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Moral Judgement and Delinquency in Homeless Youth

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ABSTRACT *The impact of the individuals' life condition on the relation between moral judgement and (delinquent) behaviour was investigated in a sample of 162 adolescents and young adults. The sample consisted of two groups: homeless youth and institutional youth, i.e. youth with a history of residential care. The difference in life conditions between both groups is characterised by a lack of stable social relationships and specific survival demands for the homeless youth group. Homeless youth reported much more delinquent behaviour than institutional youth, but this difference could not be attributed to the level of moral judgement. However, while for institutional youth a conventional level of moral reasoning was associated with lower levels of delinquency in four domains of deviant behaviour, including violence and vandalism, no such association was found for homeless youth. In the latter group, important predictor variables explaining delinquent behaviour, besides being male, were: a restrictive and affectionless parenting style, predominance of individuation over attachment and a passive coping style. It is concluded that delinquent behaviour in homeless youth appeared to be caused by a lack of stable social relationships, as well as a by a lack of moral internalisation, with affect and cognition not being integrated.*

One of the long-term goals in the study of moral development is to understand and predict moral behaviour, including delinquency. Empirically, the relationship between moral judgement competence and delinquency "has become an established finding" (Gregg *et al.*, 1994). Theoretically, the relationship between moral judgement competence and moral behaviour is complex (Salzstein, 1994; Smetana, 1994). The present study on the relationship between moral judgement competence and delinquent behaviour focuses on the life condition of participants, differentiat-

ing homeless youth from residential youth. A difference between these groups is that the daily life of the homeless youngsters will be *less embedded in stable social relationships* and, therefore, they will lack the external control exerted by the expectations of the social group in which one normally is involved. To study the relationship between moral judgement competence and delinquency within these two groups broadens the view on this relationship.

Empirical Findings on the Relationship Between Moral Judgement Competence and Delinquency

According to Blasi (1980), a relationship between moral judgement competence and delinquency was found in 9 of 11 studies using moral judgement production measures. Since Blasi's review, several empirical studies (Gavaghan *et al.*, 1983; Chandler & Moran, 1990; Gregg *et al.*, 1994) and meta-analyses (Nelson *et al.*, 1990; Smetana, 1990) have confirmed this finding. According to Smetana (1990) the results of studies utilising the interview method, as well as the objective questionnaire method, derived from Kohlberg's theory, are "overwhelmingly supportive" of the hypothesised relationship between moral competence and delinquency. In The Netherlands, the finding was confirmed in a study carried out by De Mey (1994) using an adapted version of the SRM (Gibbs *et al.*, 1984). A lower mean moral judgement score was found for juvenile delinquents compared to two non-delinquent groups. Mean age in the three groups was 16 years. Control group members attended schools at lower and intermediate levels of secondary education.

The above-mentioned relationship between moral judgement competence and measures of delinquency is of moderate size (correlations of about 0.3). In our opinion this demonstrates that, empirically, certain behavioural tendencies depend on the stage of moral judgement. Typically, most people committing serious delinquent acts have been found to function at Stage 2 (using interview methods; with questionnaires a higher score of about one-third stage might be expected, cf. Brugman *et al.*, in press). The majority of matched controls functions at the conventional level, i.e. Stage 3 (Kohlberg *et al.*, 1975). Stage 2 (pre-conventional morality) denotes a way of judgement about moral issues characterised by the primacy of one's concrete self-interests, pragmatism and opportunism. Thornton and Reid (1982) have given evidence that pre-conventional moral judgement can only be associated with delinquent behaviour if the perpetrator believes he or she has a good chance of getting away with it.

On the other hand, Stage 3 is indicative of a way of judgement characterised by acceptance and upholding of interpersonal expectations. The concrete reciprocity of Stage 2 ("do unto others what they have done unto you") has turned into ideal reciprocity ("do unto others what you would like to have them do unto you"). This may well function as a kind of barrier against committing unjust, i.e. criminal, acts (Kohlberg, 1978). Some studies have also found a substantial number of delinquents who function at Stage 3 (Smetana, 1990). When this finding was reported for the first time, it was suggested that addicts especially would function at Stage 3. Smetana's study makes clear, however, that other factors are also of importance.

According to most psychological theories, growing up means that behavioural control shifts from an external to an internal locus. According to Gibbs, a fully fledged internal control is reached at Stage 4 (Gibbs *et al.*, 1992). A reason why children functioning at Stage 2 do not commit criminal acts, as do Stage 2 adolescents, is that children lack the bodily needs and physical equipment of adolescents to do so. Also, in most instances children are heavily supervised while adolescents are not.

The Complex Relationship Between Moral Judgement Competence and Delinquency

The complexity of the relationship between moral judgement competence and moral behaviour becomes obvious when one realises that (a) moral behaviour is content-specific while cognitive structures are formal; (b) moral behaviour is multiply determined; psychological processes are hypothesised which are moderators of the relation between moral judgement and behaviour; (c) moral behaviour is context-sensitive and is adapted to and influenced by the social context in which the actors find themselves; and (d) in most cases the delinquency measures in the studies reported above used some proxy for delinquent behaviour. We will address these points successively.

(a) Content specificity. The cognitive structures or stages of moral judgement competence are highly abstract and formal. A reason pro and con for action in any specific situation can be constructed at nearly every stage of moral development (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). In contrast to the cognitive structures of moral judgement, moral behaviour is not neutral. It has been argued that moral behaviour is different from neutral action in terms of specific content categories, taking into account the social context in which the behaviour occurs. For example, "helping" may be viewed as moral behaviour unless we are told that the German occupants were helped in their search for Jewish people in hiding. Thus the person lying to the occupants could be considered a moral hero and the person helping them a moral failure. Judging delinquent behaviour as immoral behaviour in our current society is another example of the viewpoint that takes the social context into account, although there might be exceptions of delinquent behaviour being moral (e.g. stealing bread to survive).

(b) Moderator variables. The modest relation between moral judgement competence and delinquency stresses the need for additional explanatory factors. In the present study the following constructs are important: parental style (Hoffman, 1983, 1984), attachment (e.g. Bowlby, 1984; Van Yzendoorn *et al.*, 1997) and coping style (Haan, 1977; Haan *et al.*, 1985). A restrictive and affectionless parenting style is conducive to insecure attachment relationships (cf. Bowlby, 1988) and to a lack of moral internalisation (Hart, 1988; Boyes & Allen, 1993; Luntz & Widom, 1994). Lack of moral internalisation is characterised by the non-integration of affect and cognition (Hoffman, 1994) and, as such, not only influences moral judgement

development but empathy as well (Gibbs, 1994). For the realisation of intentions, whether good or bad, it is necessary to determine whether coping behaviour will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and for how long.

(c) *Stage typed sensitivity to external control.* Costanzo and his colleagues (Costanzo & Fraenkel, 1987) have demonstrated empirically the functioning of external and internal control as related to conforming and non-conforming acts. According to their view, the source of external control shifts from “the parents” in children, to “the peers” in adolescents, to “societal stereotypes” in adults. Thus, one might hypothesise that stage of moral judgement goes hand-in-hand with sensitivity to type of external control. External control includes social influence using moral arguments. Those who can reason at the conventional level are more likely to be influenced by moral arguments at this level, i.e. social stereotypes, and such arguments are likely to be more critical for the prevention of delinquency and anti-social behaviour. However, one can only be influenced by other people’s moral arguments when one functions in a social context in which these arguments function as social expectations and are used to confirm each other’s social being. Those who fail to live up to these expectations are no longer accepted as members of the social group (community) to which one feels one belongs (Power *et al.*, 1989). Therefore, this interpretation makes sense only within stable relationships in which it matters that relationships do not become damaged.

(d) *Delinquency measures.* In most cases the delinquency measures in the studies reported above used some proxy for delinquent behaviour, e.g. conviction, incarceration and categorisation by clinicians and counsellors as evidence for delinquency. Objections to these measures for delinquency include that they do not measure delinquency directly and that, in one way or another, each of them is a potentially contaminated indicator. For example, the existence of delinquent behaviour in the control group cannot be excluded. Another example is that the retardation in moral judgement development may be due to institutionalisation and might, therefore, be a consequence of confinement rather than a cause of delinquency.

The very few studies that used self-report measures have not found a link between delinquency and moral judgement (Emler & Reicher, 1995). Objections to the use of self-report measures include that no honest report is given with these measures, and that self-report measures focus on small criminal acts. In a thorough discussion of reliability, validity and meaning of self-report measures of delinquency, Emler and Reicher (1995, pp. 68–72) conclude that such measures are (1) very reliable (p. 69), and (2) that self-report methods of delinquency have been successfully validated against official records and reputational evidence (p. 72). In the study reported here a self-report measure of delinquency is used. In this measure four kinds of delinquent acts are distinguished and the relationship will be investigated for each.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

We expected homeless adolescents to be more delinquent than the residential youth

group. Above all, this may be attributed to their lack of stable relationships, their economic life condition and survival strategies. In addition, other individual characteristics and processes might explain differences in delinquency both between and within these groups. We studied the effects on delinquency of moral competence, (a lack of perceived) social support, (an inadequate) coping style, (insecure) attachment, (a disturbed) attachment-individuation balance, (affectionless) parenting style and neuroticism. Neuroticism was included as an overall measure of (un)healthy development.

Method

Participants

All subjects were selected to meet the criteria of age—between 15 and 24—and ethnicity, i.e. raised by an ethnically Dutch mother.

Homeless youth were represented by a sample of 79 adolescents[1] who volunteered to complete the interview. The subjects, 54 boys and 25 girls with mean ages of 20 and 18 years, respectively, were recruited from an array of Youth Emergency Services throughout The Netherlands. They all met the criteria of homelessness as defined in this study: they had been without a fixed home or residence for at least 3 consecutive months and, during that time, had lived at a minimum of three different places. On average the subjects had been homeless for seven months, and had been staying at 6 different places during the last 3 months. Fifty-six per cent of the sample had a history of residential care (mean stay: 4 years). Nearly 80% of the mothers and 60% of the fathers belonged to the skilled and unskilled working classes; 18% of the fathers though were classified as executives and academically trained professionals. In 1990, overall 18% of the Dutch families were classified at the level of executives and academically trained professionals, 20% as upper middle class, 20% as lower middle class, 35% as skilled and 8% as unskilled workers.

The subjects' educational level was low: 68% had no certificate beyond primary school. One-third were enrolled in primary schools for special education, compared with 5% of the Dutch school population at large. Seventy-two per cent were, at one stage, enrolled in schools for lower and intermediate levels of vocational training, and only 23% obtained a certificate. The number of divorced parents was very high: 71% for the whole sample, 80% for homeless youth with residential care history. Divorce rates for the Dutch population at large amount to an average of 30%; for married couples with children 16%. Ninety per cent of the homeless subjects were repeated runaways.

Residential youth, i.e. institutional youth with a history of residential care, were represented by a sample of 83 adolescents, 48 boys and 35 girls with a mean age of 18 years. The average length of time spent in institutional care was 3.5 years. Subjects left their institution for residential care at least 3 months, and at most 3 years ago, had not been transferred to another institution, and had not become homeless in the mean time. The subjects were recruited from institutions for residential care, the populations of which have been demonstrated to possess the same characteristics as homeless youth in terms of acting-out and other forms of anti-social behaviour. Their fathers belonged mainly to lower-middle and skilled

working classes, their mothers almost exclusively to skilled and unskilled working classes. One-third of the subjects were enrolled in primary schools for special education. Their educational level hovered between low and intermediate levels of vocational training. Fifty per cent did not have a school certificate beyond the primary school level. The rate of divorced parents was 42%; 50% of the subjects were repeated runaways.

In The Netherlands, homeless youth and residential youth differ from “standard” samples of young adults and adolescents with respect to the number of different rearing contexts they have experienced during early and middle childhood, the relatively early age at which the parents divorced, the higher rate of participation in schools of special education, and a lower level of education *per se*. Furthermore, homeless youth are distinguished from both residential and normal youth with respect to a higher divorce incidence rate and a lack of parental responsiveness and sensitivity (Tavecchio & Thomeer-Bouwens, 1996). Thus, the subjects in both groups have received (far) less respect and social support than is needed to confirm their existence as members of a stable social group, with the homeless youth lagging behind the residential youth.

Instruments

Participants completed questionnaires on delinquency, moral competence, parenting style, attachment, social support, coping strategy and neuroticism. In order to assess delinquent behaviour we used the Anti Social Behaviour Inventory (Wouters & Spiering, 1990). To assess moral judgement we used the Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure–Short Form (Basinger & Gibbs, 1987). Parenting style was measured with the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker *et al.*, 1979); attachment with the Separation Anxiety Test (Hansburg, 1980) and the Attachment Styles Questionnaire (Hazan & Shaver, 1987); social support was measured with the Social Support Questionnaire (Sarason *et al.*, 1987). To assess coping strategy we used the Utrecht Coping Scale (Schreurs *et al.*, 1993). Neuroticism was measured with the Symptom Checklist-90 (Arrindell & Ettema, 1986).

Anti Social Behaviour Inventory (ASBI). The ASBI (Wouters & Spiering, 1990) consists of 54 items measuring delinquent behaviour on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from 0, “never” to 3, “often”). From a principal components analysis four factors emerged, explaining 51% of the variance. These factors were: petty crime, 21 items referring to stealing, fencing and selling drugs (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.93$); vandalism, consisting of 16 items referring to wrecking and causing material damage (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$); violence, 10 items referring to threatening or using physical violence (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.86$); police, seven items referring to rebellious behaviour and opposition to police authorities (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$). The correlations between the factors ranged from $r = 0.52$ to $r = 0.70$; the correlations with the overall scale from $r = 0.74$ to $r = 0.93$. The overall scale, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.96$, may be

considered as a measure of delinquent behaviour, and the four factors as a further specification of the general construct.

Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure—Short Form (SROM-SF). The SROM-SF (Basinger & Gibbs, 1987) is a measure of judgement in terms of moral justification. The measure involves recognition of reflective socio-moral judgement in multiple-choice format, and showed acceptable reliability and validity with respect to the assessment of adults and most adolescents (Basinger & Gibbs, 1987). The SROM-SF uses two moral dilemmas and 12 question arrays focusing on socio-moral norms. The questions include response options representative of moral Stage 1 to 4. The first two stages, unilateral-physicalistic and exchanging-instrumental, respectively, constitute the immature or pre-conventional level. The third and fourth stages, mutual-prosocial and systemic-standard, respectively, constitute the mature or conventional level (Gibbs *et al.*, 1992). Participants indicated which options were “close” and “closest” to their views. In the present study the internal consistency was assessed in terms of Cronbach’s α as well as the Pearson correlation between “close” and “closest” stage across 11 question arrays; Question 8 was not included, because it proved unreliable. Computation of Cronbach’s α was based on subjects without missing data. Cronbach’s α was 0.62 for the homeless group, and 0.68 for the comparison group of residential youth. The correlation between “close” and “closest” stage ($r = 0.63$) reached a significance level of $P < 0.001$. We conclude that the reliability was satisfactory.

Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI). The PBI (Parker *et al.*, 1979) consists of 50 Likert scale items, and was constructed to assess the individual’s relationship to his or her parents during the first 16 years of life. The PBI measures two dimensions for each parent, namely caring and overprotectiveness. High scores on the care scale suggest a caring and empathic parent, low scores a rejecting or indifferent parent. High scores on the overprotection dimension suggest a parent who encourages dependency, controls, intrudes and infantilises, while low scores suggest a parent who encourages the child towards independence and autonomy. In studying a sample of 672 twins, Mackinnon *et al.* (1991) found evidence for the validity of the PBI as a measure of actual parental behaviour. Moreover, they found no evidence for the existence of effects of personality and current state or problems related to the retrospective character of the information gathered with the PBI.

In the present study a shorter version of the PBI was used. The internal consistency remained high for all scales, varying between $\alpha = 0.85$ (overprotection father) and $\alpha = 0.95$ (care father). A combination of the four scales led to one overall scale, measuring the quality of the parenting style. The reliability of this scale was satisfactory (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.68$). The correlations between the quality scale and the original scales ranged from $r = 0.62$ (care father, $P < 0.000$, $n = 162$) to $r = -0.73$ (overprotection mother, $P < 0.001$, $n = 160$).

Separation Anxiety Test (SAT). The SAT (Hansburg, 1980) is a semi-projective measure of responsiveness to separation stress. The test comprises 12 pictures of children in separation situations and 17 statements describing the child's feelings. Participants were asked to select the statements that reflect their view on how the child feels. The SAT-measure of attachment quality is the attachment-individuation balance, "a balance of activity between the drive for contact and the drive for individuation, alternating and depending upon the degree to which the individual feels separation" (Hansburg, 1980, p. 65). In this study we used six of the 12 pictures, and found a high internal consistency of total SAT responses: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$.

Attachment Styles Questionnaire (ASQ). The ASQ (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mayseless, 1990) is a combined single-item and rating-scale measure of adult attachment style, using a four-fold typology: secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganised attachment. The first three styles correspond to patterns of infant-mother attachment as observed by Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) in early childhood. In the present study we used the version translated by Van Ijzendoorn *et al.* (1993). The attachment style questionnaire seems to yield a rather general personality measure. Strong relations were found between attachment styles and work orientation (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and the "Big Five" personality traits (Shaver & Brennan, 1992). Furthermore, the ASQ might measure only the easily and directly accessible perceptions of the respondent (De Haas *et al.*, 1994). Internal consistency was assessed by combining the attachment classifications with the rating scales. The classifications were confirmed by higher mean scores on the corresponding rating scales ($P < 0.001$). Moreover, the correlations between the four scales ranged from $r = -0.17$ (avoidant and ambivalent; $P < 0.05$) to $r = 0.33$ (ambivalent and disorganised; $P < 0.001$). All correlations were based on $n = 162$.

Social Support Questionnaire-6 (SSQ-6). The SSQ-6 (Sarason *et al.*, 1987), consisting of six items each having two parts, was derived from the 27-item Social Support Questionnaire (Sarason *et al.*, 1983). The instrument purports to assess perceived social support, that is, the belief that specific people will be available if needed and show acceptance under all or most conditions. As such, the idea of social support is related to the concept of attachment. The SSQ-6 differentiates between two aspects of social support, namely the number of available others to whom one can turn in times of need and the degree of satisfaction with the perceived support. Both aspects were measured with the N(umber)-scale and the S(atisfaction)-scale, a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1, "very dissatisfied" to 6, "very satisfied". In two studies the SSQ-6 proved reliable, with Cronbach's α between 0.90 and 0.93 (Sarason *et al.*, 1987). In the present study the two scales also proved reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$). A correlation of $r = 0.39$, $P < 0.001$ ($n = 153$) between the N- and S-scale supported the standardised aggregation of these scales into one social support scale.

Utrecht Coping Scale (UCS). The UCS (Schreurs *et al.*, 1993) concerns the way people cope with life events and frustrating situations in everyday life, coping behaviour being conceptualised as a personality trait. The UCS comprises seven scales, with internal consistency values ranging from $\alpha = 0.55$ (expression of emotion, three items) to $\alpha = 0.82$ (social support, six items). After factor analysis two dimensions emerged, explaining 54% of the variance: (1) passive coping ($\alpha = 0.64$), consisting of the scales palliative reaction pattern, avoidance, passive reaction pattern and expression of emotion; and (2) active coping ($\alpha = 0.56$), comprising the scales using comforting thoughts, dealing actively with problems and seeking social support.

Symptom Check List-90 (SCL-90). The SCL-90 (Arrindell & Ettema, 1986) consists of 90 descriptions of physical and psychological symptoms. Participants report the degree to which they experienced any of these symptoms during the last week. The SCL-90 consists of eight dimensions—agoraphobia, anxiety, depression, physical complaints, insufficiency of thought and behaviour, distrust, interpersonal sensitivity, hostility, sleeping problems—and an overall measure of neuroticism. In the present study we only used this overall measure, with a Cronbach's α of 0.97, based on 90 items.

Results

The first hypothesis to be tested was that residential youth and homeless youth would differ with respect to their level of delinquent behaviour. This hypothesis was confirmed. On the ASBI the mean of 38.1 (SD = 26.5) for the homeless youth group differed significantly from the mean of 25.2 (SD = 23.4) for the residential youth group, $t(160) = -3.82$, $P < 0.001$. Significant differences were also found on three of the four ASBI subscales, with consistently higher means for homeless youth. Homeless youth committed more petty crime, were more violent and showed more rebellious behaviour and opposition to police authorities than residential youth. These traits were reflected in means of 18.0 (SD = 11.8) for homeless youth and 11.3 (SD = 10.9) for residential youth on the petty crime scale, $t(157) = -3.71$, $P < 0.000$; means of 6.6 (SD = 5.8) for homeless youth and 4.3 (SD = 4.5) for residential youth on the violence scale, $t(160) = -2.74$, $P < 0.01$; means of 3.2 (SD = 3.8) for homeless youth and 1.1 (SD = 2.2) for residential youth on the police scale, $t(160) = -4.48$, $P < 0.001$. On vandalism the groups did not differ significantly.

The mean score on the SROM-SF for homeless youth was 307 (SD = 23), indicating a conventional (prosocial) level of moral judgement. The mean score for residential youth was slightly higher, that is 309 (SD = 27), but this difference was not significant, $t(160) = 0.47$, $P = 0.64$. We expected less consistency between mature moral judgement and maturity of actual behaviour in homeless youth than in residential youth, which should be reflected in higher means on delinquency for pre-conventional subjects than for conventional subjects in the residential youth

TABLE I. Mean delinquency scores for residential youth and homeless youth at two levels of moral reasoning competence

	Preconventional		Conventional		<i>t</i>
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	
Residential youth					
Total score delinquency	36.1	(29.7)	20.5	(22.1)	1.93*
Police	2.7	(3.0)	0.9	(2.4)	2.12*
Violence	6.2	(5.5)	3.7	(3.9)	1.76*
Vandalism	11.2	(9.4)	6.4	(6.4)	1.91*
Petty crime	16.5	(13.6)	9.5	(11.1)	1.78*
N ¹	18		23		
M ² SROM (range)	270	(257–288)	341	(327–382)	
Homeless youth					
Total score delinquency	40.3	(27.2)	40.8	(28.5)	NS
Police	2.9	(4.2)	4.8	(5.1)	NS
Violence	8.7	(7.8)	6.4	(5.4)	NS
Vandalism	9.8	(7.2)	9.7	(9.2)	NS
Petty crime	18.9	(13.4)	18.6	(10.9)	NS
N ¹	18		18		
M ² SROM (range)	275	(260–288)	337	(330–346)	

¹ N = number. ² M = mean. * $P < 0.05$, one-tailed.

group, with smaller or no differences in the homeless youth group. This hypothesis was supported by the results of separate *t*-tests, using the delinquency scores in the lowest and highest quartiles of the SROM-SF distribution, indicating the predominantly pre-conventional and predominantly conventional level of moral judgement competence, respectively. We used univariate *t*-tests, as the sample size did not allow for multivariate statistical testing.

As can be seen from Table I, in the residential youth group preconventional subjects proved to be more delinquent than conventional subjects on all ASBI scales, $P < 0.05$ (one-tailed). This was not the case for the homeless youth group: preconventional and conventional subjects did not differ with respect to their level of delinquent behaviour on any of the scales. This result appears to corroborate our hypothesis that moral judgement competence does not lead to less delinquent behaviour in homeless youth. Other factors than moral judgement could, however, be more powerful in explaining delinquent behaviour in homeless youth.

A first, straightforward picture of possibly relevant factors is presented by the zero-order correlations in Table II, with the homeless group data in the upper right triangle and the residential group data in the lower left. First, the data confirm that delinquency and moral judgement are unrelated in the homeless group and inversely related (-0.24) in the residential group. Secondly, in the homeless group delinquency correlates negatively with social support and attachment (-0.26 and -0.36 , respectively), and positively with neuroticism and passive coping (0.31 and

TABLE II. Correlations between independent and dependent variables for residential youth ($n = 83$, lower left triangle) and homeless youth ($n = 79$, upper right triangle)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Sex	—										
2. Age of separation	0.13	—									
3. Parenting style	-0.38***	-0.20	—								
4. Social support	0.02	-0.04	0.18	—							
5. Attachment-individuation	0.10	-0.08	0.03	0.07	—						
6. Attachment security	-0.22*	0.15	0.28*	0.28*	-0.11	—					
7. Neuroticism	0.25*	0.17	-0.37***	-0.21	-0.05	-0.08	—				
8. Passive coping	0.10	0.07	0.33***	-0.13	-0.02	-0.07	0.58***	—			
9. Active coping	-0.06	-0.06	0.01	0.26*	0.07	0.11	-0.07	0.26*	—		
10. Moral reasoning	0.18	0.14	-0.06	0.01	-0.15	-0.08	0.10	0.13	0.28*	—	
11. Delinquency	-0.35***	0.01	-0.05	-0.15	-0.08	-0.01	0.15	0.23*	-0.19	-0.24*	—

* $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

TABLE III. Multiple hierarchical regression of delinquent behaviour in two groups

Variables	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>R</i> ² Ch	FCh	β	<i>T</i>
Homeless youth						
Sex	0.48	0.23	0.23	22.2***	-0.44	-4.74***
Parenting style	0.54	0.29	0.06	6.1*	-0.20	-2.26*
Attachment	0.63	0.39	0.10	12.5**	-0.29	-3.27**
Passive coping	0.66	0.44	0.05	6.3*	0.23	2.51*
Residential youth						
Sex	0.34	0.12	0.12	10.8**	-0.40	-4.10***
Passive coping	0.43	0.19	0.07	6.8*	0.35	3.48***
Active coping	0.53	0.28	0.09	9.5**	-0.31	-3.09**

* $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$.

0.40, respectively). This last result also holds for the residential group (0.23). Finally, in both groups there is a significant relationship between sex and delinquency, with boys showing more delinquent behaviour.

For a more powerful exploration of the impact of other factors on delinquency than moral judgement we used hierarchical multiple regression analysis, conducted stepwise, as a further specification of our main research question. We began the analysis with the homeless youth group. Sex was entered in the first step, as it is known to be a strong correlate of delinquency (cf. Table II). In the second step, age of separation from the primary caregiver and quality of parenting style were entered, as they may influence quality of attachment. In the third step we entered perceived social support and three attachment variables, i.e. the attachment-individuation balance, and scales for secure and avoidant attachment. In the fourth step we entered passive coping, active coping and neuroticism. Moral judgement was entered in the last step. The *F* values in Table III indicate whether the increment in the proportion of variance accounted for by each variable was significant. The (cumulative) *R*² indicates the total amount of variance accounted for by the variables in the equation. Finally, the beta coefficients (standardised estimates) show the association of each variable with delinquency.

In the homeless group, four variables proved to be predictors of delinquency: sex of the subject, explaining 23% of the variance, with male subjects showing more delinquent behaviour than female subjects; quality of parenting style, adding 6% variance, with restrictive and affectionless parents predicting more delinquent behaviour; the attachment-individuation balance, adding 10% variance, with more individuation leading to more delinquent behaviour; and a passive coping style, adding 5% variance, related to more delinquent behaviour. These factors, all contributing significantly to the regression equation, together explained 44% of the variance in delinquency in the homeless group.

In the residential group three variables, together explaining 28% of the variance in delinquent behaviour, contributed significantly to the regression equation. These

were sex of the subject, explaining 12% variance with, again, male subjects being more criminal than female subjects, followed by passive and active coping, adding 7 and 9% variance, respectively; the first coping style related to more criminal behaviour, the second to less.

Discussion

This study on moral judgement competence and delinquency in homeless youth is unique, especially for its focus on *life condition*, *affect*—operationalized as attachment variables—and *cognition*, in terms of moral judgement, and how they influence delinquent behaviour. Homeless youth reported a great deal more delinquent behaviour than residential youth, on all behavioural scales: petty crime, vandalism, violence and rebellious behaviour towards police authorities. Furthermore, residential group data confirm the often reported result, which indicates conventional subjects committing much less delinquent behaviour than pre-conventional ones. In the homeless youth group this difference is absent. As residential youth and homeless youth differed on all four kinds of delinquent behaviour, it seems unlikely that this result can be attributed to the economic life condition and economic survival needs of the homeless youth. Instead, it should probably be attributed to the lack of stable social relationships and social support that characterises homeless youth. “Conventional stage” moral judgement development can only make a difference in behaviour when stable social relations are available, and when individuals are exposed to moral arguments which press them to behave in prosocial ways as members of a social group are expected to.

Using multiple regression analysis, important characteristics predicting delinquent behaviour in the homeless youth group, besides being male, are: a restrictive and affectionless parenting style, predominance of individuation over attachment and a passive coping style. In the residential youth group, only the subject’s sex and a passive coping style predict delinquent behaviour. So, the differential influence of moral judgement in residential youth—i.e. pre-conventional subjects scoring higher on delinquency than conventional ones—seems to disappear when other factors are taken into account first. This may be due to a restriction of range in moral judgement scores in our sample. Whereas delinquents usually reason at a score level below 250 (Smetana, 1990), in our sample the lowest moral judgement score is 257.

Multiple regression analysis cannot directly support our hypothesis that the lack of stable relationships and social support which characterises the life condition of homeless youth explains (1) the difference between both groups in delinquent behaviour and (2) the lack of difference in delinquent behaviour between pre-conventional and conventional homeless youth. However, the results of the multiple regression analysis point to the importance of moderator variables related to the life condition of individuals. Besides the subject’s sex and a passive coping style, other variables which might hamper the “translation” of moral judgement into behaviour in homeless youth are individuation and a restrictive and affectionless parenting style. Individuation is associated with a lack of attachment which, at the individual

level, amounts to the same effect as is attributed to the homeless youth's life condition at the group level. A restrictive and affectionless parenting style can result in a lack of moral internalisation, with affect and cognition not being integrated. However, this lack of moral internalisation does not need to act exclusively on behaviour through a delay in moral judgement development. It may also operate through other components of the moral judgement-behaviour relationship, i.e. a deficient moral sensitivity (empathy) and/or a lack of moral motivation (cf. Rest, 1983). The importance of (a lack of) social support for moral behaviour may be more prominent in these components than in moral cognition.

Finally, we want to consider the implications the results of our study may have for moral education. From the perspective of the prevention of antisocial behaviour, stimulating moral judgement development in residential youth could be an effective approach. A higher level of moral judgement could keep these youngsters from becoming involved in this type of behaviour. Moreover, and possibly even more important from the perspective of reducing antisocial behaviour, this group could profit from a training programme aimed at developing an active coping style.

In the homeless youth group, stimulating the development of moral judgement should be part of a comprehensive treatment and social rehabilitation programme which focuses on building trustful relationships. The peer-helping approach of Gibbs *et al.* (1995) contains the elements of such a programme. This group could also benefit from treatment aimed at changing their habitual passive coping strategy into more effective coping skills (cf. Unger *et al.*, 1998). Such a combined approach should lead to a situation of stable independent functioning and enable these youths to find a place for themselves in normal everyday life within society.

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Notes

- [1] All subjects received 25 Dutch guilders for their co-operation. Roughly 25% of the original sample ($n = 108$) were left out of the analysis due to their unreliable SROM-scores. This lack of reliability seems to correlate with duration of homelessness, and needs to be explored further.

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