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## DELINQUENT AND NO DELINQUENT MALE ADOLESCENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF THEIR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS



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### Abstract

Using a retrospective method developed by Pipp et al. (1985), delinquent ( $N=100$ ) and nondelinquent ( $N=100$ ) 16-17 years old male adolescents' used diagrams and questionnaire ratings to portray their relationships with both parents during four age periods. From early childhood to their current age, delinquents perceived their intimate relationships with parents as less loving and close compared with matched controls. Both study groups perceived themselves as gaining progressively more responsibility and dominance during childhood, but differed from each other in the area of dominance, responsibility and friendship during current relationships and during early childhood in the area of independence and similarity.

**Keywords:** Close relationships with parents, delinquent and nondelinquent adolescents

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## 1. Introduction

Close relationships as a broad term describes the extent to which individuals are connected emotionally and behaviorally, differentiating between intimate relationships and behaviorally close relationships. Intimate relationships are characterized as high levels of the partners feel close, connected, or bonded to one another (Ben- Ari & Lavee, 2007), and is typically assessed via self-report using pictorial measures of diagrams (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Pipp et al., 1985), designed to study these relationships by circle and/or verbal scale variables. Although parent-child relationships transform during adolescence (Collins, 1990) with children becoming more autonomous and independent from their parents (Smetana & Asquith, 1994) in a context of support and attachment (Silverberg & Gondoli, 1996), the dyadic processes between the two generations continued to play significant roles in the young person's development (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). These formulations give relatively greater emphasis to the importance of the history of relationship experiences with which a child enters a new life period. Young peoples' close relationships has been a focus of the developmental research related to how and under what conditions partners of different types of relationships contribute to development during developmental transitions (Laursen & Collin, 2009).

However, general trend indicate a decline in the quality of the parent-child relationship in middle and late adolescence (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009), research on the continuities and changes in the qualities of intimate relationships between children and both parents can specify these trend. The landmark study regarding adolescents' perceptions about the development of their intimate relationships quality with parents carried out by Pipp, Shaver, Jennings, Lamborn, and Fischer (1985). Authors found that from early childhood to late adolescence, adolescents portrayed their relationships in two major ways: (1) with regard to variables pertaining to love and closeness, late adolescent normative sample perceived their relationships with their parents as closer at present than in the years preceding, more similar in this respect to their relationships with their parents in early childhood, and (2) adolescents perceived themselves as gaining in responsibility, dominance, and independence from infancy to the present while portraying their parents as experiencing a decline on these dimensions.

At the other side, a growing body of literature (Hoeve et al., 2009; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986) confirms that parenting is related to delinquency and the strongest effect was found for negative aspects of support such as neglect, hostility and rejection or combinations of these parenting behaviours. Much less is known about the association between developmental changes in parent-child relationships and the development of

juvenile delinquency. Two related studies have indicated that a stronger decline of parental knowledge and adolescent disclosure are related to stronger increases in adolescent delinquency (Keijsers et al., 2009; Laird et al., 2003). Also, cross-sectional design of the study (Keijsers et al., 2011) revealed links between poor quality of parent-child close relationships (in terms of intimate and behavioral components) and boy's offence across late childhood, early and middle adolescence showing that relationships improved during childhood, their quality decreased in early adolescence and remained stable in middle adolescence, but delinquent behavior increased in middle adolescence. Also, it was shown that the developmental changes towards poorer parent-child relationships and changes towards higher levels of delinquency were significantly associated. Nevertheless, it is still not clear how the quality of close relationships between parent-child relationships changed unfolds over time in the relationships between delinquent adolescents and their both parents.

Research questions was raised: How delinquent and nondelinquent male adolescents retrospectively portray their intimate relationships with both parents at that point of time and at several points in the past taking self's and parents' perspective?

The purpose was to examine nondelinquent and delinquent male adolescents' conceptions of changes from birth to the present in their intimate relationships with both parents.

Two different aspects of parent-child intimate relationships between delinquent and nondelinquent male adolescents was examined: (1) changes in the relationships with mothers and fathers over time – from infancy to the present (age periods of 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, and now), and additionally (2) the adolescent's own and the parents' perspective on the intimate relationships was included to measure dominance, friendship, independence, loving, responsibility, and similarity.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Instrument

Two part questionnaire developed by Pipp et al. (1985) was used to measure parent-adolescent intimate relationships retrospectively based on the circle drawings and verbal scale variables.

At first part of questionnaire subjects were asked for eight figural representations of the adolescent and mother/father relationships retrospectively during four age periods: 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, and now. Each drawing was to contain two circles, one representing the self and another representing mother or father (a separate series of drawings was completed for each parents). The subject was asked to draw the two circles in a

meaningful configuration, in relation to each other as you believe best illustrates your relationship with mother/father.

A modified Pipp's et al., (1985) scoring system was employed measuring eight different circle variables: (1) the size of the self circle (the largest diameter measured in millimeters), (2) the size of the mother/father circle (measured in millimeters), (3) the relative size of circles: self smaller than mother/father (coded: - 1 to - 6), self equal to mother/father (coded: 0), self bigger than mother/father (coded: + 1 to + 6), (4) the distance between centers of the two circles (measured in millimeters between the centres of the two circles), (5) an amount of overlap between circles (coded: 1 - no overlap, 2 - touching but no overlap, 3 - partial overlap, 4 - complete overlap), (6) the percentage of the self circle occupied by the other circle - a ratio of the diameter of the intersection to the diameter of the whole circle, (7) the relative vertical placement of the two circles (coded: 1 - the center of the mother/father circle was positioned above the centre of the subject circle, 2 - two centers of circles were drawn at the same vertical level, 3 - the center of the self circle was drawn above the centre of the mother/father), and (8) the relative horizontal placement of the two circles (coded: 1 - the center of the self circle was positioned on the left, 2 - two centers of circles were drawn at the same horizontal level, 3 - the center of the self circle was on the right).

The second part of questionnaire measuring verbal scale variables consist items about dominance, friendship, independence, loving, responsibility, and similarity in child-parent relationships. Subjects responded to twenty-four 5-point Likert scales (ranging from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree) for each parent at each of the four age periods taking their own and the parents' perspective on the relationships.

The average item scores for each of the six scales for each parent and perspective (self's perspective on the relationship with mother/father and mother's/father's perspective on this relationships) was calculated, and the t-test was used to compare the values of the means from two samples.

## 2.2. Samples

The sample of the study consisted of two groups of adolescents: juvenile delinquents and matched control group. The first group consisted of 100 16-17 year old male adolescents attending a training school. Using matched pairs method, juvenile delinquents were matched by three characteristics (age, sex, nationality) with the control group subjects (nondelinquents) from three randomly selected mainstream school pupils. The total number

of subjects in the two different groups was 200 ranging from 16-17 years ( $M=16.79$ ;  $SD=2.88$ ).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Circle Variables

In Figure 1a we present a representative series of mother/child and father/child drawings as measured by the size of the self, mother and father circle, whereby the size of each circle calculated by determining the largest diameter (millimeters). Two groups of adolescents portrayed themselves as becoming larger whereas with increasing age, and they portrayed their parents as becoming smaller. It was revealed that adolescents did not, on the average, draw themselves as large as they drew their parents. Two groups of adolescents differed in three aspects: during the age period 1-5 delinquent subjects portrayed themselves larger than controls ( $t=1.94$ ,  $p<.05$ ); controls draw larger mother figures than delinquents during age period 1-5 ( $t=1.92$ ,  $p<.05$ ); and during 1-5 period and “now” delinquents draw their fathers smaller than controls (accordingly:  $t=2.77$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=2.99$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

In Figure 1b the effect of age among delinquent and nondelinquent adolescents is presented connected with circles relative size – self figure compared with parent size. On the average, adolescents perceived themselves as becoming larger relative to their mothers and fathers, although at no time did they portray themselves as equal to or larger than parents, but during all age period delinquents portray themselves relatively more equal to their mothers and fathers compared with nondelinquents (accordingly during different age periods with mothers:  $t=6.90$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=6.82$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=1.85$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $t=2.21$ ,  $p<.05$ ; and with fathers:  $t=5.77$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=5.66$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=1.74$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $t=2.48$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

The analyses of the distance between the circles showed that two groups of adolescents draw their parents circles apart with increasing age, whereby during all age period (years 1-5, 6-10, 11-15 and now) nondelinquents illustrated a closer relationships between themselves and their parents compared with delinquent adolescents (accordingly during four age periods with mothers:  $t=7.92$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=7.35$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=6.39$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=4.49$ ,  $p<.01$ ; and with fathers:  $t=6.72$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=6.74$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=6.12$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=4.79$ ,  $p<.01$ ) (Figure 1c).

The analysis of the measure of interaction between self and parent circles show that the intersection generally decreased with age among both groups of adolescents being during all age periods significantly greater between nondelinquents and their parents compared with delinquents and their parents (accordingly during different age periods with mothers:  $t=9.03$ ,

p<.01; t=5.70, p<.01; t=3.55, p<.01; t=2.22, p<.01; and with fathers: t=8.38, p<.01; t=4.83, p<.01; t=2.79, p<.01; t=1.67, p<.05) (Figure 1d).

As shown in Figure 1e, the percentage of the self and parent decreases during all ages among both study groups, whereby the overlapping of parent-self circles was more intensive during all ages for nondelinquents compared with delinquents (accordingly during four age periods with mothers: t=5.57, p<.01; t=3.21, p<.01; t=1.97, p<.05; t=1.71, p<.05; and with fathers: t=3.61, p<.01; t=2.53, p<.01; t=1.97, p<.05; t=1.76, p<.05).

Finally, in order to assess whether subjects drew the circles in particular spatial relations to each other, their relative vertical and horizontal alignment was noted. On the average, parents were drawn above the self by both subject groups, but with increasing age the average placement of the two circles approached equality (Figure 1f), whereby analysis of this variable yielded no significant between delinquents and nondelinquents. Also, the average horizontal relation over all circles drawn suggested that adolescents tended to draw themselves on the left and their parents on the right with increase of age to draw self and parent circle more equal without statistically significant differences between two study groups.

### 3.2. Verbal Scale Variables

*Friendship.* Attributions of parent-child friendship generally increased with age with, whereby both groups of adolescents perceived their relationships with mothers friendlier than relationships with fathers across all age periods (years 1-5, 6-10, 11-15 and now) from self's and parents' perspectives (accordingly self/mother/father perspective during 1-5 years: t=2.52, p<.05/t=2.32, p<0.05/t=2.87, p<.05; during 6-11 years: t=3.59, p<.01/t=2.37, p<0.01/t=4.57, p<.01; during 11-15 years: t=2.12, p<.05/t=1.88, p<0.05/t=2.80, p<.05; during "now": t=3.71, p<.01/t=2.19, p<0.05/t=3.00, p<.05). Differences between delinquents and nondelinquents were found during present time period (now) – delinquents perceived their fathers less friendly compared with nondelinquents evaluations (accordingly self's/father's perspective: t=1.76, p<.05/t=1.76, p<.05). There was no such perceived difference between delinquents and nondelinquents and their mothers (Figure 2a).

*Love.* Research results indicated that nondelinquent subjects perceived themselves as loving their parents and their parents loved them more during all age periods (1-5, 6-10, 11-15, now) compared with delinquents' evaluations (accordingly during four age periods self's/mother's perspective: t=4.52, p<.01/t=1.72, p<.05; t=4.87, p<.01/ t=4.91, p<.01; t=3.64, p<.01/t=2.29, p<.05; t=2.20, p<.05/t=2.89, p<.05; and self's/father's perspective: t=4.01, p<.01/t=1.77, p<.05; t=3.53, p<.01/t=2.34, p<.05; t=2.20, p<.05/t=1.99, p<.05;

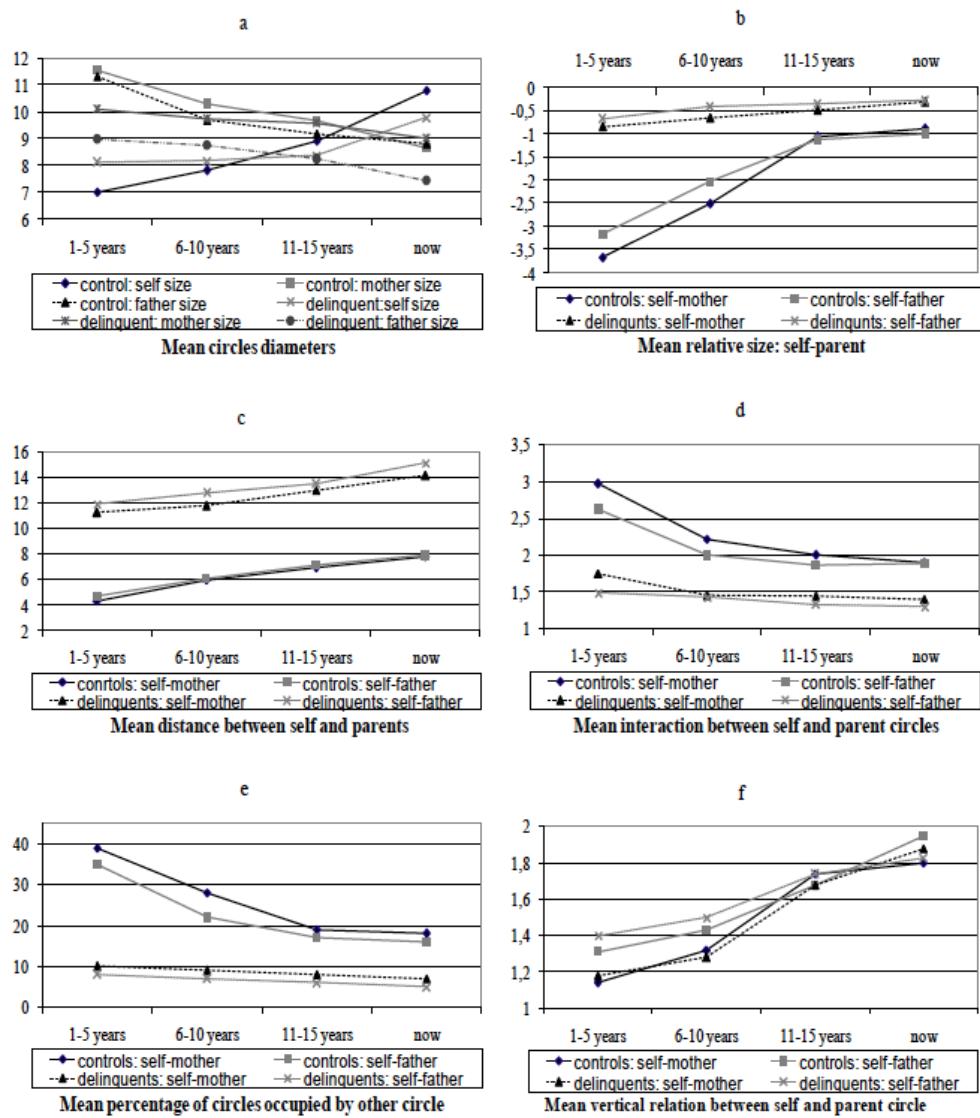
$t=1.79$ ,  $p<.05/t=3.12$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), whereby controls and their parents loving relationships tended to increase and delinquents and their parents loving relationships tended to decrease during age periods 1-5, 6-10 and 11-15 (Figure 2b).

*Dominance.* Both groups of adolescents portrayed a decrease in the amount of dominance they thought their parents felt for them, with marked increase in the amount of dominance toward their parents across all age periods for nondelinquents, but with decrease in the amount of dominance for delinquents toward their parents during the age periods of “now”. Namely, delinquent adolescents portrayed their mothers and fathers as less dominant in present relationship than did controls (accordingly self’s/mother’s perspective and self’s/father’s perspective:  $t=2.18$   $p<.05$ ;  $t=2.91$ ,  $p<.05$ ) (Figure 2c).

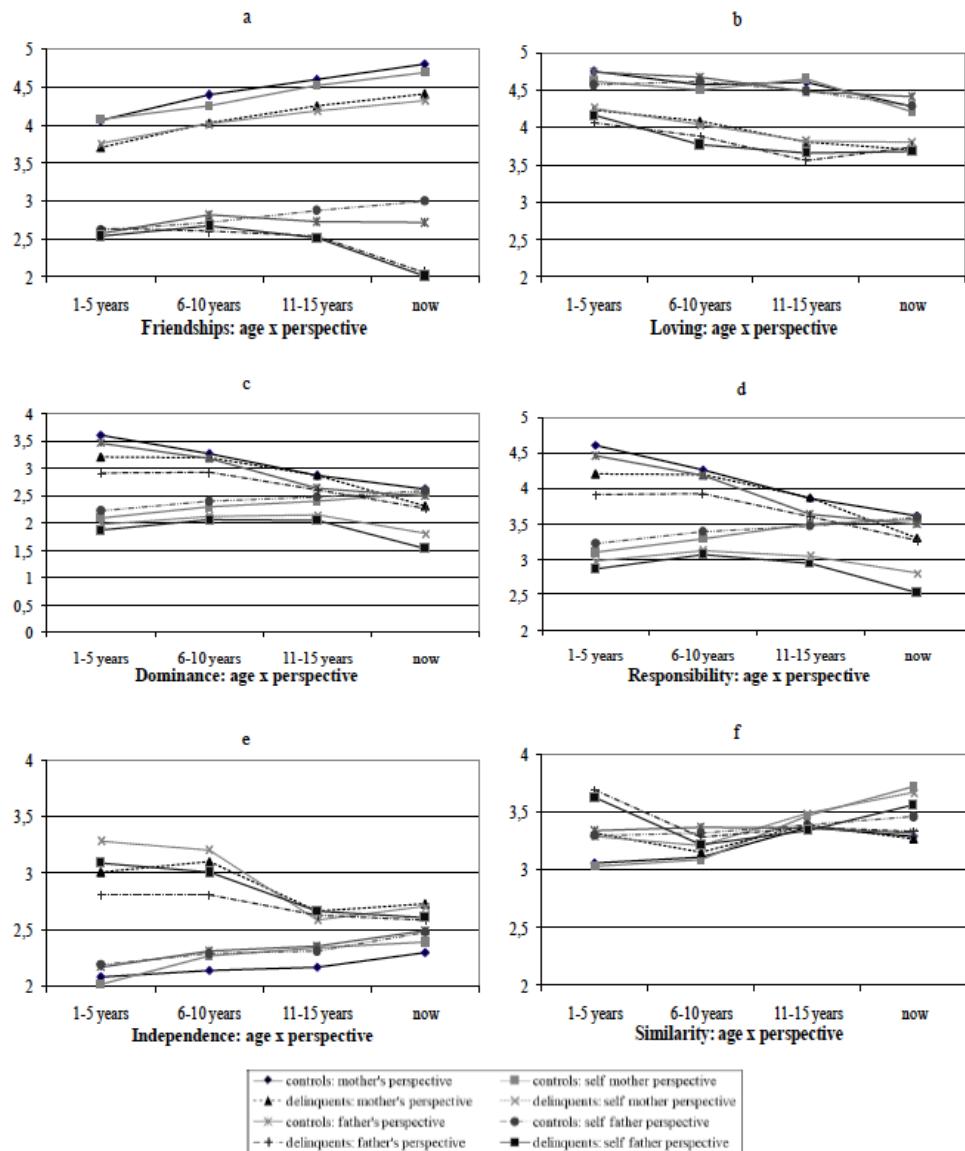
*Responsibility.* Overall, delinquents and nondelinquents perceived a decrease in the amount of responsibility they thought their parents felt for them, with marked increase in the amount of responsibility toward their parents across all age periods for nondelinquents, but with decrease in the amount of responsibility delinquents felt toward their parents during the age periods of 11-15 years and now (accordingly 11-15 age period/ “now” period relationships with mothers:  $t=2.41$ ,  $p<.01/t= 2.08$ ,  $p<0.05$ ; and 11-15 age period/ “now” period relationships with fathers:  $t=2.69$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $t=1.63$ ,  $p<.05$ ) (Figure 2d).

*Independence.* Results indicated that delinquents felt themselves to be more independent from their parents and felt also that their parents to be more independent from them during the two early periods in childhood (1-5 and 6- 10) comparing the results of the nondelinquents evaluations (self’s/mother’s perspective 1-5 years:  $t=1.92$ ,  $p<.05/t=3.20$ ,  $p<.01$ ; self’s/father’s perspective 1-5 years:  $t=2.45$   $p<.01$ ;  $t=3.15$ ,  $p<.01$ ; self’s/mother’s perspective 6-10 years:  $t=2.08$ ,  $p<.05/t=2.90$ ,  $p<.05$ ; self’s/father’s perspective 6-10 years:  $t=2.69$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $t=2.37$ ,  $p<.05$ ). During late adolescence, parents and both groups of adolescents were perceived as more equally independent from each other (Figure 2e) with no statistically significant differences between matched groups evaluations.

*Similarity.* Delinquent and nondelinquent adolescents tended to felt themselves to equally similar to their parents for the ages of 6-10 and to be increasingly more similar to their fathers and mothers during the last two age periods, but during early childhood period (years 1-5) delinquents perceived themselves more similar to their both parents compared with nondelinquants’ evaluations (self’s/mother’s perspective 1-5 years:  $t=1.72$ ,  $p<.05/t=2.59$ ,  $p<.05$ ; self’s/father’s perspective 1-5 years:  $t=3.45$   $p<.01$ ;  $t=3.02$ ,  $p<.01$ ) (Figure 2f).



**Figure 1.** Circle variables graphed as a function of retrospective age of delinquents and nondelinquents



**Figure 2.** Scale variables graphed as a function of retrospective age of delinquents and nondelinquents

#### 4. Conclusions

Following research on the continuities and changes in the qualities of close relationships using retrospective technique among adolescents to evaluate their relationships developmental history (Pipp et al., 1985) in the context of the bidirectional dynamics between parent-child relationships and offending from middle childhood to middle

adolescence (Keijsers et al., 2011), is a theme in the literature which offers new challenges. In the present research new question was raised: *How do delinquent and nondelinquent adolescents perceive retrospectively - from early childhood to their current age, their intimate relationships with both parents?*

The aim of the study was twofold - to describe and compare delinquent and nondelinquent middle adolescents' retrospective perceptions of their intimate relationships with their both parents across different age periods and interpersonal perspective. The present research designs - a retrospective method developed by Pipp et al. (1985), was sensitive to both similarities and differences between changes in the intimate parent-child relationships from childhood to the transition to adolescence comparing delinquents' and nondelinquents' developmental histories of their relationships. Middle adolescent male subjects used drawings and questionnaire ratings to portray their relationships with their mothers and fathers at four points between infancy and the present. Matched study groups also portrayed the two sides of their relationships - self and parent - as different in several components (dominance, friendship, independence, loving, responsibility, and similarity) of close relationships.

The clearest and most consistent finding was that nondelinquent adolescents perceived themselves as gaining in responsibility, dominance, independence, and similarity from infancy to the present, whereas they portrayed their parents as experiencing a decline on these dimensions, whereby delinquents reported in their relationships a decline of the dominance and responsibility during current relationships and a decline of independence during early childhood.

These findings among nondelinquents reveal developmental trend from childhood to adolescence - a progressive move toward autonomy and equality, as previous studies (e.g. Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Pipp et al., 1985) have shown. Distortions in this developmental trend toward autonomy and equality reflected in current relationships with parents in the area of dominance and responsibility, and also in early childhood relationships in the area of independence among juvenile delinquents. Present results showed that male delinquents: (1) perceived themselves as having more responsibility and dominance in current relationships compared with nondelinquents, (2) portrayed their parents as more independent of the child during early childhood (age period from birth to ten), and (3) felt also more independent from parents than nondelinquents during the same time period.

Also, linear developmental progression over time reflected child and parent movement from a relationship of inequality toward an equality by adolescents' self-representations of relationships portraying themselves as having lower hierarchical relations

compared with their parents from early childhood to the present – middle adolescence. Parallel with this typical developmental changes, male delinquents perceived distortions in the hierarchical relations with parents in early childhood, when both parents were perceived as less dominating, and during current relationships with relatively low hierarchical positions of father. These results are consistent with theoretical and empirical accounts of the child's striving towards increasing autonomy from childhood to adolescence (e.g. Collins & Steinberg, 2006), whereby distortions in retrospective perceptions of the quality of juvenile delinquents' intimate relationships with parents confirm and enrich previous works (Keijsers et al., 2009) between poor parent-child relationships and delinquency unfold during the development from middle childhood to middle adolescence.

A second interesting aspect of adolescents' portrayal of their relationships with parents is the degree to which male juvenile delinquents versus controls differentiate emotionally close relationships with their parents. Although, both matched groups of adolescent subjects portrayed the development of their relationships with both parents as involving greater distance, less intersection, and relatively less overlap with each other with age (variables indicate closeness in relationships), delinquents' retrospective perceptions of this quality of their intimate relationships with their both parents were significantly lower than controls. Also, for variables indicating love, there were different linear trends between two study groups - nondelinquent adolescents perceived their mothers and father more loving from infancy to adolescence, and they depicted their current relationships as involving a great deal more love compared with delinquents. Thus, delinquents perceived their relations with their both parents from infancy to the present as considerably less cohesive and loving than did nondelinquents. With respect to variables pertaining to love and closeness, nondelinquents tended to perceive decrease as normal linear developmental trajectory from early childhood to middle adolescents, supporting previous studies (Kubota, 2009; Pipp et al., 1985).

Thirdly, male adolescents characterized their intimate relationships with their two parents differently with regard to one component of relationships – friendship. Specifically, both groups of adolescents perceived their relationships with mothers and fathers differently across all periods from early childhood to middle adolescence: More friendly relationships with the mothers compared with fathers, although it was revealed that delinquents felt less friendly toward fathers than controls during current relationships. The developmental trend that friendship marked more the close relationship with mother than the relationship with father is consistent with previous related studies (e.g.

Hoeve et al., 2012; Pipp et al., 1985). The finding that delinquent male sample perceived their father as less friendlier compared with matched sample is parallel with findings that poor paternal support is more strongly related to delinquency than poor maternal support, especially for boys (Hoeve et al., 2009).

For variables indicating similarity, however there was a linear trend for both study group male adolescents to feel more similar to their parents with increase of age (as previously reported developmental trend: Pipp et al., 1985), with one exception – during early childhood delinquents felt more similar to their parents than nondelinquents. The puzzling finding from the present research that delinquents perceived retrospectively more similarities with their both parents, opens itself for more speculation. It may be speculated that what is actually being measured by retrospective reports, are “desired” feelings connected with close relationships rather than current feelings of closeness as Holtz, Brannigan and Schofield (1980) have supported. This would mean that the delinquent adolescents may portray retrospectively in early childhood desired or ideal intimate relationships with their parents, but not necessarily because he really felt similar.

Finally, to understand how an individual experiences a relationship at any one point in time, it is necessary to understand the history of that specific relationship in conjunction with other relationships, especially with close relationships with parents. These preliminary descriptive data provide the context in which to understand more deeply the developmental histories constructed by adolescents which reflected certain developmental tasks facing them and also distortion in the quality of their intimate relationships with parents facing by juvenile delinquents. The findings of the present study are limited to boys’ retrospective representations of their relationships with both parents and cannot be generalized to girls and to relationships with their parents. Also, it is unclear whether founded differences between delinquent and nondelinquent retrospective reports on child-parent relationships at four age period are generalize to the real parent-child dyadic close relationships.

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