

## Conduct Disorder and Moral Competence among Juvenile Delinquents: A Mini-Review

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### Introduction

The younger population is responsible for a great proportion of criminality in different countries, particularly in Asia [1]. In the Philippines, there have been more than 4,000 cases of offenses committed by Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) in Metro Manila from 1986 to 1992. In 2009, more than 11,000 CICL were recorded nationwide, which showed a significant increase from previous numbers [2-6]. With this trend, juvenile delinquency and criminal behaviour in adolescents, particularly the contributing factors to such behaviour has been the subject of numerous studies in the recent years.

Historically, increased risk for delinquent behaviour have been associated with child-related, parent-related, and social factors. Among risk factors associated with delinquency, conduct disorder and moral competence were the focus of this review. Conduct disorder is a repetitive and persistent pattern of behaviour in which the basic rights of others or major societal norms or rules are violated [7,8]. It is considered as one of the most common psychiatric disorders of childhood, with a median prevalence rates of 4%-7% in the general population [7,8] and 73%-77% in Western and Latin American juvenile justice institutions [9,10]. On the other hand, moral competence refers to the "affective orientation to perform altruistic behaviour towards others and the ability to judge moral issues logically, consistently, and at an advanced level of development" [11].

The purpose of this review is to summarize and give an overview of the currently available information regarding how conduct disorder and moral competence may be associated with juvenile delinquency, as well as to find potential gaps or conflicting claims which may serve as a springboard for future investigation and research.

### Research questions

- Is there an association between conduct disorder and antisocial/criminal behaviour among children and/or adolescents?
- Is there an association between moral competence and antisocial/criminal behaviour among children and/or adolescents?

### Methodology

For this review, the ScienceDirect, Embase, Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar databases were searched. To identify the articles, the search terms of juvenile delinquency, children in conflict with the law, conduct disorder, moral competence, moral judgement, moral orientation, and all the possible combinations of these keywords were used. No time limit was considered in the search process, and the articles were grouped into the 3 categories based on their topics. Inclusion criteria were (1) studies which examined the association between conduct disorder and/or moral competence on child or adolescent juvenile delinquency and behavioural problems, and (2) studies whose full text in the English language were available. Criteria for exclusion were (1) studies which examined adult delinquent or criminal behaviour, (2) duplicate sources, (3) studies with unclear

methods, (4) studies which did not have an English translation, and (5) studies without a full text version.

### Results

A total of 17 studies on children in conflict with the law were included in the review. Of the 17 articles, 7 tackled conduct disorder and its association with delinquent behaviour, while 8 studies investigated the participants' moral competence. One study conducted in the Philippines utilized both conduct disorder and moral competence as variables in criminal behaviour of children and adolescents [12]. These studies have a wide range of dates: The earliest ones being published in 1981 [13], 1988 [14], and 1994 [15]. One article was published in 2006 [16], 2011 [17], 2014 [18], 2015 [19], 2017 [20], and in 2020 [21]. There were 2 published studies in the year 2016 [22,23], 3 in 2018 [24-26], and 3 in 2019 [12,27,28].

Table 1 gives an overview of the 8 chosen studies which investigated the relationship of conduct disorder and delinquent behaviour among children and/or adolescents. Various methods of inquiry were utilized in these articles commonly cross-sectional, prospective cohorts, and meta-analysis, among others. The common finding in these studies is the strong association between conduct disorder and delinquent behaviour. All of the chosen studies had results which supported the hypothesis that conduct disorder or psychopathic traits predicted future criminal behaviour. This included theft and homicide [12, 17], aggression [18], substance abuse [19], and arrest [20]. Studies on incarcerated juvenile delinquents and those with criminal records also show that majority of these children had symptoms of conduct disorder [19, 22]. Conversely, previous history of incarceration was found to be an independent risk factor for the development of conduct disorder [22]. This suggests a bidirectional relationship, with conduct disorder being a risk factor for criminal behaviour, and history of said criminal behaviour and arrest being a predictor of conduct disorder development. Finally, one study found that delinquency was associated with the psychopathic trait of impulsivity more than callous-unemotional traits [21]. Delinquent acts were a result of the psychopathic impulsivity of the child rather than of his/her lack of emotions or inability to empathize.

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Author/s (Year)	Study title	Findings
Mordre, et al. (2011) [17]	The Impact of ADHD and conduct disorder in childhood on adult delinquency: A 30 Years follow-up study using official crime records	Conduct disorder (RR=2.0, 95%CI=1.2-3.4) and hyperkinetic conduct disorder (RR=2.7, 95% CI=1.6-4.4) significantly increased the risk of future criminal behaviour.
Hemphälä and Hodgins (2014) [18]	Do psychopathic traits assessed in mid-adolescence predict mental health, psychosocial, and antisocial, including criminal outcomes, over the subsequent 5 years?	The number of conduct disorder symptoms positively predicted alcohol and substance use disorders.  High numbers of CD symptoms were associated with significantly higher scores for aggressive behaviour, as well as significantly more convictions or self-reports of violent and nonviolent crimes.
Doria, et al. (2015) [19]	Delinquency and association with behavioural disorders and substance abuse	Conduct disorder was present in 59.4% of the sample of juvenile delinquents.  Both ADHD (p<0.001) and CD (p<0.01) had significant associations with substance abuse.
Olashore, Ogunwale, and Adebawale (2016) [22]	Correlates of conduct disorder among inmates of a Nigerian borstal institution	Out of 147 respondents, 83 (56.5 %) met the criteria for conduct disorder with a mean age 17.1 ± 1.1.  Number of siblings (OR 4.630; p=0.01; 95 % CI 1.433–14.964) and previous history of incarceration (OR 4.99; p=.04; 95 % CI 1.048–23.846) emerged as independent predictors of CD.
Greenfield, et al. (2017) [20]	Conduct disorder and alcohol use disorder trajectories, predictors, and outcomes for indigenous youth	Participants who had conduct disorder symptoms had higher odds of high school dropout, sex under the influence, and arrest at age 17-20.
Khuda, (2019) [27]	Juvenile delinquency, its causes and justice system in Bangladesh: a critical analysis	Conduct disorder was identified as a risk factor for juvenile delinquency.

Mariano, (2019) [12]	Moral competence and conduct disorder among Filipino children in conflict with the law	Children with conduct disorder were significantly more likely to have committed theft and homicide.  Children with CD were more likely to have committed more violations compared to the control group (t=2.33, df=21, p=.030).
Geerlings, et al. (2020) [21]	The association between psychopathy and delinquency in juveniles: a three-level meta-analysis	Psychopathy was associated with delinquent behaviour, with a moderately significant effect size of r=0.24 (95% CI=0.20-0.30; p<.001).  The association was significantly stronger for impulsivity traits (r=0.31), than for callous unemotional traits (r=0.23), F (2, 354)=67.43, p<.001.

Table 1: Articles on Conduct Disorder (CD) and juvenile delinquency.

A summary of the findings regarding the association of moral competence and delinquent behaviour is presented in Table 2. Results of these studies, though with varied methods, consistently found that a lower level of moral competence, a lower stage in moral development, or moral disengagement were significantly associated with an increased tendency for antisocial or delinquent actions. Several studies found a significantly lower moral competence in juvenile delinquents as compared to their non-delinquent counterparts [12,13,15,16]. Likewise, those examining children in conflict with the law have found that those who have lower moral competence ratings were more likely to exhibit physical assaultiveness, aggression, and antisocial tendencies [14, 24, 28]. Conversely, Shek and Zhu [25] found that higher moral competence and spirituality resulted in reports of lower delinquent behaviour as compared to their counterparts.

Author/s (Year)	Title	Findings
Sagi and Eisikovits (1981) [13]	Juvenile delinquency and moral development	Delinquents scored significantly lower than low, middle, and upper class non-delinquents in moral orientation indices of resistance to temptation, moral stage, feeling after the offense, and confession (p<.001).
Veneziano and Veneziano (1988) [14]	Correlates of moral development in juvenile delinquents	Among delinquents, those who scored lowest in the Morality-Immorality Scale had the highest ratings by supervisors in the areas of escape risk, physical assaultiveness, oppositional tendencies, verbal aggressiveness, manipulativeness, following rules and antisocial tendencies.
Lind, (1994) [15]	Why do juvenile delinquents gain little from moral discussion programs?	Delinquents showed a very low moral judgment competence. The mean competence score (MJT) was 18.8 and 20.5 for the experimental and the control group respectively.  Delinquents have a much lower ability to apply their moral principles to the discussion and solution of concrete moral dilemmas, than non-delinquents.

Stams, et al. (2006) [16]	The moral judgment of juvenile delinquents: A meta-analysis	There was large and significant overall effect size of $d=.76$ , $p<.001$ , indicating lower moral judgment scores for delinquents compared to nondelinquents.
Wang, et al. (2016) [23]	Moral disengagement as mediator and moderator of the relation between empathy and aggression among chinese male juvenile delinquents	Moral disengagement partially mediated the influence of empathy on aggression and moderated the relation between empathy and aggression.  There was a significant negative relation between empathy and aggression at low levels of moral disengagement.
Romeral, Fernandez, and Fraguela (2018) [24]	Moral reasoning in adolescent offenders: A meta-analytic review	Results suggest a powerful relationship between moral reasoning and officially recorded juvenile delinquency
Shek and Zhu (2018) [25]	Self-reported risk and delinquent behaviour and problem behavioural intention in hong kong adolescents: the role of moral competence and spirituality	Adolescents who had better development of moral competence or spirituality reported lower levels of risk and delinquent behaviour as compared with their counterparts
Zapolski, et al. (2018) [26]	Perceived police injustice, moral disengagement, and aggression among juvenile offenders: utilizing the general strain theory model	Moral disengagement predicted past-month aggression among juvenile offenders, but only by youth who reported mean and high levels of perceived police injustice.
Mariano, (2019) [12]	Moral competence and conduct disorder among filipino children in conflict with the law	Statistically significant differences between groups were noted, with conduct-disordered children having lower Moral Competence Test scores compared to controls ( $t=-2.99$ , $df=21$ , $p=.007$ ).
Dauksha, (2019) [28]	The correlation of moral orientation and the deviant behaviour propensities in adolescence	There were positive correlations between delinquent behaviour propensity, pre-conventional level of moral development, and self-concern.

**Table 2:** Articles on Moral Competence and juvenile delinquency.

Several studies sought to focus on the specifics of this relationship. According to Lind [15], delinquents, though having inherent moral competence, are less likely to apply their moral principles to the discussion and solution of moral dilemmas. Similar to this finding, Wang et al. [23] found that moral disengagement moderated the relationship between empathy and aggression. This means that empathy may moderate the relationship between low moral competence or moral disengagement and antisocial behaviour. However, Zapolski et al. [26] found that this relationship was significant only for delinquents who had high levels of perceived police violence. On the other hand, Maryano [12] attributed aggressive acts to a lack of moral development – specifically, those who were predisposed to aggression possessed a more self-centered and self-concerned type of moral orientation.

## Discussion

The findings of the studies were consistent in establishing an association between conduct disorder and moral competence to criminal acts done by juvenile delinquents. Most studies observed a direct relationship between conduct disorder and risk-taking behaviour. A bi-directional relationship between the two was also proposed, with previous incarceration being associated with conduct disorder symptoms. Hence, children in conflict with the law may be inherently trapped in a vicious cycle of the development of an inherent psychiatric disorder and misdemeanor, the result of which furthers the progress or worsens the existing disorder. This may be a topic of future research, as this may hold key implications with regards to

intervention and rehabilitation of these children.

Most of the studies included in this review established the relationship between conduct disorder and delinquency by utilizing questionnaires or scales to measure conduct disorder or its symptoms in delinquents, and then correlating these scores with criminal or antisocial behaviour. It would be interesting to utilize a cross-sectional study design to effectively compare delinquents to their non-delinquent counterparts in terms of conduct disorder diagnosis or symptoms. One such study by Mariano [12] has utilized this method, however, more studies may be done to elaborate and further strengthen this association.

Likewise, future investigations into this topic may be geared towards the different possible mediating or moderating variables between conduct disorder and delinquent behaviour. The few articles included in this review have established this connection, but pathways in which these variables are connected seem lacking. More studies have established associations between numerous factors such as family background, socio-economic status history of trauma or abuse to juvenile delinquency. It would indeed be possible to factor some of these variables in as possible elements in the conduct disorder-juvenile delinquency relationship.

Moral competence was consistently found to be negatively associated with criminal or antisocial behaviour. Furthermore, moral disengagement was found to moderate the association between lack of empathy and aggressive behaviour. This supports Lind's [15] theory that delinquents are less able to apply moral principles to situations, and may be an interesting perspective to investigate further.

## Conclusion

The 17 studies that were included in this review support the hypothesis that the presence of a psychiatric disease, particularly conduct disorder, and a lower level of moral competence are associated with a higher risk for criminal acts done by children in conflict with the law. There seems to exist a bidirectional association between CD and delinquency, which has very significant implications in terms of research and psychiatric clinical practice. A lower moral competence or moral disengagement was found to be directly associated with anti-social behaviour but this was also found to be a moderating factor between the lack of empathy and aggressive behaviour. Once again, this may be a topic of interest for research in the future.

Despite the significant information summarized in this review, this study is limited in terms of both the quantity and analysis of articles about the topics of interest. There are certainly more studies available, extensively examining the factors involved, which were not included in this study due to language and access restrictions and the nature of the study being a mini-review. Likewise, the data of the chosen studies were summarized and discussed, but in-depth analysis of the studies themselves as well as quantitative statistics (as in meta-analytical studies) were not performed. These may lend themselves to a meta-analytic paper in the future.

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