Psicothema

The role of gender identity in adolescents' antisocial behavior

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Abstract

Background: Analysis of the relevance of the variables sex and gender to explain delinquency is a topic of growing interest in Criminology. This study tests a model of juvenile delinquency that integrates gender identity, the association with deviant peers, and a lack of attachment to conventional contexts. **Method:** We used a sample of 970 adolescents of both sexes, representative of the urban population, between 12 and 18 years, attending public schools in Galicia (Spain). **Results:** The results of path analysis confirm that: a) weak attachment to conventional contexts, and belonging to a deviant groups are precedents for deviation of adolescents of both sexes; b) these contexts also contribute to the development of gender identity; and c) gender identity affects the likelihood of deviation: femininity tends to reduce this behavior, and masculinity (in particular, negatively valued masculinity) contributes to increase it. **Conclusions:** These findings support the adequacy of including gender identity in the explanatory models of delinquency. They also suggest the need to reconsider the role of conventional settings in the socialization of masculinity and, therefore, in the genesis of adolescent delinquency of both sexes.

Keywords: Gender identity, juvenile delinquency, peer group, family/school attachment.

Resumen

***El papel de la identidad de género en la conducta antisocial de los adolescentes.* Antecedentes:** partiendo del interés creciente que en Criminología parece tener el análisis de las variables sexo y género, este trabajo pone a prueba un modelo de la delincuencia juvenil que integra la identidad de género, la relación con iguales desviados y la ausencia de vinculación a contextos convencionales. **Método:** utilizamos una muestra de 970 adolescentes de ambos sexos, representativa de la población urbana, de entre 12 y 18 años, escolarizada en centros públicos de Galicia. **Resultados:** los resultados de los path análisis realizados confirman que: a) una débil vinculación a contextos convencionales y la pertenencia a un grupo desviado son antecedentes de la desviación de ambos sexos; b) estos contextos contribuyen al desarrollo de la identidad de género; y c) la identidad de género incide sobre la probabilidad de desviación: la feminidad tiende a reducirla mientras la masculinidad (especialmente los aspectos socialmente no deseables de la masculinidad) contribuye a incrementarla. **Conclusiones:** estos hallazgos avalan la conveniencia de incluir la identidad de género en los modelos explicativos de la delincuencia, así como la necesidad de replantearse el papel de los contextos convencionales en la socialización de la masculinidad y, por tanto, en la génesis de la delincuencia de ambos sexos.

Palabras clave: identidad de género, delincuencia juvenil, grupo de iguales, vinculación familiar/escolar.

The appearance of the feminist movement in criminology, around the 1970s, promoted the inclusion of women as a crucial element in the analysis of delinquency and started an interesting and ongoing debate about whether the factors proposed to be the cause of males' delinquency could adequately explain women's delinquency and the fact that women engage in deviant behavior significantly less than men (Campbell, 1984).

Authors like Giordano and Rockwell (2000) or Heimer and De Costner (1999) consider that the psychosocial theories of juvenile delinquency—the social learning theory (Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, & Radosevich, 1979), or the differential association theory (Sutherland, 1939)—are valid models to explain deviant behavior of both sexes: females' and males' delinquency would derive from

learning processes in their socialization settings (family, friends, school); and they also consider that these models explain the different rates of delinquency in men and women (the *gender gap* in delinquency): males have more opportunities to learn and perform antisocial behavior due to the lower control exerted over them by conventional contexts and to their higher contact with unconventional groups. Also, from the social control theory (Hirschi, 1969) and its most recent formulation, the general theory of crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), women's traditional attachment to conventional settings, especially the family, and their greater commitment to conventional norms derived from this attachment are assumed to be determinants explaining their lower rates of delinquency.

Works with samples of both sexes tend to conclude that, in effect, males are more exposed to risk factors for delinquency: delinquent peers, low parental supervision, scarce attachment to family and school; and that these risk factors also explain women's deviation (Elliot, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985; Storvoll & Wichstrom, 2002).

However, other authors (i.e., Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996) consider that, in order to understand the role of sex and gender in delinquency, it is not sufficient to

include samples of women in the studies to verify whether or not the relations described for males are repeated in females. It is necessary to propose models that consider from the start the existence of differential socialization trajectories, which not only lead to unequal exposure to risk/protection factors but which crystallize in the construction of personal identities that are differentially related to the likelihood of performing potentially harmful behaviors.

Steffensmeier and Allan (1996) propose a theoretical model the main element of which is the concept *organization of gender:* a series of factors (gender norms, identity, affiliative concerns and moral development) that contribute to differentially structuring the social life of men and women. The model establishes that women commit fewer crimes than men because the definition of the feminine gender promotes the assumption of an identity associated with caring for others and maintaining interpersonal relations based on affect, aspects that are relatively incompatible with antisocial behavior. In contrast, the organization of the male gender stimulates the development of an identity that includes features such as competitiveness and achievement of social status, which imply placing one's own interests before those of others, and therefore, makes men more prone to engage in deviant behavior.

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999) and, in general, all the theoretical models of this area (i.e., Heimer & De Costner, 1999; Maccoby, 1998) note the importance of socialization settings, particularly family and friends, in the construction of gender identity: parents and peers intervene offering models and specific messages for each sex, which lead males to develop an identity defined with the characteristics associated with masculinity, and females with femininity.

With regard to the relation between gender identity and delinquency, although research is still scarce, it tends to show that assumption of the characteristics that define masculinity correlates positively with delinquency, whereas assumption of the features associated with femininity tends to reduce the likelihood of deviation (Horwitz & Raskin, 1987; Lengua & Stormshak, 2000). Recent studies (i.e., Danoff-Burg, Mosher, & Grant, 2006; Helgeson & Fritz, 2000) even state that the relationship between masculinity and deviation is especially evident in some of the characteristics that define masculinity: the less socially desirable ones.

In this work, we shall test an explanatory model of juvenile delinquency that assesses the effect of gender identity concurrently with that of the variables that the literature (i.e., Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen, & Farrington, 1991; López & Rodríguez-Arias, 2010), define as especially relevant to juvenile deviation: the relation with delinquent peers and the weakness of conventional attachment.

The goals of the work are, firstly, to advance in the delimitation of the importance that each component of gender identity (socially desirable and undesirable masculinity and femininity) may have on engagement in deviation; and, secondly, to verify the extent to which this series of variables predicts deviation of adolescents of both sexes.

Method

Participants and procedure

The sample includes 970 adolescents, 465 boys (48%) and 505 girls (52%), between 12 and 18 years ($M = 15.00$, $SD = 1.83$), from a total of 19 public schools. This is a representative sample of the urban population attending public high schools in Galicia (Spain). The sample was selected through proportional stratified sampling (by city, sex, and age). The sample unit was the school. Sample error was 3.5% with a confidence interval of 95%.

In each school, the questionnaires were administered in one class of each academic course. Educational staff and students were informed about the purpose of the study. Students were also informed about the anonymous and voluntary nature of their participation.

Instruments

The variables of the study were assessed with a series of standardized questionnaires and some indicators elaborated by the authors. They were all used in previous works in Spain (i.e., Mirón & Otero-López, 2005; Rodríguez, Mirón, & Rial, 2012), showing their suitability to measure these constructs.

Antisocial Behavior Questionnaire (Mirón & Otero-López, 2005). It includes 51 items, referring to the frequency of 5 types of antisocial behavior: conduct against rules (e.g., to run away from home), vandalism (e.g., to destroy public phones), theft (e.g., to steal a motorcycle), aggression (e.g., to beat up someone), and drug use and traffic (e.g., to use cocaine). Response options range from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Very frequently*).

Extended Version of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (EPAQ; Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979). It is used to assess the dimensions of gender identity: a) Positively Valued Masculinity (M+): characteristics associated with masculinity, socially perceived as positive (e.g., independent); b) Negatively Valued Masculinity (M-): characteristics associated with masculinity, socially perceived as undesirable (e.g., egotistical); and c) Positively Valued Femininity (F+): characteristics associated with femininity, socially perceived as positive (e.g., emotional). Each dimension includes eight items, presented as bipolar adjectives, with a 5-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all or not typical of me*) to 5 (*Very typical of me*).

Revised Unmitigated Communion Scale (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998), used to analyze aspects of femininity that are not highly valued socially. In fact, it was developed as a consequence of the lack of the psychometric adequacy of the corresponding subscale (F-) of the EPAQ. It has 9 items referring to excessive concern about other's interests (e.g., "I always place the needs of others above my own"). The response format has 5 categories, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

Index of Attachment to Parents and School (Wong, 2005), used to assess Attachment to Mother, Attachment to Father and Attachment to School. Its 9 items analyze the degree to which the adolescent: (a) cares about what his mother/father/teachers thinks of him; (b) shares with them his thoughts and feelings, and (c) would like to be the kind of person they are. Items are rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 3 (*Very much*).

Index of Parental Monitoring (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005), assesses Parental Supervision. It is made up of 5 items referring to parents' control over their children's behavior at home and outside of the home (e.g., "Your parents know where you are when you are not at home"). Response options range between 1 (*Never*) to 4 (*Always*).

Exposure to Abusive and Supportive Environments Parenting Inventory (EASE-PI; Nicholas & Bieber, 1997), assesses the

relations of support and abuse in diverse relational contexts. In this work, we used the subscale of Love/Support (12 items, e.g., "respect your feelings") to analyze Support by Mother and Support by Father, and the subscales of Abuse to assess the frequency with which the behaviors of Physical Abusiveness (4 items, e.g., "hit you") and Emotional Abusiveness (6 items, e.g., "ridiculed or made fun of your beliefs") occur in group interactions not linked to conflicts. Items are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Very frequently*).

Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979), designed to assess the frequency of use of diverse tactics to cope with interpersonal conflicts. We used the subscales of Physical Violence (4 items, e.g., threw something at him/her) and Verbal Aggression (5 items; e.g., insulted or offended him/her) to assess these aspects in the group setting. Response options range from 0 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always or almost always*).

Author-created indicators. The variable Delinquent Peers was assessed with 8 items referring to the number of friends who perform the same types of antisocial behavior described for the subject (e.g., vandalism, theft, aggression); response options of each item range from 0 (*None*) to 3 (*All of them*). Lastly, we included an indicator (7 items) that assesses Unconventional Leisure in Peer Group, the frequency with which adolescents perform unconventional activities (e.g., fight with other groups or individuals) when they are with their peers; response options range from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Always*). It is important to assess this aspect because, at these ages, deviant behavior is often a group phenomenon (Reiss & Farrington, 1991).

Information about internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for each variable described is presented in Table 1.

Data analysis

Before testing the model that integrates the variables assessed, we carried out a comparative analysis of the mean scores of boys and girls (Student's *t*), as well as correlation analysis between antisocial behavior and the remaining variables of the study (Table 1).

Lastly, tested the model of relations among the variables both with the samples of boys and of girls using structural equation analysis with observable variables (*path analysis*, AMOS 18, SPSS). In accordance with prior literature, the model proposes that attachment to conventional contexts will inhibit antisocial behavior, directly and indirectly, due to its incidence on the type of friends children relate to and on the gender identity they develop. Belonging to a deviant peer group will increase deviant behavior, directly and indirectly, through its effect on the identity of the members of the group. And, finally, the model proposes the existence of a direct relation between gender identity and antisocial behavior: masculinity will tend to increase the likelihood of deviation and femininity to reduce it.

The assessment of the model was based on the significance of the chi-square statistic and the goodness-of-fit indexes that are habitually recommended in specialized literature. The comparative fit index (CFI), the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and the normed fit index (NFI), with a value of .9, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), a measure of the amount of error, with a value lower than .05, are considered adequate to accept the model.

Table 1
Cronbach's alpha for the study variables; comparison of mean scores (Student's t) of boys and girls, and Pearson correlation coefficients between predictor variables and criterion variable

Variables	Cronbach's α	Mean boys	SD	Mean girls	SD	t	Boys	Girls
		Differences between mean scores					Correlation coefficients with antisocial behavior	
Support by mother	.94	38.92	(10.17)	39.15	(9.87)	-0.36	-.352**	-.331**
Support by father	.95	35.65	(12.02)	35.12	(12.41)	0.68	-.330**	-.333**
Attachment to mother	.76	5.20	(2.39)	5.98	(2.25)	-5.21**	-.330**	-.292**
Attachment to father	.78	5.22	(2.58)	5.19	(2.47)	0.18	-.313**	-.254**
Attachment to school	.67	4.02	(2.51)	4.28	(2.25)	-1.70	-.326**	-.327**
Parental supervision	.76	17.93	(3.20)	18.84	(2.92)	-4.63**	-.573**	-.575**
Delinquent peers	.84	4.01	(4.04)	3.44	(3.62)	2.31*	.739**	.760**
Verbal aggression	.73	4.73	(3.33)	4.27	(3.09)	2.20*	.297**	.305**
Physical violence	.85	2.61	(3.35)	1.10	(2.08)	8.35**	.360**	.415**
Emotional abusiveness	.80	4.55	(3.75)	3.05	(2.95)	6.92**	.379**	.342**
Physical abusiveness	.58	0.88	(1.41)	0.39	(0.90)	6.30**	.314**	.236**
Unconventional leisure in peer group	.66	2.30	(2.98)	1.68	(2.44)	3.52**	.796**	.755**
Positively valued masculinity (M+)	.67	27.74	(5.08)	26.20	(4.83)	4.84**	.097*	.005
Negatively valued masculinity (M-)	.69	19.17	(5.10)	17.73	(4.68)	4.58**	.323**	.293**
Positively valued femininity (F+)	.80	28.33	(5.34)	31.86	(4.77)	-10.83**	-.080	-.089*
Unmitigated femininity	.73	29.85	(5.51)	33.55	(4.98)	-10.96**	-.171**	-.081
Antisocial behavior	.91	11.44	(2.94)	7.86	(10.25)	4.76**	1.00	1.00

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .001$

Results

Comparison of means showed that, as expected, there were significant sex differences in most of the variables of the study. Boys performed significantly more antisocial behavior than girls, they had more delinquent peers, performed more unconventional leisure in peer group, used more verbal aggression, physical violence, and abusiveness (physical and emotional) in their groups, and defined themselves to a greater extent with characteristics associated with masculinity (positively and negatively valued). Girls obtained significantly higher scores than boys in femininity (both in positively valued aspects and in unmitigated femininity) and in attachment to mother and parental supervision.

Correlational analyses indicate, also as expected, that for both sexes, antisocial behavior showed a significant negative association with the variables of conventional bonding: support and attachment of both parents, attachment to school, and parental supervision; whereas the association with group variables was positive and significant: delinquent peers, unconventional leisure in peer group, verbal aggression, physical violence and abusiveness (physical and emotional). In fact, sex differences were observed only for variables of gender identity: for both sexes, antisocial behavior was positively and significantly associated with M-; but for boys, antisocial behavior was also positively and significantly associated with M+, and negatively and significantly associated with unmitigated femininity, whereas for girls, antisocial behavior was negatively and significantly associated with F+.

This result, related to the sex differences in the relationship between gender identity and antisocial behavior, suggested the adequacy of testing the above-mentioned model of relationships among variables separately in the subsamples of boys and girls.

The empirical models of path analysis are presented in Figures 1 (final model for boys) and Figure 2 (final model for girls). These final models include, in each case, only the variables with statistically significant path coefficients. The goodness-of-fit statistics for both models were adequate, and the variables included in them explain a very high, and similar, percentage of variance of antisocial behavior of boys and girls ($R^2 = .71$ and $R^2 = .70$, respectively).

Final model for the sample of boys

The model for boys (Figure 1) includes family variables: support by mother, attachment to father, attachment to mother, and parental supervision; group variables: delinquent peers, emotional abusiveness, and unconventional leisure in peer group; and among those referring to gender identity: M- and unmitigated femininity (that is, only the less socially desirable aspects of the definition of gender identity).

Family variables, in effect, act as antecedents of the relationship with delinquent peers, the development of gender identity, and antisocial behavior. The direct relation between family interaction and antisocial behavior derives from the weak, albeit significant, effect ($p \leq .01$) of support by mother, which decreases antisocial behavior. Moreover, support by mother acts by decreasing the likelihood of emotional abusiveness ($p \leq .01$), whereas parental supervision very significantly decreases the probability of relating to delinquent peers ($p \leq .001$) and of performing unconventional leisure in peer group ($p \leq .001$).

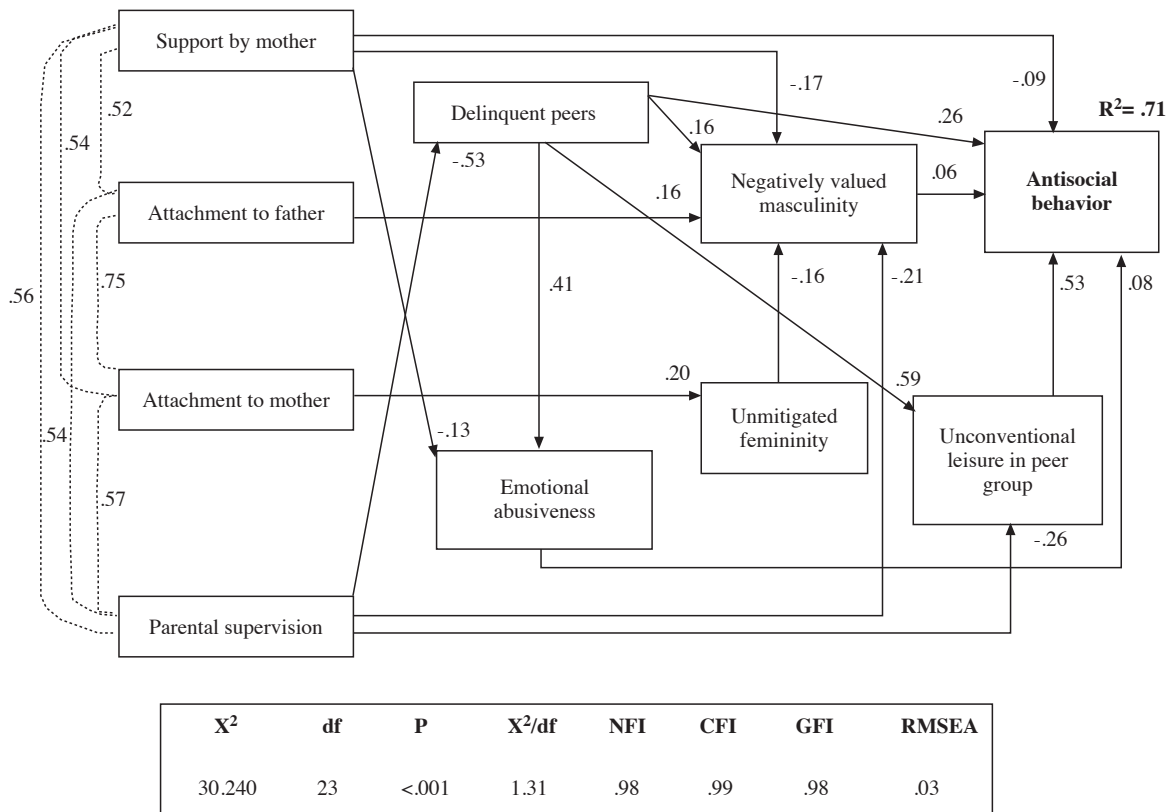| X²	df	P	X²/df	NFI	CFI	GFI	RMSEA
30.240	23	<.001	1.31	.98	.99	.98	.03

Figure 1. Empirical path model and goodness-of-fit statistics for boys. Note: All paths were significant at p≤.05

With regard to the effect of family variables on gender identity, it was observed that support by mother and parental supervision reduce M- ($p \leq .01$ and $p \leq .001$, respectively); whereas attachment to mother increases unmitigated femininity ($p \leq .001$). However, attachment to father increases M- ($p \leq .01$). That is, the action of both parents generates different effects on boys' gender identity.

As expected, group variables have an important direct effect on delinquency. The variable delinquent peers directly increases the probability of delinquency ($p \leq .001$), as well as of emotional abusiveness ($p \leq .001$) and unconventional leisure in peer group ($p \leq .001$). In fact, the last relation is quantitatively higher than all the rest observed in the model; followed by that observed between unconventional leisure in peer group and antisocial behavior ($p \leq .001$).

With regard to gender identity, the data indicate that M- increases, weakly but significantly and directly, the probability of antisocial behavior ($p \leq .05$). The effect of unmitigated femininity is indirect: it reduces M- ($p \leq .01$), and therefore, indirectly decreases the probability of delinquency.

Final model for the sample of girls

The model for girls (Figure 2) includes the variables: support by mother, parental supervision, attachment to school (absent in the boys' model), delinquent peers, unconventional leisure in peer group, M- and unmitigated femininity.

Variables of conventional attachment act as antecedents of gender identity, group interactions and antisocial behavior. The direct relation between conventional settings and antisocial behavior

for girls derives from the effect of support by mother and parental supervision ($p \leq .05$ and $p \leq .01$, respectively): both of them decrease the likelihood of deviation. Parental supervision and attachment to school reduce the probability of girls' associating with delinquent peers ($p \leq .001$ and $p \leq .05$, respectively). Supervision also decreases the probability of girls' performing unconventional leisure in peer group ($p \leq .01$). Lastly, support by mother and attachment to school favors the development of unmitigated femininity ($p \leq .01$ and $p \leq .01$, respectively), whereas parental supervision reduces M- ($p \leq .05$).

Concerning peer group variables, again, association with delinquent peers directly increases antisocial behavior ($p \leq .001$) and unconventional group leisure ($p \leq .001$), as well as M- ($p \leq .001$). Unconventional leisure in peer group also increases antisocial behavior ($p \leq .001$).

The results with regard to gender identity coincide with those obtained for boys: M- directly increases females' antisocial behavior ($p \leq .05$), whereas femininity reduces it indirectly, through its inhibitor effect on M- ($p \leq .05$).

Discussion

The findings of this work show, firstly, and in accordance with prior literature and the assumptions of the main theoretical model of juvenile deviation (e.g., Haynie, 2002; Linden & Fillmore, 1981), that male and female adolescents who engage in antisocial behavior are: (a) less attached to conventional settings, and (b) more closely related to friends who perform deviant and/or violent behaviors and abuse. That is, they corroborate the importance of conventional and unconventional attachments as antecedents of deviation.
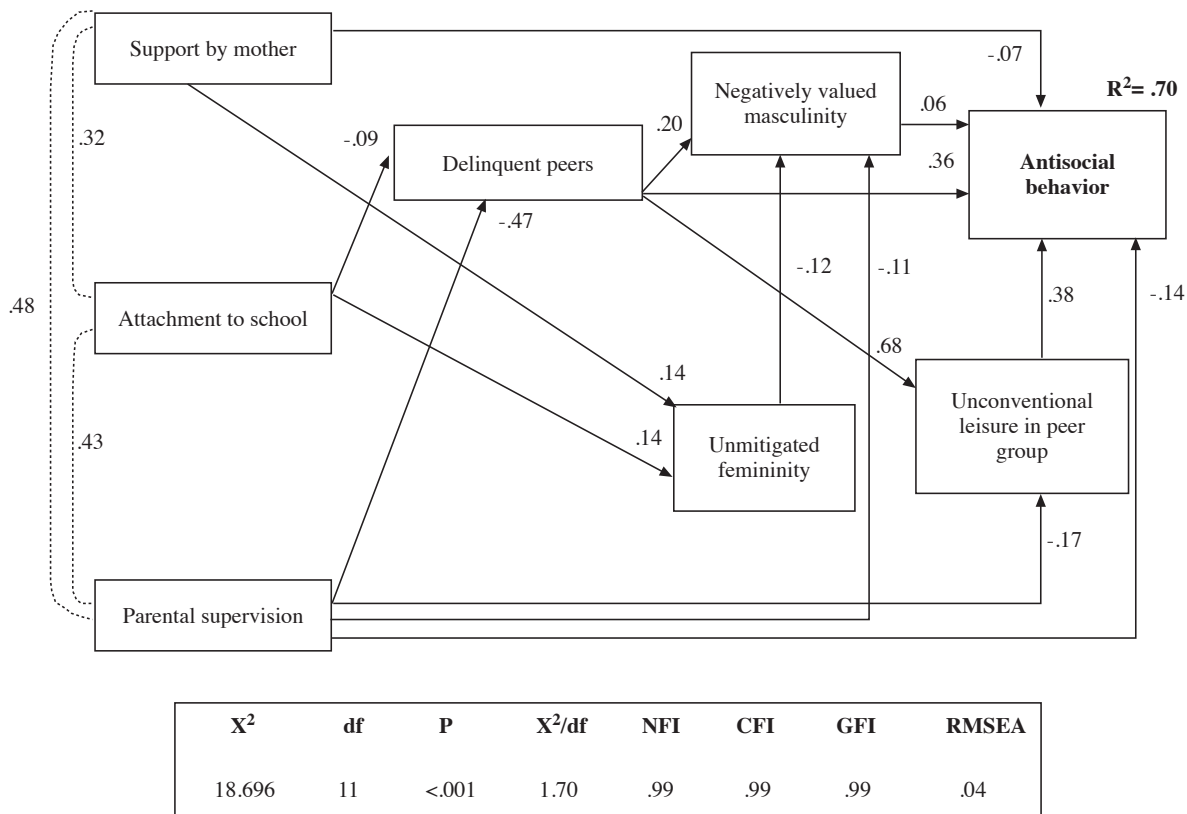

X^2	df	P	X^2/df	NFI	CFI	GFI	RMSEA
18.696	11	<.001	1.70	.99	.99	.99	.04

Figure 2. *Empirical path model and goodness-of-fit statistics for girls. Note: All paths were significant at $p \leq .05$*

Secondly, they confirm that boys perform more antisocial behaviors than girls, probably because: (a) they relate more with delinquent peers, and (b) they are less controlled by—and less attached to—conventional settings. That is, and coherently with prior literature and following Belknap and Holsinger (2006), females are less exposed than males to factors that have been shown to have a risk effect on delinquency, and/or they are more exposed to protection factors.

Concerning gender identity, our results confirm that: (a) the actions of socialization agents (parents, peers, school setting) are an antecedent of the development of gender identity (coinciding with the postulates of Bandura, 1986, or Maccoby, 1998); (b) boys obtain significantly higher scores than girls in masculinity, both in positively and in negatively valued aspects, whereas girls score higher than males in femininity, both in positively valued aspects and in unmitigated femininity (coinciding with the results of Mosher & Dannoff-Burg, 2006; or Sánchez, Moreira, & Mirón, 2011); (c) masculinity increases deviation, whereas femininity tends to decrease it (Gini & Pozzoli, 2006; or Lengua & Stormshak, 2000, obtained similar results); and (d) negative characteristics of masculinity (e.g., hostile, egotistical) show a clearer relation with adolescents' antisocial behavior than positive characteristics of masculinity (coinciding with the data of Danoff-Burg, Mosher, & Grant, 2006; or Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

The fact that boys have, to a greater extent, assumed as part of their own identity the characteristics that define masculinity, especially those associated with performing behaviors that harm others, could be another differential risk factor, with capacity to explain the lower rate of delinquency in girls. According to Steffensmeier and Allan (1996), women perform less antisocial behavior than men, to a great extent because they have internalized a gender-linked self-definition in which such behaviors are considered especially inappropriate, because they are incompatible with the characteristics of concern for others that define femininity.

Moreover, the findings that masculinity also increases the likelihood of deviation in girls, whereas femininity tends to reduce it, also in boys, indicates that women's traditionally lower antisocial behavior is not (or not only) an issue of sex, but of gender; and more specifically, of gender-linked socialization.

The results of this work suggest that delinquent peers basically act by increasing the assumption of characteristics associated with masculinity, both among boys and girls. But the role of affective attachment to parents is complex. Attachment to mother favors the acquisition of characteristics associated with femininity, both in boys and in girls; whereas attachment to father, in the case of boys, promotes the assumption in their identity of characteristic associated with masculinity.

This could indicate that, in the socialization of sons, conventional contexts can promote, or not inhibit sufficiently, the assumption of a personal identity defined by characteristics that are compatible with behaviors/attitudes that may be harmful to others. As noted by Fernández-Dols (1998), if during the socialization process, this type of behaviors/attitudes are not firmly forbidden or excluded from the desirable traits of the individual's identity, the likelihood of deviation is being promoted.

The cross-sectional design of the study limits causal inferences. Despite this limitation, we consider that the data obtained support the adequacy of including gender in the explanatory models of delinquency, as well as the need to reconsider the role of conventional settings in the socialization of masculinity and, therefore, in the genesis of adolescent delinquency of both sexes.

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