Juvenile Delinquents—Frame Analysis Is not the Point but, Social Aspects Are Approaching Behavioral Literacy

Carmen Schmitz-Feldhaus, Manfred Wittrock
University of Oldenburg, Oldenburg, Germany

With regards to the “Reaction Pattern Research” (Rink & Ott, 1997), 98 juvenile delinquents, aged 15-21, were asked to complete a questionnaire with six critical incidences. The aim was to find out whether they are aware of specific social frames in interactions or not. The results indicate that juvenile delinquents know about social rules. But they rather act by considering social or friendship relevant risks or profits than by legal consequences. Further studies are due to come in 2015.

Keywords: juvenile delinquency, behavioral literacy, frame analysis, peers

Introduction

Some students, children, and adolescents with EBD (emotional and behavioral disorders) just don’t fit in regarding challenging social situations. They seem to act like, so to say, a bull in a china shop. But why do they behave that way? All of the students have specific resources: disposition, special skills and abilities, mental possibilities, and a physical appearance. The interaction is a social situation with a specific ethically normative frame. Sometimes the student just does not behave appropriately and in doing so, does not fit in to the social situation. The construct of behavioral literacy tries to answer the question, as follows.

Our day-to-day life is characterized by a large number of social interactions and social situations. Every day we experience situations, sometimes new, but mostly similar to facts that we have already witnessed. For all of those cases, one aspect is the same: We have to read the social frame we face at that moment and we have to read the behavior of the involved persons. In our opinion, this is a special social competence and is defined as Behavioral Literacy. This competence or skill is important for everyday life in preschool, school, and beyond, as well as for families. It is crucial for every person, especially professionals such as teachers, therapists, instructors, and trainers, as well as parents.

In the theoretical framework of our concept, two theories are central:

(1) Everything is seen regarding the Frame Analysis and its four aspects by Goffman. We always consider the general frame of the society, the specific frame of the individual, and the frame of social situation. In doing so, we are able to locate, perceive, involve, and label an unlimited amount of specific incidents because they are defined by means of the frames (Goffman, 1974).

(2) The Social Control Theory by Hirschi and the four elements of the bond try to explain why a person becomes delinquent and thus acts against social norms and laws. As the first element Hirschi states “attachment

of the individual to others” is the “essence of internalization of norms, conscience, or superego”. On the contrary, someone without attachment to others is “free from moral restraints” and shows psychopathological behavior. “Commitment” is the second element and could be described as a “rational component in conformity”. It, in this way, includes: (a) a decision-making and its consequences; (b) a positioning of oneself because of one’s former behavior; and (c) the awareness of the first two aspects as well as the effects of the acting. Because time and energy of a person are limited, Hirschi holds the opinion that “involvement” is another important element of the control theory. Some people are just too busy to act inappropriately because they are involved in conventional activities and with all of their plans, social meetings, and work, can’t even think about being socially inappropriate or delinquent. The last element of the bond regarding the Social Control Theory is “belief” as a “common value system within the society or group”. First of all, the theory assumes that the deviant person believes he is doing wrong. Secondly, belief might be seen as mere words, which in specific circumstances mean nothing and can be ignored. Third, the deviant uses the so-called “technique of neutralization”. He rationalizes the act and is free to realize it. As a keystone of the argument, it can be assumed that there is a “variation in belief in the moral validity of social rules” (Hirschi, 2009, p. 16). In addition to these two theories, three others are important to explain the phenomenon of “Behavioral Literacy”:

(A) The Social Information Processing has five phases by Dodge which explain the steps a child must go through before he or she can act with competence to social demands such as (1) “encoding situational cues” and (2) “representation and interpretation of those cues”. Here, hypothetically, the child focuses on specific cues and designs an individual explanation of the situation. Phase (3) is the “mental search for possible responses to the situation,” and Phase (4) is the “selection of a response”. During the second two phases, the long-term memory of the child is relevant because the child might analyze his or her former experiences and select the one that best fits the circumstances faced at the moment. The Phase (5) is the “acting out of the chosen response and monitoring its affects” regarding the interaction (Crick & Dodge, 1994, p. 74).

(B) The Emotional Competence with eight skills by Saarni. The first skill is the “awareness of one’s emotional state”. It is possible that a person could experience more than one emotion at a time, and with regards to inattention or unconscious aspects, the person is not consciously aware of his or her feelings. The second skill is the “ability to discern others’ emotion, based on situational and expressive cues that have some degree of cultural consensus as to their emotional meaning”. The next skill that Saarni poses is the “ability to use the vocabulary of emotion and expression terms”. The skills are seen as connected to the particular culture and have to be available and link to social roles. Skill four is the “capacity for empathic and sympathetic involvement in others’ emotional experiences” and five is the “ability to realize that (the) inner emotional state need not correspond to outer expression”. This means that the person I’m interacting with might use some sort of a “front” (Goffman, 1959) or “mask (see Schmitz-Feldhaus Masking Behavior)”. Additionally, my behavior could influence the manner of my opponent, which means that I have to consider what kind of emotion to show. The “capacity for adaptive coping with aversive or distressing emotions by using self-regulatory strategies that ameliorate the intensity or temporal duration of such emotional states” is the sixth skill. Number seven could be described as an awareness of emotional communication within relationships. It includes interpersonal consequences, the consideration of different types of relationships and the fact that emotional communication contains a certain amount of power and authority. The last skill that Saarni postulates is the “capacity for emotional self-efficacy”. This ability is based on an emotional balance and the person’s theory of emotion and moral sense (Saarni, 1999, p. 5).

(C) The Sense of Coherence and its three dimensions by Antonovsky for the purpose of screening with regards to the behavioral-literacy ability of the person in question. The sense of coherence is the main aspect of the salutogenetic theory and includes the sense of comprehensibility, the sense of manageability and the sense of meaningfulness. It describes a "... feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable; (2) the resources are available to her/him to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement" (Antonovsky, 1987, p. 19).

After several years of studying the concept, we define behavioral literacy as the skill of noticing (observing) the frames of different social interactions or social systems and making sense of the coherent implications. Furthermore, it is the capacity to comprehend emotions and expressions of self and others. And it is a skill to handle these information's regarding one's own belief system.

Method/Sample

In the 1980s started a project called the "Reaction Pattern Research (RPR)" in the Netherlands (Rink, Vos, Van Lokven, & Slagveer, 1989). The issue of the project was the attitude of youngsters towards social limits and their reaction and motivation patterns. The first aim was to gather the normative and the deviant behavior. The second aim was to develop a specific diagnostic and treatment assessment for different settings. Several studies in different countries (Canada, Estonia, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany) were realized (Grietens, 1999; Rink & Ott, 1997).

The sample of this study were all 116 incoming delinquent juveniles new incarcerated in one youth correctional facility, responsible for Northern Germany: Out of these 116 juveniles, 10 were without any knowledge of the German language and eight refused to participate. In order to collect data regarding juvenile delinquents, we asked the $n = 98$ young men aged 15-21 incarcerated in a juvenile correctional facility in Northern Germany, by using the high-quality RPR questionnaire short-form the ASL-Scale (attitude to social limits-scale) (Rink et al., 1989). We wanted to know whether they are aware of specific social limits or not. We presented six situations (critical incidents) to them, with social limits, e.g.:

Situation (1): You find a purse in the cafeteria with \$ 50;

Situation (2): Your friend is attacked and fights back;

Situation (3): You are in the grocery and want to buy only one item. You come to the counter, but no one is there.

The questions to the situations where:

Question 1: What could a person do in such a situation?

Question 2: What would you do in this situation?

Question 3: Why would you do that?

The RPR identified four reaction types:

A = adjustment;

B = overstepping;

C = negotiation;

D = withdrawal.

And four motivation types:

a = I-directed motivation, placing self-interest at the centre;

b = other-directed motivation, placing other people or society at the centre;

c = here-and-now-directed motivation, oriented towards immediate gratification;

d = future directed motivation, oriented towards considering the consequences of one's own behavior (Rink & Ott, 1997).

Results and Discussion

Several aspects were noticeable: First, the participants couldn't think of a lot different opportunities for action (Question 1). This might be due to the limited time they had for the questionnaires, out of lack of concentration or shortage of ideas. Second, they had increased problems to give a reason for their own approach using "That's why" as an explanation. It could be that they had never thought about the reasons for their acting before. To bring that up in a survey setting might have been difficult for them. Third, some questions do not seem to be easily answered. With regards to situation 1, someone did for example say: "depends on my mood". This shows that he is aware of his own emotions most of the time (Saarni, 1999). Someone else mentioned two conditions to make his action dependent of: having money and not having money. "If you have money, you bring the purse to the police; if you do not have money, you take it". It can be assumed that this example shows a self-centered motivation with a here-and-now oriented motivation (types a and c). Regarding the three dimensions of the sense of coherence, this participant focuses on the sense of meaningfulness. If the money would be important for him at that moment, he would take it, otherwise he would bring it to the police.

In addition, our sample showed following results (see Table 1):

Table 1

Results

	Situation 1	Situation 2	Situation 3
Question 1	Type A, 76 times	Type A, 55 times	Type A, 82 times
	Type B, 27 times	Type B, 55 times	Type B, 42 times
	Type C, 0 times	Type C, 7 times	Type C, 1 times
	Type D, 12 times	Type D, 23 times	Type D, 2 times
Question 2	Type A, 48 times	Type A, 28 times	Type A, 81 times
	Type B, 44 times	Type B, 74 times	Type B, 17 times
	Type C, 8 times	Type C, 10 times	Type C, 1 times
	Type D, 0 times	Type D, 12 times	Type D, 2 times
Question 3	Type a, 44 times	Type a, 7 times	Type a, 34 times
	Type b, 23 times	Type b, 32 times	Type b, 1 times
	Type c, 10 times	Type c, 22 times	Type c, 33 times
	Type d, 1 times	Type d, 8 times	Type d, 5 times

Conclusion

In summary, the 98 juvenile delinquents are aware of social rules and know the social expectations for all six situations and know how to behave properly. But the decision, whether or not to show deviant attitudes has in most of the situations to do with the social frame of the situation, e.g., when a friend is involved as in situation 2. The reaction that is pointed out most is limit overstepping (B) and the motivation for this behavior is that other people are at the center or rather relevant in choosing that sort of action (b). To adduce Hirschi's Social Control Theory (2009), the first element "attachment of the individual to others" seems to be at the core

of explanation regarding juvenile delinquents. It shows us that the well-known aspect of “significant others” might have an impact on becoming delinquent as well. Whether the peers are seen as a role model or participants wanted to impress their buddies has as yet to be studied. As for the young man who put two conditions to this actions, the element of “Commitment” is as the “rational component in conformity” could be drawn to in order to explain this behavior, because it contains a decision-making and its consequence. His answer (the above mentioned was but a segment) indicated that he is well aware of the outcome if he takes it or brings the purse to the police. Referring to the person who takes the purse or not, depending on his mood, he uses his belief system rather flexible, by bringing the so-called “technique of neutralization” into play. He rationalizes the act and is free to realize it. As a keystone of the argument, it can be assumed that there is a “variation in belief in the moral validity of social norms”. So he alters his course of action depending on his disposition towards specific situation. But all of the results make it clear that all of the participating 98 delinquent juveniles know about the social situation and the inherent frames as well as about their own emotions. They have a sense for the consequences. So, we assume that most of the criminal young men from our survey are “behavioral literate” (see definition above).

It is our opinion that, although the results are somewhat surprising, they are nevertheless relevant for parents, educators, social workers and coaches of different professions, e.g., clinical psychologists.

Right now we analyze another study on RPR. Participants are girls and boys aged 14 till 21, who got into the focus because of deviant behavior and are taking part in an anti-aggression-training. First results indicate that these youth also orient their behavior on peer related aspects. Further evaluation is due to come.

References

- Antonovsky, A. (1979). *Health, stress and coping*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Antonovsky, A. (1987). *Unraveling the mystery of health: How people manage stress and stay well*. London: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Crick, N. R., & Dodge, A. (1994). A review and reformulation of social information-processing mechanisms in children's social adjustment. *Psychological Bulletin*, 115, 74-101.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Grietens, H. (1999). *Attitudes towards social limits, undersocialized behavior, and self-presentation in young people: A contribution to the theoretical framework and the empirical validation of the reaction pattern research in flanders*. Leuven: University Press.
- Hirschi, T. (2009). *Causes of delinquency*. Berkeley: University of California Press/Transaction Publ. (1st edition 1972).
- Rink, J. E., & Ott, W. (1997). *Youngsters between freedom and social limits*. Toronto: University Press.
- Rink, J. E., Vos, R. C., van Lokven, H. M., & Slagveer, Ch. (1989). *Grensgevalen, Deel 1: Nederlandsejongren-algemeen. (A study on the attitudes of young people towards social limits. Part I: Dutch youngsters—General population)*. Leuven, Belgium: Acco.
- Saarni, C. (1999). *The development of emotional competence*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Schmitz-Feldhaus, C., & Wittrock, M. (2014). Behavioral literacy—A theoretical approach. *International Journal of Neuroscience and Behavioral Science*, 2(1), 5-11. doi: 10.13189/ijnbs.2014.020102
- Schmitz-Feldhaus, C., Rieß, B., & Wittrock, M. (2012). Jugendliche im Fokus von Drop-out-Gefährdung-Aus dem Blickwinkel von Behavioral Literacy. In H. Ricking, & G. Schulze (Eds.), *Schulabbruch-ohne Ticket in die Zukunft?* Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt.
- Wittrock, M., & Schulze, G. (2002). Reaction pattern research—Results and program development in Germany. In W. Ott, & K. Rink (Eds.), *Youngsters between freedom and social limits* (Vol. IV, pp. 143-155). Maastricht (Shaker).