

DELINQUENCY AS DEFENSE

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Data on self-reported delinquent behavior of American adolescents are employed to test the hypothesis that such behavior is invoked as a defense against a derogated self-image. The hypothesis specifies one source of threat to self-esteem and its impact on both conscious and unconscious images of the self.

This study explores the hypothesis that a significant motivation for delinquent behavior is to defend against a derogated self-image. This is certainly not a new hypothesis, and clinical evidence for it abounds. But this study perhaps advances our understanding of delinquency as a defense in three ways.

First, the evidence presented to support the hypothesis is of a different sort than has heretofore been available: the data are drawn from a representative sample of American boys and girls ages 13 through 16, rather than from a selected clinical caseload or juvenile court population; their delinquency is measured by their own confessions, rather than by records of police, courts, or social agencies; and delinquency is measured in degree, from more to less, rather than simply as present or absent.

Second, the hypothesis is specified in terms of one of the environmental threats to self-image, the impact of the threat on both conscious and unconscious images of the self, and the features of the delinquency that are effectively defensive against this sort of threat.

Third, the data identify aspects of personality and environment that make delinquency differentially available for defense among adolescents confronted by similar self-degrading situations.

DELINQUENCY AMONG THE DEFENSES

Delinquency, it seems to us, is a relatively sophisticated defense, involving little distortion of perceived reality. (Indeed, its nature puts into sharp focus the difficulty in distinguishing qualitatively between a defense and a coping mecha-

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nism; for delinquency is often so reality-bound and so effective that it represents successful coping from the point of view of many adolescents.) We suggest that what is distorted is the individual's perception of himself as actor. This distortion permits a re-evaluation of the self such that a self-image that is unconsciously belittled passes into consciousness as adequate if not potent or laudable.

This transformation of the self-image does not require a considerable amount of distorting work. The self is not so definite an object of external reality that it achieves strong consensual validity. In most cases, the self is but an indistinct image to oneself and others. Furthermore, one receives various reflections and evaluations of self from others, often contradictory. And still further, an individual may lay claim to greater familiarity with his "true" self so that threatening reflections and evaluations from others may be easily discounted. With such an object as the self, then, distortion finds little opposition.

Delinquent behavior is a mechanism whereby a derogated self-image may be reclaimed for more positive conscious apperception. Most important for granting delinquency this capacity is that the delinquent is a fairly clearly defined role in American society. And the consensual image of the delinquent, at the same time that it is negatively regarded, is composed of several positively evaluated features: the image is potent and daring, and highly masculine. It is available as an alternative role when failure to fulfill other, central roles tarnishes the self-image. In the process of refurbishing the self-image by adopting the delinquent role, the adolescent anesthetizes himself from the anxiety generated by realiza-

tion of an ineffective and unworthy self.

But this defense, like all the others, is only anesthetic, the source of pain remains. That is, while anxiety does not become manifest, we may suppose that it continues to be felt unconsciously because the self-image remains unconsciously derogated. Consequently, those adolescents who are able to employ a delinquent defense experience less anxiety than those for whom the defense is not available. Previous researchers have noted this phenomenon.^{5, 9}

THREAT AND AVAILABILITY OF DEFENSE

An important threat to the self-image of many adolescents is their failure to perform the role of student adequately. While the role is not exclusively academic, certainly schoolgrades are important measures of role fulfillment. When a youngster receives poor grades, we may assume that psychic forces have been generated that threaten his sense of an adequate self. And insofar as delinquency is available to him as a defensive maneuver, we would expect that poor grades will provoke delinquent behavior. Delinquency may not be the defense mechanism of choice; other arenas for accomplishment may offer themselves, such as athletics or social popularity or the emerging role of adolescent citizen who is concerned with matters of war and peace, pollution and population, or the legalization of marijuana. But there is a sense in which the role of delinquent offers easier access to immediate and clear success than the others and may be preferred, especially by adolescents whose skills and temperaments fit them badly for the other roles.

Cohen, in his *Delinquent Boys*,² discusses in some detail the appropriate-

ness of the delinquent role for combating the threat to self-image emanating specifically from scholastic failure. For delinquency is not merely another accomplishment; implied in the delinquent role is a wholesale rejection of just those criteria of success that apply to the student role—docile obedience, commitment to tasks assigned by others, concern for a distant future, and a display of intelligence detached from accomplishment of immediate adolescent goals. Thus, heavy engagement in delinquent behavior strikes twice at the danger of scholastic failure—once in providing an arena for achievement of sorts, and once in depreciating the values by which scholastic failure is defined.*

But delinquency is not equally available or equally suitable as a defense for all adolescents. Insofar as the common image of the delinquent is masculine, then clearly it is not so available for adolescent girls as a means to enhance their self-esteem.** In addition, since its capacity to ameliorate a derogated self-image depends to some degree on its performance before an appreciative audience, it is likely to be more effective among youngsters whose friends value

delinquency. One might also expect that adolescents with weak affective bonds to their parents might employ a delinquent defense less burdened by guilt; but this does not turn out always to be the case, as we shall see.

In sum, we explore here the hypotheses that low schoolgrades tend to lower adolescents' self-esteem; that adolescents will tend, in order to raise their self-esteem, to invoke a defense consisting of a regular pattern of delinquent behavior, and that invocation of such a defense will occur more often among those adolescents to whom the delinquent defense is more available by virtue of their masculinity and the support they receive from their peers. In the course of our exploration, we will present data that reveal one function of adolescents' feelings toward their parents in this defensive maneuver. And, finally, we will present data that indicate that the maneuver is truly defensive in that it rescues conscious self-esteem but leaves unconscious self-esteem unredeemed.

NATIONAL SURVEY OF YOUTH

These data are drawn from the National Survey of Youth,** which in the

* While we are indebted to Cohen for clarifying this defensive use of delinquency, we do not share all of his views on the etiology of delinquency. Our differences center around what it is we are primarily trying to explain: on his part, the location of the delinquent subculture, and on our part, the delinquent behavior of individuals. His orientation leads him to stress the dependence of delinquent behavior on collective support, to locate such support for the most part in the lower class, and to suggest that middle-class delinquency has different motivational sources. On the other hand, we suggest that the delinquent role is widely known, about equally acceptable, and therefore about equally available to adolescents in all social classes; that, while peer support is an important factor in sustaining patterns of delinquent behavior, it need not take the form of an identifiable subculture—gangs, etc.; and that lower-class and middle-class delinquency are much more similar than different in their motivational bases.

** The idea that girls' delinquent behavior is different from boys' and more feminine—that is, involving more heterosexual behavior—is not borne out by other data.⁴ Girls are less delinquent as a group than boys, but the profile of their offenses is quite similar to that of boys.

*** Dr. Jay R. Williams directed the National Survey of Youth, and we are grateful to him for his help in producing this study.

spring and summer of 1967 interviewed a representative sample of 847 American boys and girls.

The teenaged respondents were selected through the clustered probability sampling frame of the Institute for Social Research. The household compositions of recent surveys taken by the Survey Research Center were searched to identify those dwelling units that, at the time of their original contact, included individuals who would be thirteen through sixteen years old in the spring and summer of 1967. There were 1,367 dwellings so identified and contacted, of which 959 (70%) were found still to house an eligible respondent. Of these, 810 (85%) yielded an interview, with only one eligible respondent interviewed in each dwelling. An additional 37 black youths were chosen by random supplementary sampling. Eligible respondents then absent from home were interviewed wherever possible, including reformatories.

Various tests of the sample against population figures and against some known characteristics of the sampling frame indicated that the sample of 847 is adequately representative of the population of thirteen through sixteen year olds residing in the forty-eight contiguous states at the time.

Interviewing. Interviewers were University of Michigan graduate students, married couples trained for this specific survey. Men interviewed boys, women interviewed girls.

With few exceptions, interviews were conducted outside of the youngsters' homes, in community centers, churches, libraries, and other sites out of earshot of the respondents' parents. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to several hours, with an average of about 105 minutes.

Table 1
ITEMS OF DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR

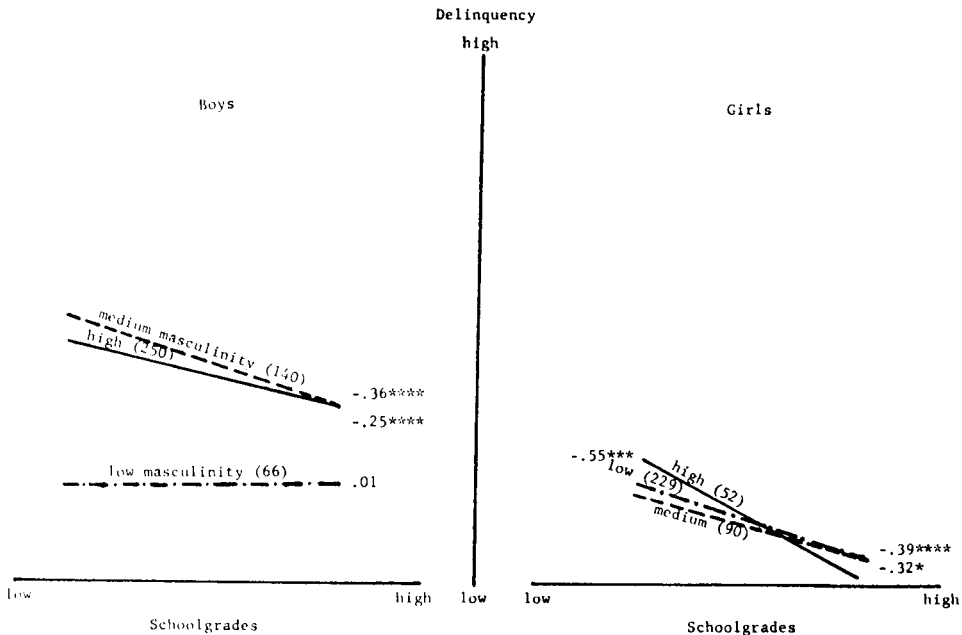
1. Ran away from home.
2. Hit one of your parents.
3. Skipped a day of school without a real excuse.
4. Purposely damaged or messed up something not belonging to you.
5. Tried to get something by lying about who you were or how old you were.
6. Tried to get something by lying to a person about what you would do for him.
7. Took something not belonging to you even if returned.
8. Injured someone on purpose.
9. Threatened to injure someone.
10. Went onto someone's property when you were not supposed to or without permission.
11. Went into a house or building when you were not supposed to be there.
12. Drank beer, wine or liquor without your parents' permission.
13. Used any drugs or chemicals to get high.
14. Took part in a fight where a bunch of your friends are against another bunch.
15. Carried a gun or knife besides an ordinary pocketknife.
16. Took a car without the permission of the owner (even if the car was returned).

Measures of delinquent behavior. Indices of delinquent behavior were constructed from the reports of the teenagers. Toward the end of an interview that roamed over a wide range of topics relevant to adolescent life—family, school, dating, aspirations for the future, and so on—each respondent was told that he would next be asked about behavior that “would get teenagers into trouble if they were caught.” Assurances of confidentiality were reinforced along with the repetition of a request for frankness on the respondent's part. Then each respondent was given a packet of sixteen pre-punched and pre-printed Hollerith cards, with the instructions:

Here is a set of things other kids have told us they have done. Which of them have you done in the past three years, whether you

Figure 1

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOLGRADES AND DELINQUENCY AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF MASCULINITY



In this figure, as in those to follow, no effort has been made to plot actual scores. The lines have been drawn to present graphically three items of information: 1) The angle of their slopes are proportional to the size of the gammas accompanying them; 2) the direction of their slopes indicates whether the relationship between the variables on the axes of the graph is positive or negative; and 3) the elevation of a line on the vertical dimension indicates the average score on the vertical dimension achieved by the category represented by the line. The asterisks indicate the two-tailed level of significance of the gammas they mark: *, $p < .10$; **, $p < .05$; ***, $p < .01$; ****, $p < .001$. The numbers in parentheses are the number of cases in the categories represented by the lines.

were caught or not . . . Sort them into these three piles—you have *never* done it . . . you have done it *just once* in the past three years . . . you've done it *more than once* . . .

When the respondent had completed the card sort, he was then questioned on some of the details of each admitted

offense—where it happened, when, if he had been caught and by whom, and so on. No more than the three most recent of each of the sixteen types of offenses were subjected to this probing.*

The sixteen items of delinquent be-

* For a report on the validity of this measure of delinquent behavior, see Gold,⁴ which describes its use in an earlier study.

havior included in the questionnaire are presented in TABLE 1.

The index that we consider in this study is the total number of delinquent acts reported in detail during the interview, after those that are rather trivial have been omitted. Raters of the triviality of the delinquent acts agreed in 88% of their judgments.

RESULTS

Availability of delinquency as a defense. We have suggested that not all adolescents whose self-esteem is threatened by academic failure may employ a delinquent defense with equal facility. Boys, for example, may derive a great deal more self-aggrandizement from delinquency than girls. And the more securely masculine, the more boys will employ a delinquent defense. FIGURE 1 presents the data on the relationship between schoolgrades and delinquency under different levels of felt masculinity among boys and girls. The youngsters' schoolgrades were ascertained simply by asking them what grades they had received in their previous term in school.* The measure of masculinity employed in this table was generated from youngsters' responses to an array of seven outlined body images ranging from clearly masculine to clearly feminine. Early in the interview, in the context of questions about how they believed boys and girls differed in regard to certain traits, respondents were asked to identify the ideal body shape for a boy and

the ideal body shape for a girl from among those body images. Toward the end of the interview, they were asked to identify the body image on the chart most similar to their own. The measure of masculinity here is the joint discrepancies between the image most like their own and the body images of the ideal boy and girl.

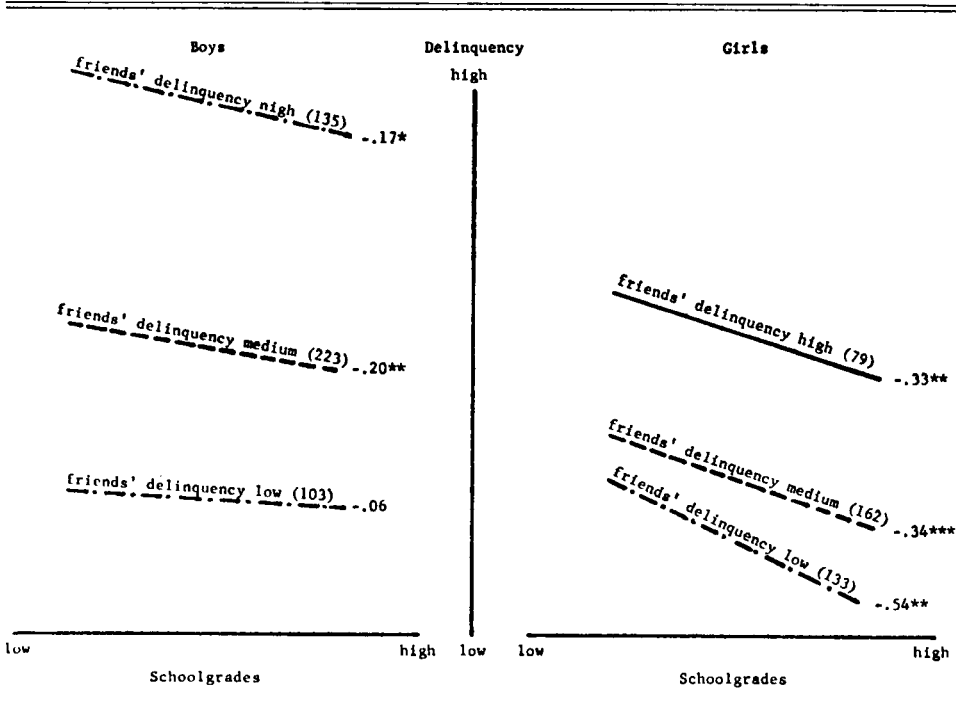
The data in FIGURE 1 indicate that schoolgrades are more closely related to delinquency among both boys and girls when they feel they are more masculine. Several features in these data should be noted. First, in the boys' graph on the left, the elevation on the delinquency dimension of the "high masculinity" and "medium masculinity" lines compared to the "low masculinity" line indicates a relationship between masculinity and delinquency—the more masculine, the more delinquent. This is not true among the girls. Second, the slopes of the lines among boys and girls are mostly negative—the lower the schoolgrades, the higher the delinquency. Third, the relative angles of the slopes of the lines—and the size of the gammas that the slopes were drawn to depict—comprise the evidence for the hypothesis. In terms of the defensive model we are exploring, delinquency is available to counter the threat of low schoolgrades only among those adolescents who feel themselves to be masculine.

The data on the boys fit the model more closely than the data on the girls.

* Some defensiveness is apparent in adolescents' reporting of their schoolgrades. A selected portion of these reports was checked against schoolgrades on record, and the rank order of correlation between the two measures was only .63 ($p < .01$). Most of the difference is accounted for by the respondents with lower grades reporting higher grades. This behavior has the effect of minimizing the relationships we report here so that the estimates of the relationships between schoolgrades and delinquency or schoolgrades and self-esteem are conservative.

Figure 2

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOLGRADES AND DELINQUENCY AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF REPORTED FRIENDS' DELINQUENCY



While it is true that schoolgrades are most closely related to delinquency among the most masculine of the girls, a reliable relationship exists at all levels of masculinity among girls. In the case of boys, however, the relationship disappears among the least masculine boys. We will find throughout this analysis that the boys' data fit the defensive model better than the girls'. We believe this to be so because delinquency is a predominantly masculine defense, and therefore does not serve girls so well to raise their self-esteem.

FIGURE 2 presents the data relevant to the hypothesis that delinquency is a defense of choice when a self-enhancing

audience is available. Youngsters were asked during the interview how often their friends committed a series of delinquent acts and a measure of the perceived delinquency of their friends was derived from their responses. It is apparent in FIGURE 2 that this variable is closely related to the respondents' reports of their own delinquency: the average delinquency of those reporting "friends' delinquency high"—depicted by the height of those boys' and girls' lines on the vertical dimension—is clearly the greatest, and the medium group is clearly above the lowest. Indeed, no single variable in our data predicts so well to adolescents' reports

of their own delinquency as their own estimates of their friends' delinquency.

These data also demonstrate the importance of environmental factors in making a delinquent defense available to those under threat: schoolgrades are not reliably related to delinquency among boys who believe that their friends are not very delinquent. For the rest of the boys, low schoolgrades are related to high delinquency. Again, this model does not fit for the girls; the reverse is true: schoolgrades are most closely related to delinquency among girls who report their friends are the least delinquent.

THE FUNCTION OF RELATIONSHIPS TO PARENTS

It seemed reasonable to posit that relationships with parents would also figure in the availability of delinquency as a defense. That is, those adolescents whose relationships with their parents were close would, we believed, find delinquency no help to counter threat because delinquency itself would, under those conditions, induce too much guilt.

We solicited the adolescents' perceptions of their relationships with their parents by having them respond on a Likert scale of agreement to a series of statements about parental relationships. A factor analysis of their responses generated, among others, measures of closeness to their fathers and closeness to their mothers. The items were identical for both fathers and mothers (although the scores on the two factors were quite independent of each other): "my father (mother) gives me the right amount of affection;" "my father accepts and understands me as a person;" "I want to be like my father;" "my father is interested in and

helps me carry out my plans;" "my father makes it easy for me to confide in him;" and "I feel close to my father."

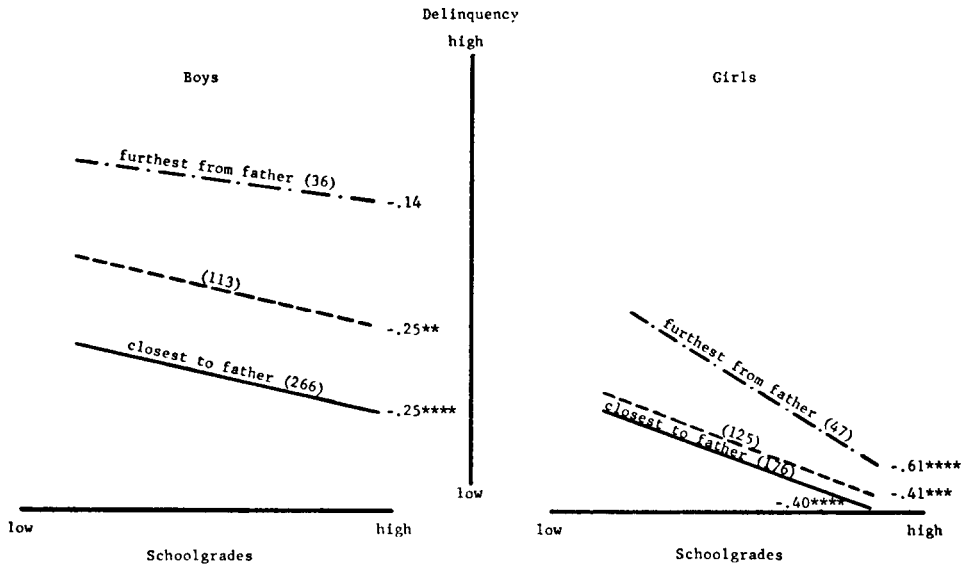
We present the data involving the measure of affective bonds with fathers in FIGURE 3. It is clear that both boys and girls who report more distant relationships with their fathers are on the average more delinquent. But, contrary to our expectations, these are not the boys among whom schoolgrades are most closely related to delinquency; low schoolgrades are most reliably related to high delinquency among those boys *closest* to their fathers. The original hypothesis is supported more clearly by the girls' data in this case; but there are fairly strong and reliable relationships between schoolgrades and delinquency among girls regardless of their relationships with their fathers.

Although we do not present the data here, the same patterns of relationships appear relative to relationships with mothers: the schoolgrades of boys closest to their mothers are most clearly related to their delinquency ($\gamma = -.39, p < .001$); among girls most close and most distant from their mothers, the relationship between schoolgrade and delinquency are the same ($\gamma = -.55, p < .03$).

We have been led by these data to reconsider the function relationships with parents plays in the defensive model we are testing. Consistent with these data and the model is the hypothesis that relationships with parents condition the impact of schoolgrades on self-esteem. That is, if low schoolgrades are more threatening to self-esteem among adolescents who feel close to their parents, it would follow that schoolgrades would be more closely related to delinquency among them, as we have seen.

Figure 3

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOLGRADES AND DELINQUENCY AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF CLOSENESS-TO-FATHER



Schoolgrades, self-esteem, and delinquency. To test this hypothesis, we introduce here a measure of adolescents' self-esteem that we regard as fairly transparent, that is, a measure of their conscious self-esteem. Our respondents were asked to describe "myself" and "myself as I would like to be now" by checking eight items on a semantic differential form. Items included were, for example, "strong-weak" and "gentle-severe." A measure of self-esteem was derived by summing over the item by item discrepancies between their ratings of themselves and as they would like to be.

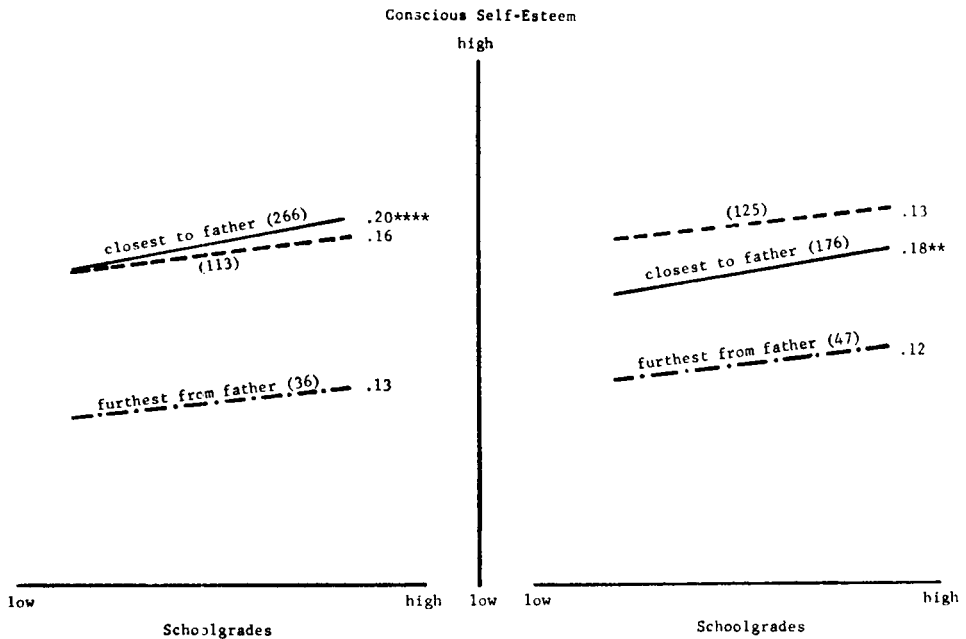
FIGURE 4 provides the data about the impact of schoolgrades on self-esteem conditioned by relationships with father.

We can see that low schoolgrades reliably relate to low self-esteem only among boys and girls closest to their fathers. In terms of the defensive model, these data suggest that schoolgrades are more provocative of delinquency when close relationships with parents* heighten their threat to self-esteem.

The data in FIGURES 3 and 4 pose a dilemma for parents. On the one hand, they demonstrate that close relationships with fathers are associated with low delinquency. On the other hand, low schoolgrades seem to hurt more keenly and are more likely to provoke a delinquent defense under those conditions. It would help resolve this dilemma, of course, if parents minimized the importance of academic achievement,

* The data on relationships with mothers is consistent but not so strong.

Figure 4
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOLGRADES AND CONSCIOUS SELF-ESTEEM AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF CLOSENESS-TO-FATHER



persuading their adolescents that schoolgrades were irrelevant to their relationship. But that is difficult to do in our culture.

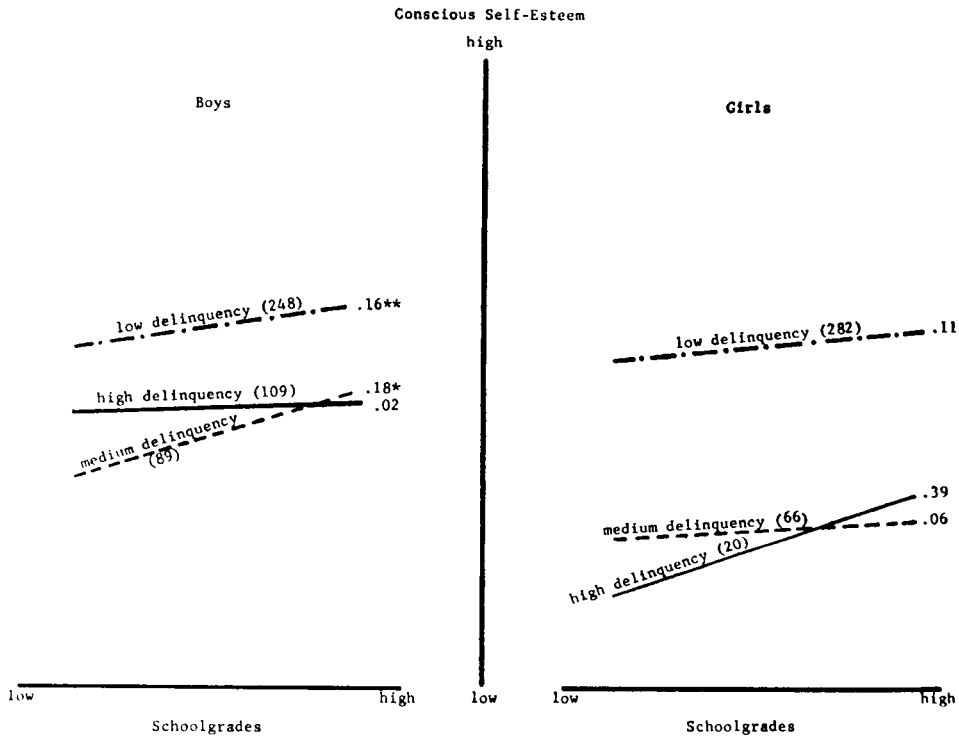
On balance, the data from the boys indicate that close relationships with parents, especially fathers, are more effective in reducing delinquency regardless of schoolgrades than they are provocative to delinquency when schoolgrades are low. As FIGURE 3 demonstrates, the average delinquency of those boys who report low schoolgrades and close relationships with their father is well below the average delinquency of those furthest from their fathers. The data and their implications for parents are not so clear in the case of girls.

Turning again to the defensive model, we find that delinquency operates to raise the self-esteem of those whose low schoolgrades ordinarily would depress their self-esteem.

The data presented in FIGURE 5 show that boys' schoolgrades are not related to their conscious self-esteem if the boys are highly delinquent. Specifically, the self-esteem of highly delinquent boys who report low schoolgrades is higher than the rest of the patterns of data would have led one to expect. But this does not hold for girls; schoolgrades are not reliably related to girls' self-esteem no matter what the level of delinquency, and the size of the relationship is greatest among the highly delinquent girls.

Figure 5

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOLGRADES AND CONSCIOUS SELF-ESTEEM AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF DELINQUENCY



These data are the most central to the model of delinquency as defense. They indicate that boys, for whom delinquency is the more appropriate means to raise self-esteem, can dull the cutting edge of low schoolgrades by adopting a pattern of relatively heavy delinquent behavior. In the case of adolescent girls however, low schoolgrades do not seem to threaten self-esteem as much, and delinquent behavior is not so appropriate to defend against whatever threat schoolgrades may present.

It remains however to show that de-

linquency is truly defensive. That is, the defensive model posits that delinquency defends conscious self-esteem but that a low level of self-esteem remains unconsciously to provoke the delinquent pattern.

Data from the National Survey of Youth are not adequate to explore the phenomenon of unconscious self-esteem. No measure of it was built into the study and no satisfactory measure could be derived in the process of data analysis.

Fortunately, however, a subsequent opportunity to investigate unconscious

self-esteem presented itself in a separate study of eighth-grade boys in a semi-rural high school in Michigan.

STUDY OF CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS SELF-ESTEEM

This study* was based on hypotheses similar to those reported above: namely, that delinquency can be viewed as a defense against perceived threats to adolescents' self-esteem, and that poor academic performance was likely to present such a threat. Respondents were all of the eighth-grade boys, all white, in the public school of a rather uniformly lower-class rural town in southeastern Michigan—a community in which education apparently did not play an important part. It was unclear, then, how important academic performance was to the boys we studied. Our data, however, show that while academic performance was insignificantly, though negatively, related to boys' scores on our measure of conscious self-esteem, it was significantly and positively related to our measure of their unconscious self-esteem (Spearman's $Rho = .35$; $p < .05$). Thus, an assumption of the importance of academic performance is warranted despite the ostensibly nonacademic nature of the community. To the extent that delinquency abetted distortion of reality—as a defense against poor academic performance—delinquency should have the effect of narrowing differences in the conscious self-esteem of boys both high and low in academic performance while differences in unconscious self-esteem remain wide.

An anonymous questionnaire was

used for data collection. It was group administered by the second author, taking approximately an hour for all the boys to complete. All data were collected in a single administration. The anonymous nature of the questionnaire was stressed before and during data collection.

Measuring self-esteem. The measure of conscious self-esteem used here was similar to that used in the National Survey of Youth. The boys were presented with a similar list of nineteen semantic differential items with instructions to describe their self ideals. Later in the questionnaire the list was repeated, with instructions to describe their actual selves. The conscious self-esteem score was computed as recorded above.

Unconscious self-esteem was measured using a technique developed by Ziller and his associates.^{12, 18} Respondents were presented a vertical array of eight circles and instructed to write "ME" in the circle in which they felt they belonged. Each respondent's unconscious self-esteem score was determined by the circle in which he wrote "ME," the topmost circle representing the highest esteem. Odd as this measure seems, Ziller and his associates have presented persuasive evidence for its reliability and validity. Our own findings support the previous investigators'; unconscious self-esteem as measured by this technique is significantly related to conscious self-esteem.

One would expect to find a moderate correlation between measures of conscious and unconscious levels of self-esteem in a predominantly normal pop-

* The original study was completed by the second author in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Psychology in the University of Michigan, 1970.

ulation. The Tau of .36 ($p < .002$) obtained in this study augments the evidence for the validity of the circles technique for measuring unconscious self-esteem.

Measuring academic performance. A straightforward index representing a realistic self-appraisal by the respondents of their schoolwork was the measure of academic performance. The questions comprising it asked whether their schoolwork reflected their ability and intelligence; how their schoolwork compared with their classmates'; and what grade average they expected to attain in the current school term.

Extent of delinquent behavior. Delinquency was measured using a self-report checklist adapted from Bachman¹ of the frequency with which the respondent had engaged in each of 29 specified delinquent behaviors in the preceding years. The items were quite similar to those in TABLE 1. A total delinquency score was obtained by weighing the indicated frequency (from five times or more to never) by a predetermined seriousness-of-offense score. The weights for seriousness were determined by agreement between the authors on the basis of their familiarity with the delinquency literature. The anonymity and confidentiality of the boys' responses was stressed again at this point. The fact that the distribution of the delinquency scores closely resembled that found by other investigators,^{4, 8, 11} with most boys somewhat delinquent tapering off to a few highly delinquent, suggests that this self-report measure of delinquency is a valid one.

Results. The respondents were assigned to four categories dichotomizing them into high and low academic performance groups, then dividing those

groups according to whether the respondents were of high or low delinquency. We then examined these groups with respect to their standing on conscious and unconscious self-esteem.

The data, presented in FIGURE 6, generally support our hypothesis. Looking first at the scores on conscious self-esteem, we must note the statistically inconclusive nature of these data. While presenting an interesting pattern, differences between groups also present something of an enigma.

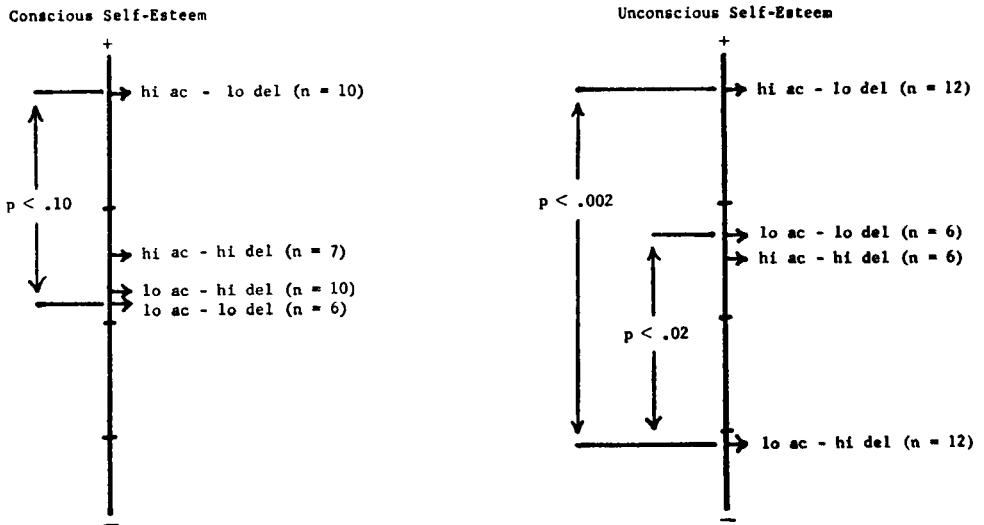
CONSCIOUS SELF-ESTEEM AND SCHOOLGRADES: A STATISTICAL PUZZLE

If we examine the pattern of the scores on conscious self-esteem, we find the factor associated with higher esteem to be high academic performance, regardless of the extent of delinquency associated with it, with the difference between the highest and lowest groups significant ($p < .10$). This represents a reversal of the direction of the relationship between conscious self-esteem and academic performance in the sample as a whole reported above.

This statistical turnabout is explained by comparing the differences in grades within the two high academic groups and the two low academic groups. The difference within the low academic group is more than twice the difference within the high academic group. Since the low academic-high delinquent group is higher in self-esteem than the low academic-low delinquent group and at the same time has the poorest grades by so large a margin, there is the source of the overall slight negative relationship between conscious self-esteem and academic performance reported earlier. That is, the negative relationship be-

Figure 6

RELATIVE CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS SELF-ESTEEM FOR BOYS HIGH OR LOW ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND DELINQUENCY



Significance test used: Mann-Whitney U 2-tailed. Scale based on standard scores.

tween academic performance and self-esteem in the total sample is due to the combination of the relatively high conscious esteem and relatively low grades of the low academic-high delinquent group (which comprises a third of the sample), as opposed to the more uniform academic performance of the two high academic groups. Nevertheless, it seems clear in FIGURE 6 that both low academic groups have lower conscious self-esteem than the high academic groups. This seems to indicate that boys to whom the student role is available—*i.e.*, who are doing well in school—are able to use this role to support self-esteem. Even in the present rural lower class sample, these eighth graders were aware of their scholastic performance when evaluating themselves. It can be argued, based on these data, that even if the

highly delinquent boy had rejected school and scholastic performance, regardless of his reasons for doing so, he could not ignore the fact of failure, of not having made the grade, despite the fact that he may be having a successful delinquent career.

These data suggest, then, that delinquency seems to be a somewhat porous defense, even on a conscious level, when trying to buffer the self-concept against scholastic failure.

UNCONSCIOUS SELF-ESTEEM, SCHOOLGRADES, AND DELINQUENCY

Turning now to the unconscious esteem data, the results are more conclusive. We find high unconscious self-esteem associated with low levels of delinquency, regardless of the level of academic performance, while high levels

of delinquency were associated with low unconscious self-esteem. It is of interest to note the change in position of the high academic-high delinquent group from a high conscious to a low unconscious level of self-esteem. This shift points up the fact that not all delinquency can be explained by school failure, nor can all low self-esteem. To expect such clear and simple explanations for such complex behavior would be foolish; but we do feel that school failure is an important factor in explaining low esteem and the etiology of delinquency.

What was consistently found—the inverse relationship between unconscious esteem and delinquency—however, does suggest quite strongly that, somehow and somewhere, the highly delinquent boys have perceived themselves as having failed. They are suffering low unconscious esteem that their delinquent behavior cannot assuage.

As noted above, the student role is not the only one from which adolescents gain support for self-esteem as seen by the relatively high esteem of the low academic-low delinquent group. While its position below the high academic-low delinquent group indicates the centrality to self of the student role, we suspect that the boys in this group are deriving some firmly-grounded self-respect from other experiences.

DISCUSSION

We have presented a model in which the causal sequence begins with scholastic failure, which lowers self-esteem, which in turn provokes delinquency in order to raise self-esteem, at least consciously. However, while the data make this sequence plausible, they do not demonstrate it. They are taken at a moment

in time and do not reveal changes over time. It would seem just as plausible, for example, that a delinquent role is adopted for reasons other than scholastic failure and that the delinquent role then requires a rejection of the student role.

We imagine that the causal sequence is not so simple as the model proposes, that the variables of academic achievement, delinquent friends, masculinity, relationships with parents, and delinquent behavior feed into one another in cyclical fashion. We submit nevertheless that the model represents a potent stream in the pattern of forces acting on adolescents, that the particular sequence that is posited can be identified in a significant number of cases and, if altered, will have a substantial effect on the delinquent outcome.

The results of a careful field experiment in delinquency treatment support our view. The data presented here in turn shed further light on the dynamics of the therapeutic process invoked in that study.

Massimo, Shore and their associates⁷ have published a series of reports of a delinquency treatment project begun in the early 1960s at the Judge Baker Child Guidance Clinic. Ten boys with a history of antisocial behavior were admitted to the treatment program upon their suspension or withdrawal from school. Treatment was focused on helping them to get and to keep jobs, but technique and service were flexible, and role rigidity was avoided. The therapist entered all areas of the adolescent's life. After a year of such treatment, testing revealed that the boys in treatment, compared to a randomly selected control group, had become markedly less antisocial. Furthermore, the researchers reported, "The results indicate that the

first area of change is in attitude toward self [measured projectively through stories]" (p. 641). They conclude:

In such a comprehensive program, the question always arises as to what specific factors brought about the change. Was it the fact that these adolescents were contacted at a crisis point, or that the techniques were flexible and individualized? Was it the informality of the total approach, the focus on the job, or the specific personality of the therapist? No doubt all these factors in combination were successful, but it is the task of future research to determine the importance of any single factor or various combinations of them. (p. 642)

The present study suggests that at least one effective ingredient in the treatment program was that it provided an experience of success in a central role in our society—the work role—for boys at a time in their lives when their failure was most acute. In addition, the boys in treatment were in frequent and prolonged contact with an adult therapist who was accepting to a degree that affirmed their self-worth. Apparently, relatively unconscious images of themselves changed positively as a result. Perhaps as the boys in treatment became more thoroughly convinced that they could achieve a positive identity, they no longer needed to hang on defensively, and precariously, to a negative one.⁸

The boys in the untreated group, we may assume, continued to experience failure in their attempts to fulfill acceptable roles. We have noted that their self-images remained low and their antisocial behavior high. Following them up three years later, Shore and Massimo¹⁰ report that they continued to deteriorate in terms of self-images and antisocial behavior:

Only two of the untreated boys continued in some sort of formal education. Of interest

is that these two boys were the only ones in the control group to show some improvement in both academic performance and in personality dimensions. (p. 612)

SUMMARY

It has been hypothesized that scholastic failure functions to lower an adolescent's self-esteem and invokes delinquent behavior as a defense. It was further hypothesized that delinquency is more available as a defense to boys and to those whose friends are delinquent.

Evidence to support these hypotheses has been generated from the 1967 National Survey of Youth, which was comprised of interviews with a representative sample of American boys and girls thirteen through sixteen years old, and from a study of the eighth-grade boys in a semi-rural Michigan community.

The data from the survey demonstrate that delinquent behavior is negatively related to schoolgrades among boys who report themselves to have a more masculine body image and when they report their friends to be more highly delinquent. The negative impact of schoolgrades on self-esteem is more strongly felt by those who are closer to their parents. And the relationship between schoolgrades and self-esteem is reliably negative among all the respondents except those boys who are highly delinquent.

None of these findings is so clear for girls.

The data from the study of eighth-grade boys replicate the survey finding that schoolgrades have little relationship to self-esteem among highly delinquent boys, but further reveal that self-esteem *measured projectively* is negatively related to schoolgrades among highly delinquent boys as well.

These data illuminate the therapeutic process of a successful delinquency treatment program previously reported in the pages of this journal by other researchers.

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