

Moral Disengagement and Alexithymia Among Delinquency-Prone and Non-Delinquency-Prone Adolescents

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This study examines the relationship between moral disengagement and alexithymia in delinquency-prone versus non-delinquency-prone adolescents. Moral disengagement is a mental process where people justify unethical actions to make them seem acceptable, allowing them to evade feelings of guilt. Alexithymia refers to difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions, which are crucial for understanding adolescent behavior. In a sample of 88 adolescents, equally divided into delinquency-prone and non-delinquency-prone groups, self-reported measures assessed these constructs. The results showed a strong connection between moral disengagement and alexithymia in both groups, with marked differences in levels between delinquency-prone and non-delinquency-prone adolescents. These results highlight the roles of moral cognition and emotional awareness in adolescent delinquency. Effective prevention strategies must address external and internal risk factors across various contexts—individual, family, school, peer, and community. Such comprehensive approaches are more likely to reduce delinquency and foster positive youth development.

Keywords: Delinquency-prone, Adolescents, Alexithymia, Moral Disengagement, non-delinquency-prone

Adolescence is the developmental stage that begins with puberty, typically around ages 10 to 12, and concludes with physiological maturity, approximately at age 19. However, individuals' specific age ranges can differ (APA Dictionary of Psychology). During this time, they experience major growth and development in physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and psychological areas (Harrison & Bishop, 2021). Adolescence is recognized as a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood (Kapur, 2015), during which individuals may engage in behaviors such as substance abuse, smoking, increased minority violence, and academic disappointment (Hosseinian et al., 2019). Importantly, many adolescents face a range of stressors during this time, which can result in symptoms like anxiety, aggression, anger, and stress. These negative emotions may lead to involvement in antisocial or

aggressive behaviors (Hosseinian et al., 2019; You & Lim, 2015).

In India, statistics on juveniles in conflict with law indicate that 30,555 cases were registered against juveniles in 2022, reflecting a decline of 2.0% compared to 31,170 cases in 2021. The crime rate also decreased from 7.0 in 2021 to 6.9 in 2022. Among the apprehended juveniles, 37,780 were involved in these cases, with 33,261 detained under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and 4,519 under Special and Local Laws (SLL). Notably, 78.6% of juveniles in conflict with the law (29,690 out of 37,780) were aged 16 to 18, and 20.8% (7,869 out of 37,780) were aged 12 to 16 in 2022. In Tamil Nadu, 3,287 juveniles were arrested out of 37,780, representing an overall rate of 8.7% in 2022 (NCRB, 2022).

Juvenile delinquency refers to illegal actions carried out by individuals under the age of 18 that would be deemed criminal if performed by an adult (APA Dictionary of Psychology). Delinquent behavior can be viewed as the result of the interaction between a child's internal predispositions and external stimulating factors. These predispositions often include learned aggressive needs and personality traits, significantly shaped by the child's family, neighborhood, peers, and broader cultural context (Kaur & Chopra, 2013). 'Delinquent-prone adolescents' are young people who exhibit behaviors that indicate a heightened likelihood of involvement in unlawful or socially unacceptable activities, especially when confronted with temptations and opportunities.

Delinquency Proneness differs from Delinquency in that Delinquency refers to antisocial behavior itself, while Delinquency Proneness indicates the possibility of a child engaging in such behavior. It represents the probability of becoming delinquent, assessed by evaluating how likely an individual is to commit a delinquent act when faced with typical temptations and opportunities (Kaur & Chopra, 2013).

Moral disengagement is a cognitive process that enables individuals to detach from their internal moral principles, enabling them to partake in unethical behaviors without sense of distress. It is identified as a crucial sign of dysfunctional behaviors, such as crime, violence, and cyberbullying. Additionally, it acts as an intermediary between individual factors (such as empathy) and unethical outcomes (such as aggression) (Concha-Salgado et al., 2022). Frequent engagement in moral disengagement has been linked to higher levels of antisocial behavior (Barriga et al., 2000). Additionally, several studies have shown a link between moral disengagement and different forms of

aggression (Capuano, 2011; Gini et al., 2014), delinquency, and general disruptive behaviors (Barriga et al., 2008).

Alexithymia is the difficulty in expressing, describing, or distinguishing between one's emotions (APA Dictionary of Psychology). It is marked by challenges in identifying feelings (DIF), difficulties in describing emotions (DDF), and an externally oriented thinking style (EOT) (Preece et al., 2017). Studies have shown that alexithymia, a difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions, is more common among delinquent adolescents than non-delinquent peers. Additionally, research suggests a negative correlation between alexithymia and emotional intelligence. Interestingly, while high emotional intelligence has been associated to antisocial behavior in some studies, the indirect relationship between low alexithymia and antisocial behavior may play a role in this complex association (Berastegui et al., 2012). Additionally, high levels of alexithymia characteristics are connected with juvenile delinquency, and confer the adolescents a risk for juvenile delinquency (Zimmermann, 2006).

In recent years, there has been a rising trend in criminal activity among adolescents. Literature reviews reveal that there are a lot of underlying factors that contribute to an individual becoming a delinquent like personal characteristics, family environment, social influences, and psychological issues. Moral disengagement and alexithymia are psychological constructs, that are considered a risk factor for delinquency, which may also play roles in adolescents who are prone to delinquency. Exploring the relationships between moral disengagement, and alexithymia, will give insights into the underlying psychological processes in delinquency-prone adolescents. Also, there are very limited studies that focus on adolescents at risk for delinquency. Hence it

is a need of an hour to investigate the psychological construct that is contributing to delinquency-prone adolescents.

Aim of the study

The present study aims to examine the connection between moral disengagement and alexithymia, specifically comparing these variables among adolescents who are prone to delinquency and those who are not.

Objectives of the study

- To study the relationship between Moral Disengagement and Alexithymia among the Delinquency-prone and Non-delinquency-prone Adolescents.
- To examine the differences among the variables - moral disengagement and alexithymia between the groups of Delinquency-prone and Non-delinquency-prone adolescents.

Method

Participants

Data was gathered using a structured survey designed to explore delinquent behaviors, moral disengagement, and alexithymia of adolescents. The study focused on 88 adolescent students in grades VIII and IX from two government schools in the Namakkal district of Tamil Nadu. Participants were aged 14 to 16. The final sample was determined using a delinquency-prone scale, categorizing 44 adolescents as delinquency-prone and 44 as non-delinquency-prone.

Tools

Delinquency Proneness Scale (DPS). The DPS (Chopra, and Kaur, 2012) assesses delinquent behavior and criminal attitudes in Indian adolescents aged 14 to 18. This self-report tool evaluates various delinquent activities, including truancy, shoplifting, bullying, stealing, substance use, gambling, fighting, vandalism, dealing in stolen property,

school expulsions, prank calls, and sexual abuse. The assessment consists of 60 items, where 54 items pertain to delinquency, and the other 6 items are associated with the lie scale, which is based on the Personality Questionnaire by Eysenck. The reliability of the measure was 0.80.

Mechanisms of moral disengagement scale (MD). The MD (Bandura et al., 1996) comprises 32 items. Participants respond to all the items presented using a five-point Likert scale. The original test indicated satisfactory reliability, $\alpha = 0.82$ (Bandura et al., 1996).

Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire (PAQ). The PAQ (Preece et al., 2018b) is a self-administered assessment featuring 24 items. Respondents provide answers on a seven-point Likert scale, with greater scores reflecting greater levels of alexithymia. This scale shows strong validity and reliability, $\alpha \geq .80$.

Process for data collection

By ethical standards, various research protocol was carried out. Obtained permission from schools prior to data collection and informed consent were meticulously established to respect the self-sufficiency and volunteer participation of adolescent students. Beforehand administering the survey, the investigator provided clear and accessible information about the study's purpose and procedures to both participants and their guardians, enabling informed decision-making regarding participation. Rapport was established with participants to facilitate data collection. Participants were given standardized questionnaires after briefing them on the study's purpose and obtaining informed consent. Each participant's confidentiality was maintained, and the researcher ensured that all questions were answered.

Results

The statistical measures employed in this study include Pearson correlation to examine the relationship between the variables, and independent sample t-tests to measure notable distinctions in moral disengagement and alexithymia across the groups.

Table 1. The correlation coefficient between moral disengagement and alexithymia among delinquency-prone and non-delinquency-prone adolescents

Variables	1	2
Moral Disengagement	-	
Alexithymia	0.27*	-

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 1 displays the relationship between moral disengagement and alexithymia among adolescents at risk of delinquency and those not at risk of delinquency. The correlation coefficient ($r = .273$, $p = .010$) indicates a positive but weak relationship between moral disengagement and alexithymia among delinquency-prone and non-delinquency-prone adolescents. This indicates a positive but weak association between moral disengagement and alexithymia, suggesting that adolescents with higher moral disengagement are more likely to struggle with identifying and expressing emotions.

Table 2. Significant differences in Moral disengagement among delinquency-prone and non-delinquency-prone adolescents

Variable/ Groups	MORAL DISENGAGEMENT				
	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig.
Delinquent-Prone	44	69.50	5.298	3.54	0.001**
Non-Delinquent-Prone	44	65.36	5.653		

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 2 shows the independent t-test carried out to identify the significant differences in moral disengagement among

the groups. The delinquency-prone group ($M = 69.50$, $SD = 5.298$) had a higher mean moral disengagement score than the non-delinquency-prone group ($M = 65.36$, $SD = 5.653$). This suggests that adolescents prone to delinquency are more likely to justify or rationalize immoral behaviors compared to their non-delinquency-prone counterparts. The t -value (3.54) reflects a notable difference between the two groups, and the p -value (.001) is statistically significant ($p < .01$), indicating that this difference is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Table 3. Significant differences in Alexithymia among delinquency-prone and non-delinquency-prone adolescents

Variable/ Groups	ALEXITHYMIA				
	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig.
Delinquent-Prone	44	115.52	17.98	9.91	0.001**
Non-Delinquent-Prone	44	77.09	18.41		

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 3 shows the independent t-test carried out to identify the significant differences in alexithymia among the groups. The delinquency-prone group ($M = 115.52$, $SD = 17.98$) scored significantly higher than the non-delinquency-prone group ($M = 77.09$, $SD = 18.41$ *) on alexithymia. This indicates a substantial difference between the two groups in their ability to identify and express emotions. The t -value (9.91) is quite large, suggesting a strong difference between the groups. The p -value (.001) is highly significant ($p < .01$), indicating that the observed difference between delinquency-prone and non-delinquency-prone adolescents is statistically meaningful and unlikely due to chance.

Discussion

The current research sought to investigate the relationship between moral disengagement and alexithymia among delinquency-prone and non-delinquency-

prone adolescents. Furthermore, it examined notable differences in the levels of moral disengagement and alexithymia among these groups.

Preliminary analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between moral disengagement and alexithymia between adolescents at risk of delinquency and those not at risk of delinquency, which is supported by previous literature that identifies a substantial connection and alexithymia positively predicting moral disengagement among young adults (Di Pentima et al., 2024; X et al., 2024). Moral disengagement is often linked to emotional manipulation, suggesting that individuals who struggle to articulate their emotions may resort to morally disengaged behaviors in social contexts (Aftab & Malik, 2021; Wang et al., 2017).

A secondary analysis was conducted to explore the significant differences in moral disengagement and alexithymia between adolescents at risk of delinquency and those not at risk of delinquency. The results indicated significant differences in moral disengagement between the two groups. Research by (Gómez & Durán, 2024) indicates that moral disengagement, alongside callous-unemotional traits, exacerbates aggressive and antisocial behaviors, suggesting that adolescents who disengage from moral considerations are more likely to act out violently. (Caprara et al., 2014) further highlight that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between hostile rumination and violence, indicating that those who dwell on hostile thoughts may disengage morally, leading to increased aggression. Paciello et al. (2008) argue that teenagers who display higher levels of moral disengagement are more inclined to engage in violent behaviors, highlighting the significance of this factor in the development of delinquent behavior. Other research also showed a strong positive relationship between moral disengagement

and antisocial behaviour (Capuano, 2011), particularly in delinquent youth (Stams et al., 2006), suggesting that this relationship is more pronounced in those prone to delinquency.

In addition to moral disengagement, the findings reveal a significant distinction in alexithymia between the two groups. Identified alexithymia as a significant predictor of interpersonal delinquency, suggesting that adolescents who struggle to understand their emotions may also face challenges in social interactions, potentially resulting in delinquent behavior (Berastegui et al., 2012). Additionally, school adolescents tend to exhibit higher levels of alexithymia, which are linked to various psychiatric issues, primarily within the internalizing spectrum, as well as thought problems and self-reported aggression. Enhancing the ability to identify and articulate feelings is crucial when addressing the needs of delinquent adolescents (Manninen et al., 2011). Furthermore, disrupted family structures link both alexithymia and delinquency, indicating that adverse family environments can contribute to emotional difficulties that heighten the risk of delinquency (Zimmermann, 2006). Overall, these findings underscore the complex interplay between moral disengagement, alexithymia, and the factors contributing to delinquency in adolescents.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals significant relationships between moral disengagement and alexithymia in both adolescents who are at risk of delinquency and those who are not at risk of delinquency. The findings indicate that those individuals who struggle to recognize and articulate their emotions are more inclined to exhibit morally disengaged behaviors, which are associated with increased aggression and antisocial actions. The distinctions in moral disengagement and

alexithymia between the two groups underscore the importance of considering both emotional and cognitive aspects to gain a clearer understanding of and reduce delinquent behavior.

Additionally, the influence of family structures on these dynamics emphasizes the necessity of holistic interventions that consider emotional development alongside family support. By promoting emotional awareness and ethical reasoning, we may reduce the risk of delinquency and foster healthier social interactions among adolescents. Ultimately, comprehensive prevention strategies and targeted interventions will more effectively reduce adolescent delinquency and enhance positive youth development.

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