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Eltink, E.M.A.; van der Helm, P.; Wissink, I.B.; Stams, G.J.J.M.

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# The Relation between Living Group Climate and Reactions to Social Problem Situations in Detained Adolescents: “I Stabbed Him Because He Looked Mean at Me”

Ellen M. A. Eltink

*Spirit, Amsterbaken, Forensic Treatment Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

Peer van der Helm

*Youth Expert Centre, Leiden University of Professional Sciences, Leiden, The Netherlands*

Inge B. Wissink and Geert-Jan J. M. Stams

*Department of Forensic Child and Youth Care Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

The present study examined the association between living group climate and aversive reactions to social problem situations (e.g., getting angry, bullying or not cooperating with staff) in adolescents in secure residential facilities. The sample consisted of 128 adolescent boys and girls. Results showed an open living group climate—designated as a structured, safe and therapeutic environment—to be associated with less aversive reactions to social problem situations. Living group climate had a negative relation with aversive reactions to social problem situations ( $\beta = -.632, p < .001$ ). It is argued that group workers should be trained in providing an open living group climate in order to diminish aversive responses to social problem situations in detained adolescents.

**Keywords:** living group climate, problematic social situations, residential youth care

Adolescents with severe behavioral and criminal problems often have other problems as well, such as a mild intellectual disability, psychiatric problems, and/or severe trauma due to neglect, abuse, and maltreatment (Kaal, Brand, & Van Nieuwenhuizen, 2012; Widom, 1989). In the Netherlands, these adolescents are treated in secure juvenile facilities or youth prisons in living groups of usually 8–10 adolescents, supervised by two or more trained group workers. In the Netherlands, the aim of treatment of adolescents in residential care is to learn to get along with others and society in general, to (re)start schooling, and to develop prosocial attitudes and reduce problem behavior

(Van der Helm, 2011). Despite the fact that sociotherapy is common in secure residential youth care and youth prisons, Marshall and Burton (2010) conclude that little is known about the effects of it. Research is urgently needed as negative (Lipse, 2009; Parhar, Wormith, Derksen, & Beauregard, 2008), as well as positive (Garrido & Morales, 2007; Nijhof et al., 2011) aspects of sociotherapy are found (for an overview, see Souverein, Van der Helm, & Stams, 2013).

Negative aspects of treatment in secure institutions can be partly ascribed to adolescents' propensity to react aggressively to social problem situations ('import' hypothesis; Gover, MacKenzie, & Armstrong, 2000). Other negative aspects are thought to result from the negative effects of incarceration itself ('deprivation hypothesis'; Dye, 2010; Gover et al., 2000; Parisi, 1982; Sykes, 1958; White, Shi, Hirschfeld, Mun, & Loeber, 2010). The deprivational model assumes that deprivation is induced by repression by

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The quote in the article's subtitle is from an interview with a 16-year-old male offender, stabbing a peer with a pencil at the living group.

Address correspondence to Ellen M. A. Eltink, LL.M., MSc., Spirit, Amsterbaken Forensic Treatment Centre, Transformatorweg 6, 1014 AK Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: elleneltink@gmail.com

staff, and a lack of safety resulting from aggression among peers.

On the other hand, a perceived open or supportive living group climate, characterized by responsive group workers, possibilities for growth and a safe group atmosphere, has been shown to be negatively associated with aggression in a sample of incarcerated delinquent boys (Van der Helm, Stams, Van Genabeek, & Van der Laan, 2012). In an open climate, group workers' authority is accepted and respected and dependency of adolescents on group workers is minimal. Adolescents are held responsible for their own conduct, resulting in an internal locus of control and an inclination to accept help from others (Van der Helm, Klapwijk, Stams, & Van der Laan, 2009) or to help others (Van der Helm, Stams, Van der Stel, & Van der Laan, 2012). Van der Helm et al. (2011) even concluded that the positive effects of a perceived open living group climate on the adaptation of the incarcerated juvenile delinquents were stronger than the effects of repression.

Recently, Schubert, Mulvey, Loughran, and Losoya (2012) found positive perceptions of living group climate and efficacious aftercare to reduce recidivism and self-reported behavior problems in juvenile delinquents. The most recent review of young offenders by Koehler, Losel, Akoensi and Humphreys (2013) showed that purely deterrent and supervisory interventions slightly increased juvenile recidivism. However, when treatment was the main goal, results were positive (7% reduction in recidivism; see also Lipsey, 2009), and when cognitive behavioral therapy was applied, reduction in recidivism rose to 13%. Best results occurred when treatment was delivered according to the Risks, Needs, and Responsivity principles of Andrews and Bonta (2010), which amounted to a reduction in recidivism of 16%. A meta-analysis by De Swart et al. (2012) examining the effects of (secure) residential youth care yielded moderate but favorable effects of evidence-based residential treatment, improving outcomes by 20%.

Interventions have been developed in the past to reduce antisocial behavior in incarcerated juvenile offenders. Secure residential treatment and incarceration are very costly compared to non-residential treatment, and recidivism or behavioral problems place a great burden on society (Spelman, 2000), as well as on the adolescents themselves. Unravelling possibilities for change in secure residential treatment could be a major step forward, according to Marshall and Burton (2009).

### Living Group Climate and Problematic Social Information Processing

Institutional climate matters for incarcerated adolescents (Van der Helm, Van Genabeek et al., 2011). In climate research an open and supportive living group climate is often contrasted with a closed or repressive living group climate (Janzing & Kerstens, 2005; Toch, 2008; Toch &

Kupers, 2007; Van der Helm, Stams, & Van der Laan, 2011). A structured, safe, and therapeutic environment is designated as an open or positive climate when, according to adolescents' perceptions, support is high, opportunities for growth are evident, and flexibility is in balance with the organizational needs for control (Craig, 2004; Ule, Schram, Riedl, & Cason, 2009; Van der Helm, Boekee et al., 2011; Wortley, 2002).

A perceived closed or repressive climate is characterized by an exceptionally asymmetric balance of power, great dependency on staff, lack of mutual respect, haphazard rules and punishment, boredom, and hopelessness. This, combined with extreme competition among peers (Harvey, 2007; Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Little, 1990) could result in reactance, aggression, and aversive reactions to social problem situations (such as getting angry, bullying, or not cooperating with staff).

Shapiro, Smith, Malone and Collaro (2010) suggested that effective treatment could mitigate negative group processes (see also Mager, Richard, Harris, & Howard, 2005; Weiss et al., 2005). Violence, destabilization, hypercompetition, and other aversive reactions to social problem situations can be seen as a continuation of previous negative experiences on the streets (Anderson, 2000). A repressive living group climate is not only a continuation of prior adverse experiences, but also serves as a confirmation of hostile views of authorities and peers (Sato, Uono, Matsuura, & Toichi, 2009). When adolescents arrive in a secure residential forensic setting, they frequently have experienced many adversities, such as dropping out of school and being rejected in many social situations by peers and formal authorities (Savage, 2009).

Social problem behavior is often a precursor of aggression at the living group (Fluttert et al., 2011; Van der Helm, Stams et al., 2011; Van der Helm et al., 2013) and violence among the incarcerated delinquents and staff may have great consequences for the safety of both youth and workers (DeLisi et al., 2010; Kury & Smartt, 2002; Maitland & Sluder, 1998). In secure institutional treatment for youth, frequent aggressive behavior often has a negative impact on social interactions and social learning, and could negatively affect treatment (Fontaine & Dodge, 2009; Osgood & O'Neil Bridell, 2006; Van der Helm, Boekee, Stams, & Van der Laan, 2011). On the other hand, positive social behavior at the living group can promote successful treatment of externalizing behavior and personality problems (Van der Helm, Stams et al., 2011). Notably, of paramount importance in residential youth care is the therapeutic relationship between juveniles and group workers (Van der Helm et al., 2009), which is thought to first and foremost reflect juveniles' reactions to authority (Van der Helm et al., 2013).

Social Information Processing (SIP; Crick & Dodge, 1994) relates to the way social information is perceived, coded and processed. According to Dodge (1986),

negative processing can lead to aggressive and/or antisocial behavior. Aggressive boys have been found to differ from non-aggressive boys in information processing when interviewed about problematic social situations (see Orobio de Castro et al., 2002; Sato et al., 2009). Problematic social information processing has been found to express itself in difficulties coping with competition among peers, problems in accepting authority, perceptions of being disadvantaged and having problems in accepting (or giving) help (Goldfried & D’Zurilla, 1969; Harvey, 2007; Van der Helm et al., 2013). These problems are intertwined in a secure setting: hypercompetition demands special coping skills from adolescents, one needs to show toughness, and lack of fear, in order not to be taken advantage of by other peers (Anderson, 2000; De Jong, 2007). Being unable to cope with the perception of social disadvantage often causes feelings of bitterness and anger. These feelings can lead to hostility and diminished feelings of empathy for others (Sato et al., 2009; Van der Helm, Stams, Van der Stel, et al., 2012). In a harsh environment, needing or giving help may be considered as a sign of vulnerability (De Jong, 2007). Finally, 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, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2010). Failure to accept authority reflects inadequate social information processing (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Sato et al., 2009), and often aggravates behavioral problems (Granic & Patterson, 2006; Laird & Marrero, 2010).

Peer status, and thereby protection of violence from others is attained by defying authority and repressing peers (Harvey, 2007; Van der Helm, Stams et al., 2012). Recent research has indeed shown that incarcerated adolescents who feel safe at the living group feel safe because they are able to defend themselves (Eichelsheim & Van der Laan, 2012; Van der Helm, Klapwijk et al., 2009).

The perceived advantages of a defying, repressive or aggressive peer status hamper the development of an open living group climate. An open living group climate facilitates social learning and subsequently a better handling of social problem situations. As such, the living group offers a training ground for practising social problem situations, and a challenging one because of the aggregation of adolescents with behavioral problems within these living groups.

### The Present Study

The main question of this study is whether a perceived positive group climate is related to less aversive handling of social problem situations in male and female adolescents living in institutional facilities. It is hypothesized that a perceived open living group climate is associated with less aversive reactions to problematic

situations (as perceived by the juveniles). In an open climate, group workers’ authority is accepted, and dependency of adolescents on group workers is minimal. Adolescents feel more responsible for their own conduct, resulting in an internal locus of control and an inclination to accept help from others (Van der Helm et al., 2009) or to help others (Van der Helm et al., 2013). In sum, the SIP theoretic background and previous research findings support the hypothesis of the current study that a perceived open and supportive living group climate is related to less aversive handling of social problem situations.

## METHOD

### Participants

The present study was conducted in three institutions for residential youth care (Almata, Transferium, and Avenier) in the Netherlands at five different sites. Four sites provide secure youth care for justice-involved adolescents and one site is a juvenile correctional facility. A total of 128 adolescent boys (62%) and girls (38%) living in these institutions participated: 105 (82%) adolescents (58 boys and 47 girls) lived in an institution of secure residential youth care, and 23 boys (18%) lived in a juvenile correctional facility. The mean age of respondents was 15.7 years ( $SD = 1.4$ , range 12–19 years). The mean age of the juvenile justice population was 17 years ( $SD = 1.0$ , range 14–19 years). A total of 40% ( $n = 51$ ) of the adolescents had a non-Western cultural background. Adolescents living in secure residential youth care had been referred by a judge because of serious conduct problems (e.g., conduct disorder), often among other problems. The participants residing in the juvenile correctional facility were sentenced or taken into detention before trial. The mean stay at the time of filling out the questionnaire was 28 weeks ( $SD = 15.2$ , range 1–74 weeks).

### Procedure

All adolescents present in the three institutions were invited to participate in the present study and participated voluntarily (response rate of 95%). They all signed an informed consent declaration 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, participants received a telephone card or a small gift of €5.50. All names on the questionnaires were deleted and given a code number in SPSS. In order to protect the privacy of the adolescents, researchers had no access to the names. Questionnaires were administered by specially trained graduate students of the 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

### *Prison Group Climate Inventory (PGCI; Van der Helm, Stams et al., 2011)*

The PGCI consists of 36 items rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = 'I do not agree' to 5 = 'I totally agree.' Each item belongs to one of the four scales for group climate. The support scale (12 items) assesses perceived professional behavior and in particular the responsiveness of group workers to specific needs of the inmates. Paying attention to inmates, taking complaints seriously, respect, and trust are important characteristics of support. An example of a support item is: 'Group workers treat me with respect.' The growth scale (eight items) assesses learning perceptions, hope for the future, and giving meaning to prison stay. An example of a growth item is: 'I learn the right things here.' The repression scale (nine items) assesses perceptions of strictness and control, unfair and haphazard rules, and lack of flexibility at the living group. An example of a repression item is: 'You have to ask permission for everything here.' The group atmosphere scale (seven items) assesses the way inmates treat and trust each other, feelings of safety towards each other, being able to get some peace of mind, and having enough daylight and fresh air. An example of an atmosphere item is 'We trust each other here.' Together, the support, growth and atmosphere scales represent 'open' climate; the repression scale is indicative of a closed climate. Cronbach's alphas were .92 for support, .70 for atmosphere, .78 for repression, and .91 for growth. The PGCI was validated in 2011, showing favorable construct validity (confirmatory factor analysis) and reliability (Van der Helm, Stams et al., 2011).

### *Taxonomy of Problematic Social Situations-Adolescent Version (TOPS-A)*

The TOPS-A was developed using Matthys et al.'s (2001) original observation instrument, and has been adapted and validated for self-report use in forensic adolescent settings by Van der Helm, Matthys et al. (2013). The TOPS-A measures the extent of an adolescent's aversive (inappropriate) reactions to specific social problem situations, such as calling names, shoving others, but also negative thoughts about others ('When I lose, someone is cheating') and not cooperating with staff ('If a group worker wants to talk to me, I keep my mouth shut'). The questionnaire contains 22 items, on a five-point Likert-type answering scale. The instrument has four scales: 'problematic reactions to being disadvantaged' (eight items), 'problematic reactions to facing competition' (five items), 'problematic reactions with accepting/giving help' (three items), and 'problematic reactions with accepting

authority' (six items). The following questionnaire items are examples of aversive responses to social disadvantage – 'When others tell me I have the wrong clothes, I yell at them' – competition – 'When I lose, I quit playing' – accepting/giving help – 'If someone else feels down, it is his/her problem' – and accepting authority – 'If a group worker is talking, I just interrupt when I feel so.' Reliability coefficients of the four scales were as follows: accepting/giving help  $\alpha = .69$ , competition  $\alpha = .77$ ; accepting authority  $\alpha = .79$ , and social disadvantage,  $\alpha = .81$ .

## Statistical Analysis

In preliminary analyses, differences in reactions to social problem situations (TOPS-A) and living group climate (PGCI) were examined between juveniles from secure institutional youth care and the juvenile correctional facility in a series of *T*-tests. Next, we examined simple correlations between the four scales of living group climate and reactions to social problem situations.

A structural equation model linking living group climate to adolescents' reactions to problematic situations was fitted to the data (see Figure 1). The latent variable 'living group climate' was measured using the manifest variables of support, growth, repression, and atmosphere (i.e., the scales of the PGCI), while the latent variable 'adolescents' reactions to problematic situations' was measured with the four TOPS-A scales (problematic reactions to being disadvantaged, facing competition, accepting/giving help, and accepting authority). Additionally, we controlled for gender and age by adding these variables to the model.

An observed variance-covariance matrix was used as input for the analysis. The maximum likelihood estimation yields estimates of regression coefficients, residual variances and covariances, as well as a chi-square (CHISQ) measure of overall goodness of fit, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). In addition, two other fit indices were used: the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). The chi-square test is a measure of exact fit. A significant chi-square value ( $\alpha < .05$ ) indicates that the model does not fit the data well. A study by Hu and Bentler (1999) suggests that a cut-off value close to .95 for TLI and CFI and a cut-off value close to .06 for RMSEA are needed before we can conclude that there is a relatively good fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analysis

*T*-tests were conducted to examine differences in reactions to social problem situations (TOPS-A) and living group climate (PGCI) between juveniles from secure

residential youth care and the juvenile correctional facility. Levene's tests showed that variances were equal between groups. No differences of means were found on the TOPS-A scales and on the growth scale of the PGCI. However, differences were found on repression, atmosphere and support ( $p < .05$ ). Juveniles in the correctional facility experienced more support (Cohen's  $d = 0.54$ ), less repression (Cohen's  $d = 0.48$ ) and a more positive atmosphere (Cohen's  $d = 0.52$ ). Despite differences in age and gender (see Method section, participants) and perception of living group climate between the secure care and correctional facility, groups were collapsed in the structural equation analysis, controlling for age and gender, in order to have a sufficiently large sample size to preserve statistical power.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and (one-tailed significance) correlations among the four living group climate factors (i.e., support, growth, repression and atmosphere) and four reactions to social problem situations (i.e., social disadvantage, competition, problems with accepting/giving help and problems with authority). The four climate factors were moderately to strongly (significantly) correlated with one another, between  $r = -.36$  ( $p < .001$ , growth and repression) and  $r = .72$  ( $p < .001$ , support and growth). Moderate to strong (significant) correlations were also found among the four reactions to social problem situations, ranging between  $r = .40$  ( $p < .001$ , competition and giving/accepting help) and  $r = .64$  ( $p < .001$ , social disadvantage and authority). Small to moderate significant associations were found between all climate factors and reactions to social problem situations, except for the relations between atmosphere and

competition ( $r = -.14$ ,  $p = .126$ ) and growth and competition ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p = .329$ ).

### Structural Equation Modelling

The baseline model linking living group climate (measured by support, growth, repression, and atmosphere) to adolescents' reactions to problematic situations (measured by problematic reactions to being disadvantaged, to facing competition, with accepting/giving help, and with accepting authority) and with the control for age and gender showed a close fit to the data:  $\chi^2(31) = 50.194$ ,  $p = .016$ , RMSEA = .070, CFI = .957 and TLI = .939. However, modification indices showed that adding paths between the residual variances of problems with competition and social disadvantage ( $\beta = .247$ ,  $p = .013$ ), atmosphere and repression ( $\beta = -.243$ ,  $p = .005$ ) and atmosphere and growth ( $\beta = .244$ ,  $p = .014$ ) further improved model fit:  $\chi^2(28) = 37.379$ ,  $p = .111$  and RMSEA = .051, CFI = .979 and TLI = .967. Therefore, we added these paths to the model. The resulting model indicated that older adolescents ( $\beta = -.284$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and girls ( $\beta = -.350$ ,  $p < .001$ ) showed less aversive reactions to social problem situations compared to younger adolescents and boys, and girls perceived living group climate as less positive than did boys ( $\beta = -.232$ ,  $p = .010$ ).

A diagram of the resulting model is presented in Figure 1. It can be derived from Figure 1 that living group climate has a negative relation with social problem situations ( $\beta = -.632$ ,  $p < .001$ ). That is, the more positive or open the adolescents perceive their living group climate to be, the less inappropriate reactions to social problem situations they report.

TABLE 1  
Associations between Living Group Climate and Social Problem Behavior: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>Living Group Climate</i>										
1 Support (sig $p=$ )	39.37	9.61	1							
2 Growth (sig $p=$ )	27.68	8.40	.72 (.000)	1						
3 Repression (sig $p=$ )	21.02	4.45	-.46 (.000)	-.36 (.000)	1					
4 Atmosphere (sig $p=$ )	15.24	4.48	.67 (.000)	.65 (.000)	-.50 (.000)	1				
<i>Social Problem Behavior (TOPS)</i>										
5 Social Disadvantage (sig $p=$ )	17.85	6.93	-.40 (.000)	-.31 (.000)	.30 (.000)	-.33 (.000)	1			
6 Competition (sig $p=$ )	7.55	3.57	-.19 (.036)	-.09 (.329)	.28 (.002)	-.14 (.126)	.54 (.000)	1		
7 Accepting/giving help (sig $p=$ )	7.71	3.13	-.36 (.000)	-.26 (.003)	.32 (.000)	-.30 (.001)	.47 (.000)	.40 (.000)	1	
8 Authority (sig $p=$ )	11.04	4.84	-.49 (.000)	-.38 (.000)	.28 (.001)	-.27 (.002)	.64 (.000)	.45 (.000)	.52 (.000)	1

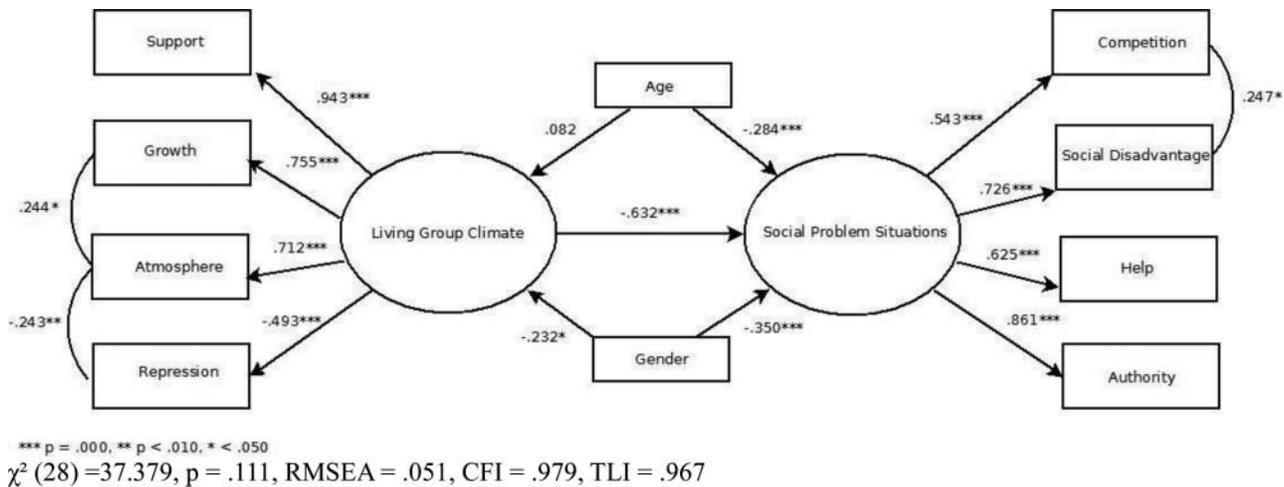


FIGURE 1. Structural equation model of the relation between living group climate and social problem situations.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the relation between perceived aspects of living group climate and self-reported responses to social problem situations in a group of adolescents placed in Dutch secure or correctional facilities. The results showed an association between open living group climate and less aversive handling of social problem situations. This is in line with research by Schubert and colleagues (2012), who found positive perceptions of living group climate to reduce self-reported behavior problems in juvenile delinquents. Results further indicated that older adolescents and girls reported less aversive reactions to social problem situations than did younger adolescents and boys. Also, girls evaluated group climate as less positive than did boys. A possible explanation is that girls are less often referred to secure residential youth care than boys, but when they eventually enter residential youth care problems have become worse than those of boys, which might translate in a more negative perception of living group climate (Sonderman & Van der Helm, 2014). Another explanation, provided by Sonderman and Van der Helm, would be that the high prevalence of internalizing problems in detained girls is associated with a negative perception of living group climate. Indeed Sonderman and Van der Helm found both high levels of internalizing problems in detained girls and a relatively negative perception of living group climate. However, in the present study differences in perception of living group climate between girls and boys may also be accounted for by an unequal distribution of gender among the secure care and correctional facilities. In other words, gender and nature of the facility were confounded in our study.

Adolescents in the correctional facility were somewhat older than those in the secure residential facilities. Also, aversive reactions to social problem situations were negatively associated with age, that is, older adolescents

reported less aversive reactions to social problem situations than younger adolescents. It seems plausible to suggest that the management of self-reputation is more difficult for younger than for older adolescents, which might be reflected in more aversive reactions to social problem situations (see Emler & Reicher, 1995).

Findings of the current study reveal opportunities for group workers to have a positive impact on adolescents' development at the living group by providing a supportive context that challenges negative reactions to social problem situations. Incarcerated juveniles must learn to cope with problematic social situations at the living group, involving situations of disadvantage, competition, accepting/giving help, and accepting authority, preparing them for life in society (Van der Helm et al., 2013). Maintaining the balance between control and flexibility is probably one of the main issues for group workers (Van der Helm, Boekee et al., 2011), and seems of crucial importance when providing a positive context for social learning.

There are some limitations of this study that need to be acknowledged. First, the latent variables in the Structural Equation Model did not explain all covariance among the indicators, which indicates some potential measurement problems. Next, the sample size was too small to allow multi-group or multi-level analysis in order to account for dependency of measurements in hierarchically structured data. Future research should use larger samples allowing the examination of the relation between living group climate and reactions to social problem situations in different age groups, boys, girls, mixed gender groups and different types of open and closed residential settings. Notably, juveniles in secure residential youth care tend to be more susceptible for negative peer influences, have a more negative self-image, less insight in the effects of their behavior, lower frustration tolerance, more anger outbursts, and are more

antisocial and aggressive than juveniles in open youth care (Vermaes & Nijhof, 2014). It would be interesting to examine whether such differences affect the relation between living group climate and reactions to social problem situations of juveniles in residential youth care.

Furthermore, the results of the current study were based on self-report measures only. This may have led to underrepresentation of aversive behavior and biased perceptions of living group climate. However, it should be noted that self-report of behavior in problematic social situations also has an advantage over other-report, because in particular staff ratings may be too global, as they are collapsed across many social situations and may be unduly based on interactions with staff instead of interactions among peers (see Foster, Inderbitzen, & Nangle, 1993; Nangle, Ellis, & Hansen, 1994). Nevertheless, ideally, future research should take staff ratings into account, in addition to self-report measures.

Marshall and Burton (2010) urgently called for a research-based framework to study living group dynamics in secure residential care. Recent research on group dynamics in secure forensic settings pointed to the key role group workers play in establishing an open group climate and providing effective treatment (De Swart, 2011; Harder, Kalverboer, & Knorth, 2011; Lambert, Altheimer, Hogan, & Barton-Belessa, 2011; Ros et al., 2013; Souverein et al., 2013). In this respect, results from this study further emphasize that group workers should facilitate a positive living group climate for detained adolescents, because a positive group climate seems to be related to less aversive reactions to social problem situations.

We would like to argue that providing social skills training within the context of an open living group climate and targeting distorted social information processing could diminish aversive responses to social problem situations in detained adolescents (Van der Helm et al., 2013). In residential youth care social skills training is often provided for a great number of adolescents suffering from behavioral problems (Maag, 2005), but effects of social skills training tend to be only modest (Lösel & Beelmann, 2006; Maag, 2006). This study indicates that improving living group climate could be a first step in improving effects of social skills training. At least, a positive living group climate appears to be associated with less aversive reactions to social problem situations, possibly making social skills training more effective.

The current study provides preliminary evidence for the association between perceptions of group climate and aversive reactions to social problem situations. Results should be replicated in a prospective, longitudinal study that allows for the examination of transactional processes and contextual effects by means of multi-level analyses. Ideally, self-reports should be combined with staff ratings and registered incidents (Ros et al., 2012).

Despite its limitations, this study is one of the few in which reactions to social problem situations of adolescents are studied within secure residential facilities. The results ask for further research in which the effects of social skills training on perceptions of living group climate of incarcerated adolescents is examined. Besides, it is important to study the possibilities for positively influencing the handling of social problem situations and for the expression of less aggression in interpersonal contact. When positive outcomes of residential interventions can be generalized to the domains of school, family and work (after detention), some progress could be made in the reduction of social problem behavior, providing a better future for adolescents with severe behavioral problems.

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