsible, dominant, sensation seeking, lack of reflection, impulsive, risk-taking, expressive and active. Neuroticism consists of the nine personality traits: anxious, depressed, guilt feelings, low self-esteem, tense, moody, hypochondriac, lack of autonomy and obsessive. Finally, the nine traits of the psychoticism dimension are: aggressive, assertive, egocentric, unsympathetic, manipulative, achievement-oriented, dommatic, masculine and tough-minded. In addition, it includes a fourth scale of sincerity which attempts to measure dissimulation or the tendency in some people of active falsification (values α ranging between .73 and .86 in men).

*Adolescent Coping Scale* (ACS) by Frydenberg and Lewis (2000). This scale consists of a total of 80 items, 79 being Likert-type, and one open-ended. Together they permit assessing 18 different coping strategies: seeking social support, focus on solving the problem, work hard and achieve, worry, investing in close friends, seek to belong, wishful thinking, not coping, tension reduction, social action, ignore the problem, self-blame, keep to self, seek spiritual support, focus on the positive, seek professional help, seek relaxing diversions, and physical recreation (mean α for the 18 strategies = .71).

*State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory* (STAXI-2) by Spielberger, adapted by Miguel-Tobal, Casado, Canovas, and Spielberger (2001). This inventory consists of 49 Likert-type items distributed in three specific scales which correspond to measurement of state-anger, trait-anger and anger expressing index. The state-anger scale consists of 15 items which permit assessment of three different components of the intensity of anger a an emotional state of the subject at a particular instant. The three subscales which comprise it are: feeling, verbal expression and physical expression (α for state-anger = .89). Feeling of anger measures the intensity of feelings of anger experiences by a person in a particular moment. Verbal expression measures the intensity of current feelings related with the verbal expression of anger. Physical expression measures the intensity of current feelings related with physical expressions of anger. The trait-anger scale consists of 10 items which permit assessment of two different components of frequency and intensity with which anger is usually experienced. These two subscales are: anger temperament, and anger reaction (α for trait-anger = .82). Anger temperament measures the disposition to feel anger in the absence of any specific provocation. Anger reaction measures the frequency with which the subject experiences feelings of anger in situations involving frustration or negative assessments. The anger expression index consists of 24 items which permit assessing four different components related to the subject’s response when experiencing anger. The four subscales are: external expression of anger, internal expression of anger, external control of anger, and internal control of anger (α for external expression of anger = .69; α internal expression of anger = .67; α for external control of anger = .87; α for internal control of anger = .81). External expression of anger measures the frequency with which feelings of anger are expressed verbally or through physical aggressive behaviour. Internal expression of anger measures the frequency with which feelings of anger are experienced but not expressed. External control measures the frequency with which the person controls feelings of anger, avoiding manifestations toward people or objects in the environment. Internal control measures the frequency with which the person attempts to control their feelings of anger through keeping calm and moderation in annoying situations.

*Scale to measure feelings of guilt* (SC-35) by Zabalegui (1993). This scale consists of 35 items which permit measurement of the tendency or general disposition to experiment feelings of guilt in regard to those behaviours which are not in accord with a given scale of values.
**Procedure**

With regard to the group of young offenders, questionnaires were administered individually, in the framework of an interview, by the research team, with collaboration by an educator of their centre. On the contrary, the other two groups, A-level students and technical students, were administered the questionnaires in small groups of a maximum of eight people. Although the instruments used were easily understandable, certain criteria were agreed on to clarify possible doubts concerning the comprehension of items, as well as the sequence of test administration. Test administration did not exceed, in any case, 120 minutes per person.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis of collected data was carried out with the SPSS.14 statistical package. As the form of the sample and the variables analysed did not meet criteria of homogeneity (Levene) or normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov), non-parametrical tests were applied. Thus to determine differences among the three groups, independent-sample hypothesis contrast tests were carried out (Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U contrast statistics, respectively) for every dependent variable studied. To establish whether there were significant differences among the groups and the sociodemographic characteristics, Pearson’s chi-square, Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U contrast statistics were applied, taking into account that some variables were nominal, others were ordinal, and others were scales. The level of statistical significance was established at $\alpha = .05$.

**Results**

**Descriptive Analysis**

The mean age of the 128 youngsters was 16.88 years ($SD = .770$). To observe the distribution of sociodemographic variables, according to the three groups, firstly a descriptive analysis of the total sample was carried out (see Table 1).

Results showed the existence of significant differences among the three groups in the variables ‘culture of origin’, ‘family situation’, ‘father’s level of education’, ‘mother’s level of education’, and ‘number of siblings’.

An analysis of the differences between groups showed that there were more immigrants among the young offenders than in the groups of A-level and technical students. Likewise, in this group there were more individuals with widowed, separated, divorced parents and/or single mothers. Concerning the parents’ level of education (see figures 1 and 2), it is worth observing that the fathers of A-level students showed a significantly higher level of education than fathers of technical students ($U = 689.500; p = .036$) and fathers of young offenders ($U = 435.500; p = .005$). On the contrary, the mothers of A-level students only showed a significantly higher level of education than that of mothers of technical students ($U = 654.000; p = .010$).

**Bivariate Analysis**

To observe differences among the three groups of youngsters in every dependent variable, a second sample analysis was carried out by applying hypothesis contrast tests.
Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and levels of statistical significance in comparison of groups: A-level students (A), technical students (T), and young offenders (O)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociodemographic Characteristics</th>
<th>A (n/%)</th>
<th>T (n/%)</th>
<th>O (n/%)</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>17 (43.6)</td>
<td>9 (19.1)</td>
<td>20 (47.6)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>15 (38.5)</td>
<td>20 (42.6)</td>
<td>16 (38.1)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>7 (17.9)</td>
<td>18 (38.3)</td>
<td>6 (14.3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Origin</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>33 (84.6)</td>
<td>40 (85.1)</td>
<td>25 (59.5)</td>
<td>10.116</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant</td>
<td>6 (15.4)</td>
<td>7 (14.9)</td>
<td>17 (40.5)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10 (23.8)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>32 (76.2)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>47(100)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-levels</td>
<td>39 (100)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family situation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widow/er or single mother</td>
<td>2 (5.1)</td>
<td>3 (6.4)</td>
<td>9 (21.4)</td>
<td>26.149</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated or divorced parents</td>
<td>3 (7.7)</td>
<td>4 (8.5)</td>
<td>15 (35.7)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents living together</td>
<td>34 (87.2)</td>
<td>40 (85.1)</td>
<td>18 (42.9)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education of father</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without school-leaving certificate</td>
<td>2 (5.1)</td>
<td>15 (31.9)</td>
<td>16 (45.8)</td>
<td>8.606</td>
<td>.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-leaving certificate</td>
<td>23 (59)</td>
<td>18 (38.3)</td>
<td>11 (31.4)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>6 (15.4)</td>
<td>7 (14.9)</td>
<td>2 (5.7)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-levels</td>
<td>3 (7.7)</td>
<td>5 (10.7)</td>
<td>2 (5.7)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University education</td>
<td>5 (12.8)</td>
<td>2 (4.2)</td>
<td>4 (11.4)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education of mother</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without school-leaving certificate</td>
<td>6 (15.4)</td>
<td>16 (34)</td>
<td>17 (40.4)</td>
<td>6.099</td>
<td>.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-leaving certificate</td>
<td>23 (59)</td>
<td>27 (57.5)</td>
<td>14 (33.3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>4 (10.1)</td>
<td>1 (2.1)</td>
<td>6 (14.3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-levels</td>
<td>2 (5.2)</td>
<td>3 (6.4)</td>
<td>4 (9.6)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University education</td>
<td>4 (10.3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (2.4)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of siblings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10 (25.7)</td>
<td>6 (12.8)</td>
<td>1 (2.4)</td>
<td>34.032</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>21 (53.8)</td>
<td>26 (55.3)</td>
<td>11 (26.2)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5 (12.8)</td>
<td>11 (23.4)</td>
<td>8 (19)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 (7.7)</td>
<td>3 (6.4)</td>
<td>8 (19)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or more</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (2.1)</td>
<td>1 (2.4)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of salaries</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (2.1)</td>
<td>1 (2.4)</td>
<td>4.681</td>
<td>.096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One salary</td>
<td>20 (51.3)</td>
<td>28 (59.6)</td>
<td>30 (71.4)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two salaries</td>
<td>19 (48.7)</td>
<td>18 (38.3)</td>
<td>11 (26.2)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relational analysis between level of guilt and group of youngsters. With regard to the level of guilt (see Figure 4), young offenders were observed to obtain significantly higher scores than A-level students ($U = 338.000; p = .000$) and technical students ($U = 424.500; p = .000$). No significant differences were found between the A-level and technical students ($U = 841.500; p = .515$).

Relational analysis between coping strategies and group of youngsters. With regard to the eighteen coping strategies assessed, there were significant differences among the groups in their use of six of them: Wishful thinking ($x^2 = 7.522; p = .023$), not cope ($x^2 = 10.966; p = .004$), tension reduction ($x^2 = 21.219; p = .000$), self-blame ($x^2 = 39.406; p = .000$), keep to self ($x^2 = 11.441; p = .003$), and seek spiritual support ($x^2 = 6.585; p = .037$). In this way, young offenders obtained significantly higher scores than A-level students ($U = 543.5; p = .009$) in wishful thinking (see Figure 5), although no significant differences were found between technical students and young offenders ($U = 765.000; p = .067$) nor between technical students and A-level students ($U = 787.500; p = .261$).

A-level students, in turn, had significantly lower scores than technical students ($U = 652.5; p = .021$) and young offenders ($U = 505.5; p = .003$) in not cope (see Figure 6). No significant differences were observed between young offenders and the group of technical students ($U = 783.500; p = .093$).
Young offenders scored significantly higher than A-level students ($U = 398.0; p = .000$) and technical students ($U = 563.0; p = .000$) in using the coping strategy tension reduction (see Figure 7). Similarly, A-level students obtained significantly lower scores than those of technical students for this strategy ($U = 672.000; p = .033$).

Young offenders obtained significantly higher scores than A-level students ($U = 510.5; p = .003$) and technical students ($U = 636.0; p = .004$) in keep to self (see Figure 9). No significant differences were observed between A-level students and technical students ($U = 858.500; p = .613$).

Finally, young offenders scored significantly higher than A-level students ($U = 577.0; p = .021$) and technical students ($U = 727.5; p = .032$) in seek spiritual support (see Figure 10). No significant differences were found between A-level students and technical students ($U = 902.500; p = .902$).
Relational analysis between personality dimensions and group of youngsters. With regard to personality dimensions, young offenders obtained significantly higher scores than A-level students ($U = 629.5; p = .006$) and technical students ($U = 613.5; p = .002$) in the neuroticism dimension (see Figure 11). They also had significantly higher scores than A-level students ($U = 471.0; p = .001$) and technical students ($U = 714.0; p = .024$) in psychoticism (see Figure 12). No significant differences were observed between A-level students and technical students with respect to either neuroticism ($U = 861.000; p = .629$) nor psychoticism ($U = 772.500; p = .210$).

Likewise, A-level students obtained significantly lower scores than young offenders ($U = 558.0; p = .013$) in trait anger (see Figure 14). No significant differences were found between technical students and A-level students ($U = 810.500; p = .357$) nor between technical students and young offenders ($U = 778.000; p = .085$).

Relational analysis between level of anger and group of youngsters. Concerning the level of anger, A-level students had significantly lower scores than technical students ($U = 696.000; p = .035$) and young offenders ($U = 578.0; p = .013$) in feeling angry (see Figure 13). No significant differences were observed between technical students and the group of young offenders ($U = 923.500; p = .582$).
Young offenders, in turn, had significantly higher scores than A-level students ($U = 512.500; p = .004$) and technical students ($U = 706.0; p = .021$) in anger expression-out (see Figure 15), and they also had significantly higher scores than A-level students ($U = 362.500; p = .000$) and technical students ($U = 460.0; p = .000$) in anger expression-in (see Figure 16). No significant differences were found between technical students and A-level students for external expression of anger ($U = 795.000; p = .290$) nor for internal expression of anger ($U = 851.000; p = .568$).

Likewise, young offenders scored significantly higher than A-level students ($U = 490.5; p = .002$) and technical students ($U = 600.0; p = .001$) in anger expression index (see Figure 17). No significant differences were found between technical students and A-level students ($U = 914.500; p = .986$).

**Discussion**

In our study, the group of young offenders, in comparison to A-level and technical students, is characterized by the predominance of immigrants, mainly coming from the Arab countries and South America. Another distinctive trait is to be found in their family situation. Most of them come from large families, with couple conflicts (separated or divorced parents), with absence of one parent (widowed parent) or one-parent families (single mothers), which coincides with Farrington (1992) and Kazdin (1993). As Lykken (2000b) has pointed out, family environment plays an important role in increasing the risk of crime. With regard to their parents, it can be highlighted that they have a lower level of education than the parents of the other youngsters studied. As López-Latorre & Garrido (2005) also found, young offenders tend to have a lower level of education than their peers.

Concerning the tendency or general disposition to experience feelings of guilt there are significantly higher scores in the group of young offenders. The high levels of feelings of guilt in these youngsters could be explained in part by noting that the parents of young offenders are characterised by a tendency to be excessively hard in their disciplinary attitudes and practices (Kazdin & Buela-Casal, 1994). In this sense, the lower or higher intensity of emotional responses of guilt could result from both individual differences and educational patterns (Echeburúa,
De Corral, & Amor, 2001). With respect to educational styles, it is worth remembering, as Bybee (1998) observed, that physical punishment produces aggressive responses, whereas psychological punishment causes intense feelings of guilt. Another aspect to be considered has to do with the fact that feelings of guilt arise from the sensation of having broken ethical, personal or social rules, particularly when one’s behaviour has harmed another person (Avia & Vázquez, 2001; Tangney, 1996). If we consider that all young offenders have committed crimes against people and/or things, the high scores of this group in level of guilt, in comparison to the others, is to be expected. In this sense it has been noted that, in young offenders, feelings of guilt at the beginning of a prison term correlated with lower rates of recidivism (Hosser, Windzio, & Greve, 2008). For this reason surely one of the main objectives of treatment of young offenders ought to be that of helping them to recognise their crimes. However we would like to point out that the high average scores for feelings of guilt in the group of young offenders hides the fact that three members of this group had extremely low scores, hinting at psychopathic traits.

Of the eighteen coping strategies under analysis, there are significant differences among groups only in their use of wishful thinking, not cope, tension reduction, self-blame, keep to self, and seek spiritual support. In this sense, when faced with difficult or controversial situations, young offenders take on more responsibility or involvement in the facts (self-blame), but have less personal capacity to try and solve them (not cope). At the same time, they avoid sharing them with others, being isolated and refusing to participate in rewarding and long-lasting emotional relationships (keep to self), which leads to an increase in tension that will be released either through not very healthy behaviours such as drinking, smoking or taking other drugs, through behaviours to temporarily escape from home and school (tension reduction), or through prayer (seek spiritual support). Strangely enough, it is young offenders who have more previous hopes for a positive or successful resolution of their difficult situations (wishful thinking). Similar results were found by Ireland, Bousted, and Ireland (2005): young offenders reported using emotional, avoidant and detached coping styles more than juveniles.

If we consider that the successful resolution of any difficult situation requires the use of cognitive and emotional strategies which realistically result in the modification of the difficult situation (Figueroa, Contini, Lacunza, Levin, & Estévez, 2005), it is not strange that some authors grant young offenders a low capacity to solve interpersonal problems (Dishion, Loebner, Stouthamer, & Patterson, 1984; Spivack & Levine, 1963). Indeed, as the results of our study show, young offenders have a passive coping style, characterized by the use of mainly avoidance strategies. In this way, as the use of strategies aimed at solving problems (focus on solving the problem, work hard and achieve, worry, invest in close friends, and physical recreation) is closely linked to psychological well-being (Figueroa, Contini, Lacunza, Levin, & Estévez, 2005), it makes sense to think that the difficulties in facing difficult situations in a positive way will result in psychological discomfort in this group of youngsters. Those people who share difficult situations with others in order to understand them and express the emotions that are created in them, regarding the situation as an opportunity for personal growth, feel that they have a social network of friends and family to support them and feel attached to (Pernas et al., 2001). In those who act contrariwise, the resulting feeling may be that they lack a social network, thus increasing the psychological discomfort.

With regard to the personality dimensions that determine regular behaviour in the youngsters under study, and coinciding with Díaz & Bágüena (1989) and Ortet, Pérez, Pla, & Simó (1988), the group of young offenders has higher scores than the other groups in the neuroticism dimension. Likewise, they also have higher scores than their student peers in the psychoticism dimension (Aleixo & Norris, 2000; Chico, 1998; Díaz & Bágüena, 1989; Otero-López, Romero, & Luengo, 1994; Urra, 2004). It seems to be a sufficiently contrasted fact, then, that neurotism (Ardil, Forcadell, Miranda, & Pérez, 2006) and psychoticism (Eysenck, 1974) are associated with maladaptive behaviour. Even so, it must be borne in mind that neurotism appears in association with delinquency when samples of prison inmates are used (Gomá-i-Freixenet et al, 2001). Although some theories relate uninhibited behaviour to criminal behaviour (Ardil et al., 2006; Eysenck, 1974), in our study, the extroversion dimension is not significant. This makes us think that extroversion is a differentiating dimension in adults but loses explanatory power in adolescents. Thus only the variable psychoticism appears to have a strong power for predicting development of antinormative behaviours. Neurotism and extroversion do not seem to have such a clear relationship with antisocial behaviour. (Diaz and Bágüena, 1989; Ortet, Pérez, Plá and Simó, 1988).

Of the three anger scales assessed, young offenders have higher scores than their peers in trait anger and anger expression index. That is, young offenders usually experience anger more frequently and intensely, but when this happens they opt to experience it without expressing it (repression), or they express it orally and through physically aggressive behaviours. If we consider that anger, as an emotion, has an adaptive value in human beings (Echeburúa, De Corral, & Amor, 2001), but may be maladaptive or counterproductive when its frequency or length is intensified, it makes sense to deduce that a high level of anger may have a negative influence on the personal well-being of youngsters (Avia & Vázquez, 2001; Tangney, 1996), as it loses its regulating character and makes the emergence of behaviour problems or pathologies possible (Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 2007). When this happens, responses of physical violence may
increase and, consequently, the level of guilt felt (Etxebarría & Pérez, 2003). It should be remembered that, as Mestre, Samper and Frias (2002) claim, the lack of mechanisms of self-control and inhibition of anger in situations provoking it are associated with aggressive behaviour, empathy being the modulating factor associated with prosocial behaviour. Moreover, their study among adolescents in Valencia showed that trait anger is associated with aggressive behaviour. Another relevant finding related with anger has to do with the fact that in impulsive adolescents, high levels of anger are associated with high levels of delinquency (Colder & Stice, 1998).

At the beginning of the study we believed that the emotional and personality characteristics of technical students would lie in between those of A-students and of young offenders. However, the groups of students do not differ greatly, but do differ on significant variables. The technical students have fewer strategies for coping and for tension reduction, and experience anger more intensely than the A-level students, and hence in these variables are more similar to the young offenders.

Despite the limitations of cross-sectional studies, and despite our having no assurance that the groups of students do not engage in acts of delinquency, our study reveals that young offenders, in comparison to their peers, have higher levels of guilt, neuroticism, psychoticism, and trait anger. Likewise, they tend to repress anger or, on the contrary, to express it orally and physically, and they usually use passive or avoidance coping strategies. In regard to interventions, it would seem that management of anger and use of coping strategies in conflictive situations ought to be therapeutic objectives in educational centres handling the population of young offenders. Similarly, psychological therapy and education addressing issues of guilt may help to reduce recidivism. One suggestive aspect deserving of further analysis is the relationship between personality, emotions and family care in delinquent behaviour. In future studies, the populations of students could be pooled to gain statistical power, given that they were found to be more similar than expected.

References


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