

NEARI NEWS:

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

An Essential Tool for Professionals Working with those who Sexually Abuse or... A Great New Way to Stay Current with Cutting Edge Sexual Abuse Research.



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Dear Colleague,

This month's research provides a new perspective on the importance of healthy core beliefs as well as the ability to control behaviors that impact on the "decision" of adolescents to commit a crime. Although the research is not focused on adolescents who have sexually abused, the implications of this research points to the importance of working with a teen's sense of "morality". We think that this particular article will provide some thought-provoking materials to talk through over the water cooler (or on Facebook?).

As always, we welcome your feedback. And if you want us to examine a particular issue in an upcoming issue, please let us know.

Sincerely,

Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis

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The Impact of Self-Control and Morality on a Teen's Decision to Commit a Crime

by David S. Prescott, Steven Bengis, and Joan Tabachnick

The Question

Does an adolescent's level of self control and level of morality have an interactive effect on his/her decision to commit a crime?

The Research

Robert Svensson, Lieven Pauweis and Frank M. Weerman explored the above question directly in a study published this year. While several studies have explored the role of self-control in adolescent criminal behavior, few (if any) have asked how "morality" guides the decision to act out criminally. The authors measured morality using different scales but addressed the same issues, including whether it is acceptable to do something illegal if you don't get caught, and if honest ways to achieve something fail, is it then acceptable to use dishonest ways?

According to the study, if the adolescent does not consider criminal behavior an option (high morality), then self-control will not have an impact on whether the adolescent engages in criminal behaviors. Alternatively, for those for whom criminal acts are an option (low morality), then self-control will have a greater impact on their choice to act. This research was the first significant study to explore the relationship between "morality" (defined as the "willingness to break rules") and self-control in three substantial samples in three countries. As might be anticipated, the research supports a strong correlation between the two factors.

Implications for Professionals

This research focuses on two possible variables when assessing risk and protective factors and designing relevant treatment interventions with adolescents. These are the need to:



FEATURED NEARI RESOURCES

Responsibility and Self-Management: Clinicians Manual and Client Workbook



by Jack Apsche and
Jerry L. Jennings

The Manual and Workbook pinpoint the function of an adolescent's problem behavior (s) and helps to develop a specific intervention for that client. Using methodologies based on Evidenced Based Treatments, this important approach focuses and enhances the treatment process while addressing multiple behaviors seen in both in-patient and out-patient treatment placements.

For more information, click the image or go to the NEARI Press Bookstore at <http://bookstore.nearipress.org/>.

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1. Teach adolescents to self-regulate, and
2. Develop the healthy "core beliefs" (a term that resonates better with the newsletter authors than "morality" and appears in much of the recent relevant literature related to problem behavior).

Although self-regulation and situational factors are vitally important to our understanding of young people generally, and safety planning more specifically, interventions targeting adolescents' willingness to break rules in the first place are crucial. Learning self-regulation can also occur through a variety of brain-based interventions increasingly appearing in the field. Creating healthy core beliefs (possible proxies for "morality") is also a core component of treatment. When assessing risk for the purposes of developing treatment strategies, low levels of self-control (e.g., ADHD and other impulse control disorders) and attitudes tolerant of criminal action warrant serious consideration.

Implications for the Field

Although this study did not explore self-regulation and morality within a sex offending population, the results demand close consideration. As prior issues of this newsletter have explained, there are important differences between adolescents committing sexual offenses and other adolescents who engage in crime. If further research supports factors related to core beliefs and rule-breaking in adolescents who abuse sexually, there are important implications for prevention programs and for treatment. Low self-control by itself means little in the presence of healthy core beliefs that do not condone criminal behavior as an actual choice. Therefore, focusing on developing healthy core beliefs by adolescents with sexual behavior problems may help set the stage to prevent future sexual abuse. An interesting future study would examine the role that self-control and core beliefs play in the decision by male sexual abuse victims who never abuse and in those that do. Finally, although the authors view morality as a willingness to break rules, and separate it from guilt and shame and other emotions in this article, morality itself is a larger concept worthy of further research.

Reference

- Does the effect of self-control on adolescent offending vary by level of morality? A test in three countries. Svensson, R., Pauwels, L., & Weerman, F.M. (2010). *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 37, 732-743.

Abstract

This study examines whether morality and self-control have an interactional effect on offending. Drawing from the situational action theory, the authors hypothesize that self-control has a more important effect on offending for individuals with low levels of morality than for individuals with high levels of morality. To test this

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Special Price: \$32.00 +
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About the Editor:
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An internationally recognized expert in the field of sexual abuse assessment, treatment, management, and prevention, Mr. Prescott has published numerous articles and authored, edited, and co-edited books on risk assessment, interviewing, and providing residential treatment to youth. He is a Past President of ATSA and is currently Clinical Director for the Becket Programs of Maine, overseeing inpatient and outpatient services for juveniles.

hypothesis, self-report data were used from three independent samples of young adolescents in Antwerp, Belgium (N = 2,486); Halmstad, Sweden (N = 1,003); and South-Holland, the Netherlands (N = 1,978). The findings provide strong support for the hypothesis that the effect of self-control on offending is dependent on the individual's level of morality. The similarity of the results across three independent samples suggests that the findings are robust among different cultural backgrounds and among studies with different operationalizations of the central concepts of interest.

To print a pdf of this article, click [NEARI NEWS](#).

Featured: First White House Press Conference on Sexual Violence

At the close of Domestic Violence Awareness Month, President Obama and Vice President Biden addressed the nation regarding unprecedented efforts across the Federal Government to protect victims of domestic and sexual violence.

This announcement was followed by the first national roundtable on sexual violence at the White House sponsored by the White House Council on Women and Girls and the Department of Justice.

See link to that press conference: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2010/10/27/domestic-violence-awareness-month>.

Questions/Feedback

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