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# “I Don’t Care About What You Want!” The Relation Between Juvenile Delinquents’ Responses to Social Problem Situations and Empathy in Secure Juvenile Institutions

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## Abstract

The present study examined the relation between juvenile delinquents’ responses to social problem situations and empathy in secure juvenile institutions. The sample consisted of 79 delinquent boys (62%) and 49 delinquent girls (38%), aged 12 to 19 years. Results showed problems with accepting authority to be negatively related to both affective and cognitive empathy. Inadequate coping with competition was negatively related to cognitive empathy, whereas problems with receiving or giving help were negatively related to affective empathy. The central role of authority problems suggests that group workers could influence adolescents’ empathy development by helping them to learn to cope with social problem situations.

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Empathy is the tendency to understand and share the emotions of others (Cohen & Strayer, 1996). It is an indispensable capacity to connect with others (Davis, 1983) and has, therefore, an important function in social contact (Baron-Cohen, 2011; De Waal, 2010; Pinker, 2011). Research has shown that juvenile delinquents function on lower levels of empathy compared with their non-delinquent peers (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; Van Langen, Wissink, Van Vugt, Van der Stouwe, & Stams, 2014), but it is not yet clear which factors are responsible for lower levels of empathy in juvenile delinquents. One of the explanations is that juvenile delinquents have not learned to respond appropriately to their social environment due to aversive childhood experiences (Asscher, Van der Put, & Stams, 2015; Hoeve et al., 2009, 2012) and/or neurobiological deficits (Raine, 2013), which might hamper the development of empathy.

The present study examines whether inappropriate responses to social problem situations are negatively associated with empathy in incarcerated juvenile delinquents. If so, empathy of incarcerated juvenile delinquents may be enhanced by targeting their aversive reactions to social problem situations in secure residential youth care. Notably, Eltink, Van der Helm, Wissink, and Stams (2015) found a more structured, safe, and therapeutic residential environment, designated as an open living group climate, to be associated with less inappropriate responses to social problem situations in incarcerated juvenile delinquents. Van der Helm, Matthys, et al. (2011) identified four inappropriate responses to social problem situations in juvenile delinquents that may negatively affect the development of empathy: inadequate coping with competition, problems with social disadvantage, receiving/giving help, and accepting authority.

Regarding the first inappropriate response, inadequate coping with competition, it is well documented that the perception of competition is associated with lower levels of empathy (de Wied, Gispens-De Wied, & van Boxtel, 2010; Gilin, Maddux, Carpenter, & Galinsky, 2013) or may even trigger counter-empathic reactions (Lanzetta & Englis, 1989). Most research on this topic, however, has been conducted in experimental laboratory settings, which might hamper the generalizability of the research findings to natural settings. It has also been shown that adequate coping with competition requires well-developed social perspective taking abilities (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008; Gilin et al., 2013), which have been found to

be underdeveloped in juvenile delinquents (Matthys, Cuperus, & Van Engeland, 1999; Van der Helm, Matthys, et al., 2011), hampering their moral affective and cognitive understanding (Lardén, Melin, Holst, & Långström, 2006; Stams et al., 2006; Van Langen, Wissink, Van Vug, et al., 2014). The present study is the first to examine the relation between inadequate reactions to perceived competition and empathy among juvenile delinquents in youth prison.

It is plausible to suggest that the inability to cope with competition could enhance feelings of social disadvantage. Regarding the second inappropriate response, problems with social disadvantage, it can be derived from social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) that not being able to cope with perceived social disadvantage can result in either negative self-focused emotions, such as shame and embarrassment, or negative other-focused emotions, such as resentment and envy (Smith, 2000). In particular, the other-focused negative emotions seem incompatible with feelings of empathy. Because experiences of social disadvantage may result in both self- and other-focused negative emotions in incarcerated juvenile delinquents, the relation between perceived social disadvantage and empathy is equivocal. The present study aims to shed more light on this relation.

The relation between, on one hand, difficulties in receiving/giving help and accepting authority and, on the other hand, empathy may be considered from the perspective of institutional living group climate. An open living group climate is designated by support from group workers, opportunities for growth, and a prosocial atmosphere among juveniles (Van der Helm, 2011). Such a supportive environment is thought to promote helping behaviors among juveniles and between prison staff and juveniles, fostering affiliation and empathy (Van der Helm, Stams, Van der Stel, Van Langen, & Van der Laan, 2011). In contrast, a closed or repressive living group climate is characterized by extreme power imbalance, deprivation, repression, and lack of protection, which not only is antagonistic to helping one another and accepting authority but also reduces empathy at the same time (Van der Helm, 2011; Van der Helm, Stams, et al., 2011).

The dominant role of authority problems in the development and maintenance of delinquent behavior among adolescents has also been established in the seminal work of Emler on "reputation enhancement theory" (Emler, 1984, 1990). Emler and Reicher (1995) argued that perceived unfair treatment by authority figures contributes to a sense of marginalization, a negative attitude to institutional authority and a non-conforming self-reputation (identity) of being tough, unemotional, and non-empathic, which provides a condition for antisocial peer group membership and, subsequently, delinquent behavior.

To conclude, problems with authority and receiving or providing help may reflect a repressive social environment and contribute to an antisocial identity formation, which are both detrimental for, or perhaps even incommensurable with, empathy development.

Attachment theory provides another explanation for the relations between difficulties in receiving/giving help, accepting authority, and problematic empathy development, in particular, because helping and concern for others, including empathy, are assumed to be implicated in both the attachment and caregiving system (Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005). Notably, many juvenile delinquents have a history of negative life events, including child abuse and neglect (Asscher et al., 2015), which has set the stage for both attachment problems (Hoeve et al., 2012; van Ijzendoorn, Schuengel, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999) and difficulties with authority figures (Van der Helm, 2011).

Adolescents in residential youth care, in particular juvenile delinquents, tend to have insecure working models of attachment, that is, they have a negative model of the self as being not worthy of love and a negative model of others as being not accepting and insensitive to their needs (Hoeve et al., 2012; Zegers, Schuengel, van Ijzendoorn, & Janssens, 2006). Therefore, receiving and giving help as well as accepting authority of adult caregivers (i.e., group workers, prison staff) can be highly problematic and may, at the same time, reduce empathy, mainly because attachment insecurity directs attention to one's own emotional state rather than the emotional state of others, including their well-being or distress (Fonagy & Target, 1997). To summarize, problems with receiving or giving help and accepting authority from professional caregivers may be considered as attachment-related problems, which can hamper empathy development.

The present study is conducted to investigate whether there is a relation between responses to social problem situations in incarcerated juvenile delinquents and their levels of empathy. We hypothesize inappropriate responses to social problem situations in terms of inadequate coping with competition, and problems with social disadvantage, receiving/giving help, and accepting authority to be related to lower levels of empathy.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The present study was conducted with 79 delinquent boys (62%) and 49 delinquent girls (38%) residing in three different youth prisons in the Netherlands. Participants were randomly selected in the institutions. The mean age of

respondents was 15.7 years ( $SD = 1.4$ , range = 12-19 years). The mean time of stay was 28 weeks ( $SD = 15.2$ , range = 1-74 weeks). A total of 97 (76%) of the participants were born in the Netherlands. All adolescents participated voluntarily (response rate of 95%). Parents (for those participants aged 12-18) and participants signed an informed consent declaration form and were told that their answers would be treated confidentially and anonymously and would be accessed only by the researchers. As a token of gratitude for their participation, the adolescents received a telephone card or a small gift of €5.50. All names on the questionnaires were deleted and were replaced by a code number in SPSS. To protect the privacy of the adolescents, researchers had no access to their names. Questionnaires were administered by specially trained graduate students of the Professional University of Leiden, School of Social Studies (Bachelor of Social Work and Master Youth Care), and the University of Amsterdam (Department of Forensic Child and Youth Care Sciences).

## **Measures**

*Taxonomy of Problematic Social Situations—Adolescent Version (TOPS-A)*. The TOPS-A was developed by adapting Matthys, Cuperus, Maassen, and Van Engeland's (2001) original instrument for self-report use in forensic settings (Van der Helm, Matthys, et al., 2011). The questionnaire consists of 22 items measuring perceived social problem behavior as the main construct. The questionnaire contains four scales: problems with "being disadvantaged" (eight items), "facing competition" (five items), "receiving/giving help" (three items), and "accepting authority" (six items). The following questionnaire items are examples of inappropriate responses to social disadvantage—"When others tell me I have the wrong clothes, I yell at them"—problems with competition—"When I lose, I quit playing"—problems with receiving/giving help—"If someone else feels down, it is his or her problem"—and problems with accepting authority—"If a group worker is talking, I just interrupt when I feel so."

Construct validity and reliability of the TOPS-A were established and found to be satisfactory, by means of confirmatory factor analysis and internal consistency analyses in a group of juvenile delinquents placed in Dutch juvenile justice facilities (Van der Helm, Matthys, et al., 2011). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of the four scales were as follows: receiving/giving help,  $\alpha = .69$ ; competition,  $\alpha = .77$ ; accepting authority,  $\alpha = .79$ ; and social disadvantage,  $\alpha = .81$ .

*Basic Empathy Scale (BES)*. The BES (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006) was developed on the basis of the four basic emotions: anger, sadness, fear, and happiness (Power & Dalglish, 1997) and was translated into Dutch and validated

for the Netherlands by Van Langen, Wissink, Stams, Asscher, and Hovee (2014). Empathy consists of “affective traits” (the capacity to experience the emotions of another; Bryant, 1982) and a “cognitive ability” (the capacity to comprehend the emotions of another; Hogan, 1969). The BES consists of 20 items measuring cognitive (nine items) and affective empathy (11 items). An example of an item that measures cognitive empathy is “I can see when my friends are afraid,” and an item measuring affective empathy is “When I am with friends who are afraid, I feel afraid too.”

Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) performed a confirmatory factor analysis in their validation study among 720 adolescent schoolchildren and found a satisfactory fit for the two-factor model and satisfactory reliabilities ( $\alpha = .79$  and  $\alpha = .85$  for cognitive empathy and affective empathy, respectively). Van Langen, Wissink, Stams, et al., 2014 (2014) replicated their study with 1,789 adolescents and found comparable results (a two-factor solution and internal consistency reliabilities of  $\alpha = .72$  and  $\alpha = .81$  for cognitive empathy and affective empathy, respectively). In the current study, we found internal consistency reliabilities of  $\alpha = .81$  for cognitive empathy and  $\alpha = .75$  for affective empathy.

## Results

### *Preliminary Analyses*

Table 1 shows the correlations (one-tailed significance) between the four factors of social problem situations and cognitive and affective empathy. Problems with social disadvantage were negatively correlated with cognitive empathy ( $r = -.376, p < .01$ ) and affective empathy ( $r = -.190, p < .05$ ). Inadequate coping with competition was negatively correlated with cognitive empathy ( $r = -.348, p < .01$ ) and negatively but not significantly correlated with affective empathy. Problems with receiving/giving help were negatively correlated with both cognitive and affective empathy ( $r = -.249$  and  $r = -.268$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ ). Problems with accepting authority were also negatively correlated with both cognitive and affective empathy ( $r = -.436$  and  $r = -.291$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ ).

### *Structural Equation Model*

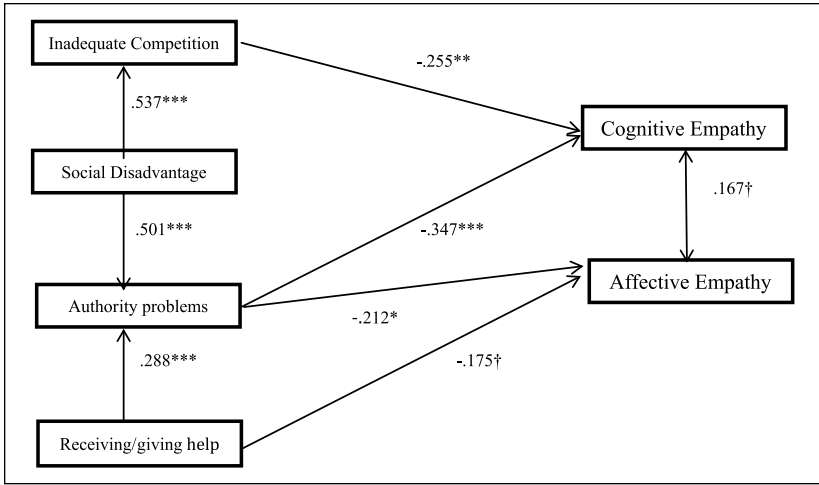
To further investigate relations between the inappropriate responses to social problem situations and cognitive and affective empathy, a structural equation model was fitted to the data using Mplus (version 6.11). We chose to only present the best-fitting model. Fit indices (comparative fit index [CFI],

**Table 1.** Means and Standard Deviations of Social Problem Situations, Cognitive and Affective Empathy, and Correlations Among These Variables.

	M	SD	2. Inadequate Competition	3. Receiving/ Giving Help	4. Accepting Authority	5. Cognitive Empathy	6. Affective Empathy
1. Social disadvantage	3.573	1.401	.538**	.465**	.634**	-.376**	-.190*
2. Inadequate competition	1.510	0.720		.404**	.441**	-.348**	-.168
3. Problems with receiving/giving help	2.574	1.052			.523**	-.249**	-.268**
4. Problems with accepting authority	1.847	0.820				-.436**	-.291**
5. Cognitive empathy	2.600	0.325					.284**
6. Affective empathy	1.800	0.241					

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$  (one-tailed significance).





**Figure 1.** SEM Model of responses to social problem situations and empathy (standardized coefficients and fit statistics,  $N = 128$ ).

Note. Fit statistics:  $\chi^2(df = 6) = 7.842, p = .250, RMSEA = .049, CFI = .989, TLI = .975$ . SEM = structural equation modeling; RMSEA = root mean square error approximation; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index.

† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed significances).

Tucker–Lewis index [TLI], and root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA]<sup>1</sup>) and the model chi-square, also designated as the generalized likelihood ratio, were used to evaluate model fit (Kline, 2005). The following cutoff values are indicative of close model fit: normed fit index (NFI) and CFI > .90, TLI > .95, and RMSEA < .06, whereas a non-significant chi-square indicates exact model fit (Arbuckle, 2007; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2005).

The model showed a good fit to the data when using a null hypothesis significance test:  $\chi^2(6) = 7.842, p = .250$ . Fit indices that are less sensitive to differences in sample size than the chi-square test (Sivo, Fan, Willta, & Willse, 2006) showed an exact fit to the data: CFI = .989, TLI = .975, RMSEA = .049. It can be derived from Figure 1 that inadequate coping with competition and accepting authority were negatively related to cognitive empathy, while problems with receiving/giving help and with accepting authority were negatively related to affective empathy.

We tested indirect effects using a method for testing indirect effects in multiple mediator models (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Results showed that the relation between social disadvantage and cognitive empathy was mediated by problems with competition (indirect effect = .137,  $Z = 2.827, p = .005$ ). The

relation between social disadvantage and affective empathy was mediated by problems with accepting authority (indirect effect = .106,  $Z = 2.106$ ,  $p = .035$ ). Finally, there was a trend showing that the relation between accepting/giving help and cognitive empathy was mediated by problems with accepting authority (indirect effect =  $-.061$ ,  $Z = 1.935$ ,  $p = .053$ ).

## Discussion

This study examined the relation between inappropriate responses to social problem situations and (cognitive and affective) empathy in a group of juvenile delinquents placed in Dutch secure juvenile institutions. Problems with competition were negatively related to cognitive empathy, whereas problems with receiving or giving help were negatively related to affective empathy. The relation between social disadvantage and cognitive empathy was mediated by problems with competition. Difficulties in accepting authority were negatively related to both affective and cognitive empathy, and mediated the relation between problems with social disadvantage and affective empathy and the relation between accepting/giving help and cognitive empathy (a trend). It appears that, in particular, the degree to which incarcerated juvenile delinquents accept authority provides the key to understanding the relation between their responses to social problem situations and empathy.

Adolescents in secure juvenile institutions tend to face a long history of failures at school and conflicts with authorities (Loeber, Slot, Van der Laan, & Hoeve, 2009; Shapiro, Smith, Malone, & Collaro, 2010). Failure to accept authority often aggravates problems, leading to a downward coercive cycle of aggression and negative encounters with authorities (Granic & Patterson, 2006), which could result in delinquency (Tarry & Emler, 2007). The central role of "authority" indicates that group workers could have a negative or positive influence on adolescents' empathy development, by being either unresponsive or responsive to the developmental needs of the juvenile delinquents.

There is empirical evidence to suggest that repression reinforces negative experiences with authority figures, damages therapeutic alliance, and undermines treatment motivation, whereas responsiveness sets the stage for new and more positive experiences with adults that are intrinsically beneficial, and which substantially reduce problems with authority (Parhar, Wormith, Derkzen, & Beauregard, 2008; Van der Helm, 2011; Ward, Melsler, & Yates, 2007).

The negative relation between problems with competition and cognitive empathy may be explained by reputation enhancement theory (Emler & Reicher, 1995), because competition in secure juvenile institutions often pertains to peer group leadership status, which may be enhanced by a reputation of callous and non-empathic responding to others (Harvey, 2005; Osgood & O'Neil Bridell, 2006; Van der Helm, 2011).

Results of the present study indicate that the relation between problems with social disadvantage and cognitive empathy was not direct, but mediated by inadequate coping with competition. It is possible that those who experienced most problems with social disadvantage were either prone to suffer from isolation, humiliation, and other forms of peer group aggression or inclined to be isolated, hostile, and aggressive themselves (Fluttert, 2011), which in both cases may create serious problems with inadequate coping with competition (Harvey, 2005). Subsequently, inadequate coping with competition, as hypothesized, proved to be related to lower levels of empathy in the present study.

As already alluded to in the introduction of this article, receiving or giving help may be considered as an attachment-related concept reflecting secure or insecure working models of attachment, that is, the lens through which a person views and interprets social behavior of self and others (Bowlby, 1988; Zegers, 2007). In other words, we argue that problems with receiving or giving help reflect insecure working models of attachment, which may hamper the development of mentalizing abilities and both cognitive and affective empathy. However, this hypothesis was only supported for affective empathy, showing a weak association with receiving/giving help, which might cast doubt on the explanation in terms of attachment. The alternative hypothesis pertains to the negative effect of a repressive living group climate, which is thought to be antagonistic to helping one another, on empathy development. Again, results of this study do not convincingly support this hypothesis, in particular because Van der Helm et al. (2012c) found a repressive living group climate to be related to cognitive empathy only.

There are some limitations of this study that need to be acknowledged. First, only self-report measures were used to assess both inappropriate responses to social problem situations and empathy, which may yield inflated correlations due to shared measure variance. Second, self-report of social behavior and empathy may be affected by socially desirable responding. Third, the sample size was too small to allow for multi-level analysis to account for dependency of measurements in hierarchically structured data (i.e., inmates are nested into living groups). Notably, the neglect of statistical dependency can result in chance capitalization and the risk of spurious research findings. Also, this study was cross-sectional, which sets limits to the causal interpretation of our study findings. The evidence is at best correlational, leaving open the possibility that empathy would be an antecedent of responses to social problem situations (Weiner, 2006). We post hoc tested this model, which showed cognitive empathy to be more strongly related to responses to social problem situations than affective empathy, which concurs with results from the best-fitting model presented in this study. However, the alternative model fitted the data less well than the hypothesized (best-fitting)

model. Because of this and other limitations, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution.

As the present study only provides preliminary evidence of associations between problematic responses to social problem situations and empathy in incarcerated juvenile delinquents, results should be replicated in a prospective longitudinal study that allows for the examination of contextual effects by means of multi-level analyses. Nevertheless, this study opens the way to further research into the effectiveness of group interventions with incarcerated adolescents and possibilities of empathy development with subsequent recidivism reduction. For instance, social skills training and improvement of the therapeutic alliance (McLeod, 2011) and of living group climate (Eltink et al., 2015) could reduce inappropriate responses to social problem situations, in particular authority problems, and could hereby improve moral development. Equipping youth to help one another (EQUIP) (Gibbs, 2003; Van Stam et al., 2014). Ultimately, individualized social skills treatment in secure institutional facilities, targeting inadequate social information processing in social problem situations and aggression, could turn out to be a major factor contributing to effectiveness of secure institutional treatment (Hoogsteder et al., 2014; Hoogsteder et al., 2015).

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### **Note**

1. Normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) are indices of goodness of fit that are independent of sample size. Models that fit well score favorably on these fit indices. For further references, see Arbuckle (2007).

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