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Research Paper

Guilt- and Shame-Proneness, Tolerance for Disagreement and Ambiguity: A Comparative Study of Juvenile Delinquents and Non-Delinquents

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the difference between juvenile delinquents and non-delinquents in terms of their proneness to guilt and shame, tolerance for disagreement, and tolerance of ambiguity, and to also illustrate the relationship between these variables. The study sample included N=60 boys, out of which n=30 was school going students, and the other n=30 were juvenile delinquents who were admitted in the correctional homes. Data collection was done using the following tools; socio-demographics, GASP scale, TFD scale, and TOA scale. Data analysis was done using the independent sample T-test, and Pearson correlation statistics. The findings have been as follows: i) a significant difference exists in the variable 'guilt-repair' between delinquents and non-delinquents, where non-delinquents scored more than the delinquent group, ii) a significant difference exists in the 'novelty-seeking'(source of intolerance for ambiguity) between delinquents and non-delinquents, where delinquents scored more than the non-delinquent group, iii)) tolerance for disagreement is strongly positively correlated with tolerance of ambiguity- complexity score (source of intolerance for ambiguity), and iv) tolerance for disagreement is strongly negatively correlated with tolerance of ambiguity- Novelty seeking. It is therefore, evident from the study that despite having almost similar feelings and preferences, what differentiates delinquents from non-delinquents is the action tendencies which follows these feelings and preferences.

Keywords: *Guilt Proneness, Shame Proneness, Tolerance for Ambiguity, Tolerance for Disagreement, Juvenile Delinquency*

Juvenile delinquency has been a persistent social psychological and the legal concern in India and worldwide. The National Crime Bureau (NCRB, 2023) continues to report increases in offences involving property crimes, sexual offences, and group-based violence among adolescents. Research studies conceptualise delinquency not just as a legal outcome but as a behavioural phenomenon that is rooted in emotional regulation deficits adverse childhood experiences and socio cognitive vulnerabilities (Ogundele et al., 2021;

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Naik & Thomas, 2023) highlighting the importance of examining internal processes that can differentiate delinquent adolescence from their non delinquent peers.

Self-conscious moral emotions specially guilt and shame play a key role in shaping behavioural responses. Earlier models have proposed a distinction where guilt promotes reparative actions while shame promotes avoidance and anger. Recent evidence supports and expands this understanding where guilt proneness in adolescence was seen to be associated with empathy moral internalization prosocial behaviour and reduce aggression (Bacchini et al., 2021). In contrast, shame proneness predicted avoidance externalising behaviour reactive anger and increased risk for future offending. Findings from longitudinal study also shows that shame proneness is also associated with substance-use patterns (Stuewig et al., 2020; O'Keefe & Bai, 2022). Neuropsychological findings also demonstrated distinct neural pathways that were involved in processing guilt and shame, which showcase differences in self-evaluation and emotional regulation (Morese et al., 2022).

Concepts such as tolerance for disagreement and tolerance for ambiguity have also given significant insight to the understanding of adolescent behaviour where children with low tolerance for disagreement have been shown to be more likely to escalate conflict, misinterpret neutral interactions as being threatening and engage in reactive aggression (Rojas & Fields, 2021). In contrast, high disagreement tolerance showed better peer relationships, psychological flexibility, and constructive conflict resolution (Liu & Zhang, 2023). Tolerance for ambiguity which is basically, the ability to function effectively despite uncertain or complex situations has been linked to risk taking and sensation seeking behaviours. Adolescents show heightened sensitivity to uncertainty due to the developing brain structures and connections. Studies show that adolescence with high intolerance for ambiguity show greater impulsivity, poor decision making, and higher engagement in anti-social behaviours (Tymula et al., 2020; Salvati et al., 2022). Novelty-seeking, a key domain of ambiguity tolerance is associated with rule-breaking and anti-social tendencies (Karim & Clark, 2021; Moshagen et al., 2021). On the contrary, ambiguity tolerance has been linked to emotional resilience and adaptive coping (Lauriola et al., 2022).

Therefore, integration of above-mentioned variables emphasises that emotional vulnerabilities (shame), cognitive and perceptual tendencies (ambiguity tolerance) and social emotional competencies (disagreement tolerance) interact to influence do risk for delinquency (Conti et al., 2023). And the studies of all these variables combined remains limited in India underscoring the rationale of the present study. This study not only focuses on the association between these constructs and delinquency but also strives to see the relation between the constructs themselves, to contribute to the understanding of delinquency add to the existing interventions and awareness for these youths in conflict.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Locale and Study Period

The study was conducted in Sikkim India. Data from the delinquent group were collected from both government run non-government organization observation and correction homes located within the state while the non-delinquent group was recruited from local schools in the same geographical region data collection occurred over 3 month period between January and April of 2024.

Delineation of the Study

The study employed a comparative research design that involved two groups of male adolescents.

1. Juvenile delinquents (experimental group): adolescence residing in correction homes.
2. Non delinquents (control group): school going adolescence with no history of conflict with law.

There were no interventions given however each participant represented one experimental unit resulting in 60 independent units. The design involved comparison across the psychological variables of guilt and shame proneness tolerance for disagreement and tolerance for ambiguity.

Objectives

1. To compare delinquents (boys) and non- juvenile delinquents (boys) on Proneness to guilt and shame.
2. To compare delinquents (boys) and non- juvenile delinquents (boys) on Tolerance for Ambiguity.
3. To compare delinquents (boys) and non- juvenile delinquents (boys) on Tolerance for Disagreement.
4. To explore proneness to guilt and shame, tolerance for disagreement and tolerance for ambiguity among juvenile delinquents (boys) and non-delinquents (boys).

Hypotheses

1. A significant difference would exist in proneness to guilt and shame among delinquents (boys) and non- juvenile delinquents (boys).
2. A significant difference would exist in tolerance for disagreement among delinquents (boys) and non- juvenile delinquents (boys).
3. A significant difference would exist in tolerance for ambiguity among delinquents (boys) and non- juvenile delinquents (boys).
4. There is a positive correlation between proneness to guilt and shame, tolerance for disagreement and tolerance for ambiguity.

Participants

A total of 60 participants of 12 to 17 years of age were taken out of which 30 were juvenile delinquents and 30 were school going inmates.

Inclusion criteria for the delinquents

- Only the age group of 12-17 years will be taken.
- Only male inmates will be taken.
- Only the individuals who are currently admitted in the institutions will be taken.

Exclusion criteria for the delinquents

- Any participant who has a history of delinquency in the past and is currently free of charges and living a normal life with good conduct will be excluded.

Inclusion criteria for non-delinquents

- Only the age group of 12-17 years will be taken.
- Only the school going students will be taken.
- Only male students will be taken.

Exclusion criteria for non-delinquents

- The participant who is a school going student but has had a past of delinquency will be excluded.

Materials

1. **Socio-demographic Data-sheet:** Collected age, schooling status, and basic background information.
2. **Guilt And Shame Proneness Scale (GASP) – (Cohen et al., 2011):** The scale measures four components- Guilt-Negative-Behaviour-Evaluation (feeling bad about how one acted), Guilt-Repair (behaviour or behavioural intentions focused on correcting or compensating for the transgression) Negative-Self-Evaluation (feeling bad about oneself), Shame-Withdrawal (action tendencies focused on hiding or withdrawing from public. Cronbach's alpha of 0.806 was reported in a replicated study (Erbilidim & Nweke, 2025). Convergent and divergent validity was reported for the scale.
3. **Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale – (Budner, 1962):** The Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale is designed to measure the degree to which an individual is open to ambiguous stimuli and whether he/she perceives it as a source of threat or as a desirable situation. There are 16 items with a 7-point Likert scale. Three subscales can also be computed to reveal the major source of intolerance of ambiguity- novelty (N), complexity (C), or insolubility (I). The test is observed to have a medium reliability of 0.64.
4. **Tolerance For Disagreement Scale (Teven, Richmond & Mccroskey, 2013):** The Tolerance for disagree scale is designed to measure the degree to which an individual can tolerate other people disagreeing with what the individual believes to be true. People with high argumentativeness are likely to be able to deal with more disagreement than those people who are low in argumentativeness. The scale has 15-item that assess the degree to which individuals tolerate disagreement in interpersonal situations. Alpha reliability of the scale is expected to be 0.85.

Data Collection Procedure

Permission was obtained from institutional heads of correctional homes and schools. Participants were informed about the study purpose, and assent was obtained along with organizational consent. Data were collected individually in a quiet setting within the institutions and schools. Each participant was given the questionnaire battery in the following order: Socio-demographic sheet, GASP, TFD Scale, and TOA Scale. Participants completed the tools independently under supervision. No time limit was imposed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was a comparative study between delinquents and non-delinquents on the variables of guilt and shame proneness and tolerance for disagreement and ambiguity.

Table 1: Comparison of Clinical Variables Between Delinquents and Non-Delinquents Using Independent t-Test (n = 30)

Variable	Delinquents (Mean ± SD)	Non-Delinquents (Mean ± SD)	t (df = 58)	p
Guilt – Negative Behavior Evaluation	17.23 ± 4.67	19.50 ± 4.281	1.961	0.055 (NS)
Guilt – Repair	17.83 ± 4.47	22.00 ± 4.32	3.669	0.001***
Shame – Negative Self	16.70 ± 4.88	19.03 ± 5.50	1.738	0.087 (NS)

Variable	Delinquents (Mean ± SD)	Non-Delinquents (Mean ± SD)	t (df = 58)	p
Evaluation				
Shame – Withdrawal	16.07 ± 3.35	14.83 ± 4.85	-1.146	0.257 (NS)
Tolerance for Disagreement	42.77 ± 6.87	44.83 ± 6.04	1.238	0.221 (NS)
Novelty Seeking	17.37 ± 3.42	15.63 ± 5.42	-2.130	0.037*
Ambiguity – Complexity	33.07 ± 5.42	32.67 ± 5.07	-0.295	0.769 (NS)
Ambiguity – Insolubility	13.00 ± 3.76	13.50 ± 3.01	0.568	0.572 (NS)

****p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; NS = Not significant.*

The present study examined proneness to guilt and shame, tolerance for disagreement, and tolerance for ambiguity among juvenile delinquents and non-delinquents. The results from the independent samples t-tests (Table 1) indicated significant differences on two variables. Non-delinquents scored significantly higher on guilt-repair than delinquents ($t(58) = 3.669$, $p = .001$), suggesting that non-delinquent adolescents demonstrate stronger reparative tendencies and a greater inclination to correct or compensate for their actions. These findings align with previous work showing that guilt is generally associated with prosocial behaviour, responsibility-taking, and reduced deviance (Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Conversely, delinquents scored significantly higher on novelty seeking, a component of intolerance for ambiguity ($t(58) = –2.130$, $p = .037$), indicating a greater sensitivity to situations lacking cues or predictability. This is consistent with Budner's (1962) conceptualisation of novelty as a primary source of ambiguity, and with recent literature showing that adolescents high in novelty seeking tend to engage in higher impulsivity and risk-taking (Karim & Clark, 2021; Salvati et al., 2022). No significant group differences emerged for guilt-negative behaviour evaluation, shame-related dimensions, tolerance for disagreement, or other ambiguity components, suggesting that the observed differences were confined mainly to reparative guilt responses and novelty-related ambiguity intolerance.

Table 2: Correlation Between Guilt–Shame Proneness, Tolerance for Disagreement, and Tolerance for Ambiguity among Delinquents (n = 30)

Variables	Tolerance for Disagreement (r)	Novelty (r)	Complexity (r)	Insolubility (r)
Guilt – Negative Behaviour Evaluation	.222	-.135	-.209	.281
Guilt – Repair	-.125	-.160	-.224	-.316
Shame – Negative Self Evaluation	-.164	.012	.329	.276
Shame – Withdrawal	-.017	.074	.051	.243
Tolerance for Disagreement	—	-.519**	.554**	.726

***p < .01 (two-tailed).*

The correlational analysis (Table 2) further revealed that within the delinquent group, tolerance for disagreement was strongly and negatively correlated with novelty seeking ($r = –.519$, $p < .01$) and strongly and positively correlated with ambiguity-complexity ($r = .554$, $p < .01$). This pattern suggests that adolescents who are more tolerant of interpersonal disagreement are less threatened by novel, unfamiliar situations but are more discomforted by complex situations involving multiple cues. These associations are consistent with the idea that adolescents with higher disagreement tolerance may be more open to diverse perspectives, new information, and unfamiliar experiences (McCroskey & Richmond, 1998),

which could explain their lower intolerance for novelty. At the same time, multiple competing cues in complex situations may require selecting one correct interpretation, which could be more challenging for adolescents who are accustomed to accommodating differing viewpoints. Additionally, the absence of significant associations between guilt–shame proneness and ambiguity-related variables in this study is notable, given literature suggesting that shame is often associated with avoidance and withdrawal (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), whereas guilt tends to facilitate adaptive coping (Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005). The lack of such associations in the present sample may be attributed to the small sample size, the use of self-report measures based on hypothetical scenarios, or the tendency of adolescents to respond in socially desirable ways when evaluating moral emotions.

When interpreting these results collectively, the findings partially support the proposed hypotheses. The first hypothesis, which predicted significant differences in proneness to guilt and shame between delinquents and non-delinquents, was not fully supported, as only guilt-repair showed a significant difference. The second hypothesis predicting differences in tolerance for disagreement was not supported, with both groups scoring within the moderate tolerance range. The third hypothesis was supported for the novelty-seeking component of ambiguity tolerance, with delinquents demonstrating greater intolerance for novel, cue-less situations. This finding resonates with Cornish and Clarke's (1987) rational choice theory, which proposes that delinquents may engage in more deliberate cost–benefit analysis, leading them to perceive novel situations as more threatening or uncertain. Finally, the fourth hypothesis received partial support, as tolerance for disagreement was significantly associated with two ambiguity components, whereas guilt and shame proneness did not correlate significantly with either disagreement tolerance or ambiguity tolerance. The mixed pattern of findings underscores the complexity of socio-emotional and cognitive-perceptual processes during adolescence and highlights the importance of examining these constructs together in order to understand delinquent behaviour more comprehensively.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a preliminary understanding of how guilt–shame proneness, tolerance for disagreement, and tolerance for ambiguity relate to juvenile delinquency. However, the findings must be interpreted with caution due to certain limitations, including a small, all-male sample and the inclusion of delinquents involved only in minor offences, which may have reduced the contrast between groups. In addition, the measure used for tolerance for disagreement assessed attitudes rather than behavioural responses, limiting the depth of interpretation. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, classify participants according to offence severity, and incorporate detailed socio-demographic and psychosocial histories. Using additional clinical variables and including structured interviews on personal experiences of guilt, shame, disagreement, and ambiguity would enrich the understanding of these constructs. Despite its limitations, the study highlights that while delinquents and non-delinquents may report similar emotional tendencies, their behavioural responses to these emotions and preferences appear to differentiate the two groups. This underscores the importance of incorporating emotional processing and behavioural regulation components into interventions for juveniles in conflict with the law.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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