

**DIFFERENCES OF SELF-SERVING COGNITIVE
DISTORTIONS AND ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOURS
BETWEEN INSTITUTIONALISED AND NON-
INSTITUTIONALISED YOUTH: PRELIMINARY
INVESTIGATION**

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Abstract: Anti-social behaviours carried out by young individuals represent an important issue currently faced by the modern civilisation. Self-serving cognitive distortions are among the essential factors that are associated with the development and maintenance of anti-social behaviours. The present study aims to examine if there are any differences regarding self-serving cognitive distortions and anti-social behaviours between institutionalised and non-institutionalised adolescents. The sample consisted of 96 adolescents (mean age = 16.05, SD = 1.21) from a high school situated in Arad, Romania and 27 adolescents (mean age = 15.04, SD = 1.74) from the Arad General Assistance and Child Protection Service, Romania. The self-serving cognitive distortions and anti-social behaviours were assessed with the “How I Think Questionnaire” (HIT; Barriga et al., 2001), which was previously

adapted for Romanian language usage (Demeter et al., 2018). The preliminary data indicates that institutionalised adolescents express higher levels of self-serving cognitive distortions and anti-social behaviours than non-institutionalised adolescents. These are discussed from the perspective of prevention programs addressing the self-serving cognitive distortions in institutionalised adolescents.

Keywords: anti-social behaviour, juvenile delinquency, self serving cognitive distortions, institutionalised adolescents.

Introduction

Anti-social acts carried out by adolescents underline the essential difficulties that are faced by several societies, including Romania, from the large perspective of young generations representing the future of humanity. The development of anti-social behaviour can be explained mostly by the multiple and diverse variables that may be possible causes or may be associated with this phenomenon; these explanations can be provided through individual factors (biological and psychological) and social factors, such as educational / schooling and family factors (Shoemaker, 2009; Shoemaker, 2010; Marica, 2007; Ojo, 2012). Anti-social behaviour is described in literature as outsourcing behaviours that have a negative effect on other persons, directly or indirectly, by violating essential and important moral and or social rules, that include aggressive manifestations with a dangerous or very dangerous background (e.g. murder or rape) and less dangerous aggression (e.g. stealing or burglary) (Barriga et al., 2001; Millie, 2009).

Among the essential factors that are associated with the development and maintenance of anti-social behaviours are the self-serving cognitive distortions (Gibbs, 2003; Barriga et al., 2001). The concept of self-serving is described in literature as a series of distorted cognitive processes, which may occur due to the generally over-dispersed tendency of self-perception and evaluation (Myers, 2015). Several of the explanations in literature offer different perspectives on the occurrence and persistence of antisocial and violent behaviour. From the perspective of the social cognitive theories, explanations are based on cognitive distortions related to antisocial behaviours or individual deficiency in interpreting social events (Nas et al., 2008; Barriga, Morrison, Liao & Gibbs, 2001).

Based on social cognitive theory (Luszczynska & Schwarzer, 2005), it is assumed that individuals act according to the interpretation of social events, and anti-social behaviour can be based on the processing of wrong prejudices,

which can lead to misinterpretation of social information (Dodge, 2011) and cognitive distortions that reduce the level of empathy and the level of guilt or moral judgment (Gibbs, 2003). Cognitive distortions are considered misconceptions or inaccuracies in participating in life events or giving meaning to life experiences in general (Barriga, et al., 2001).

In order to outline cognitive distortions that are associated with outsourcing behaviours such as aggression or delinquency, some authors use the term of self-serving cognitive distortions (Barriga et al., 2000), which can play a very important role in providing some explanations to the development of anti-social behaviour (Barriga et al., 2001). These patterns of thinking have the potential to be criminogenic because they isolate or diminish guilt, remorse or negative concept of self or ones actions from the individual that associates with or develops anti-social behaviour and self-serving cognitive distortions (Barriga et al., 2000).

Self-serving cognitive distortions (Barriga et al., 2001) can be divided into four categories, as it follows:

1. Self-Centred – represented by the focus on one’s own opinions, expectations, needs and rights, to the extent that the views and needs of others are very little, or never taken into account or respected;

2. Blaming Others - involve cognitive schemes excludes guilt, by externalizing it at sources outside of the individual at blame;

3. Minimizing/Mislabelling - are distortions in which anti-social behavior is viewed as an acceptable means to achieve certain goals, as well as the dehumanizing and negative way of referring to other individuals;

4. Assuming the Worst - represented by the attribution of hostile intentions to others, considering that the most horrible scenario is inevitable or the perception that one owns behaviour is beyond the scope for improvement (Gibbs, Potter & Goldstein, 1995).

The present study focuses on the investigation of self-serving cognitive distortions of adolescents at risk, i.e. institutionalised teenagers who have serious problems and difficulties in adapting to their environment as a result of internal and external stressors. These teenagers tend to have difficulty to respect rules, have feelings of inferiority or a negative self-image, and have a low tolerance to frustration (i.e. they tend to quit when they face challenging work at school , instead of seeking solutions and attempting to solve the problems) (Hutchinson et al., 1992). These individuals usually come from broken homes, abandonment, abusive families and are usually institutionalised and taken in by the child protection system (Luna et al., 2011). The self-serving cognitive distortions will be also assessed in non-institutionalised teenagers, not only from the perspective of providing a control group, but also from the perspective of identifying those components of self-serving cognitive distortions that might

represent an educational and interventional priority in preventing and managing the anti-social behaviours in adolescents.

Objective and hypothesis

The present study aims to examine if there are any differences regarding self-serving cognitive distortions (Self-Centred, Blaming Others, Minimizing/Mislabelling, Assuming the Worst) and anti-social behaviours (Opposition-Defiance, Physical Aggression, Lying, Stealing) between institutionalised adolescents and non-institutionalised adolescents in Romania. We are fully aware that the institutionalised adolescents represent an already selected category of participants based on specific social causes. However, we consider that the psychological screening of their levels and types of anti-social behaviours might provide a deeper understanding of their needs in terms of intervention programs and education in the institutions they are currently assigned in order to address not only their own quality of life, but also the social wellbeing (e.g. by preventing the occurrence of anti-social acts). This study is part of a larger investigation regarding a doctoral thesis, which aims to investigate the juvenile delinquency phenomenon from a psycho-social, cognitive and behavioural perspective, in order to underline those factors that are able to rehabilitate or prevent anti-social behaviours. It is hypothesised that there will be statistically significant differences between institutionalised adolescents and non-institutionalised adolescents regarding the levels of self-serving cognitive distortions and anti-social behaviours.

Methods

Participants

In the present study, a number of 123 adolescents from Romania voluntarily participated in the study. Out of the 123 young individuals, 96 belonged to the non-institutionalised group and 27 adolescents belonged to the institutionalised (or at risk) adolescents group. The participants were selected from the Arad General Assistance and Child Protection Service (Institutionalised adolescents) and the Arad High-School of Economics (Non-institutionalised adolescents). The approval for the gathering of data was obtained through a request signed by Babeş Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, in order to obtain access to the institutions where the study took place (General Assistance and Child Protection Service of Arad and the Economic High School of Arad).

Within the non-institutionalised group (N = 96), 52 participants belong to the female gender (54.2%), 43 participants belong to the male gender (44.8%) and 1 participant did not declare the gender (1%). The participants ages were between 14 and 20 years and with an average of 16.05 (SD = 1.21). All

participants had an appropriate level of education in relation to their age and most of them come from bi-parent families (86.5% - bi-parental families, 11.5% - single-parent families, and 2.1% - without parents).

Within the institutionalised group (N = 27), 10 participants belong to the female gender (37%) and 17 participants belong to the male gender (63%), ages between 13 to 18 and a mean of 15.04 (SD = 1.74). Institutionalised participants were classified with: low education (14.8%), medium level education (44.4%) and appropriate education (40.7%); 25.9% are without parents, 29.6% are from mono-parental families, and 44.4% bi-parental families. Participants were institutionalized due to the following identified causes: neglect (44.4%), poverty (14.8), deviant behaviour (11.1), abuse with neglect (7.4%), abandonment (7.4%), lack of shelter with neglect (3.7%), maternal abuse (3.7%), maternal illness (3.7%) and lack of shelter (3.7%).

Instruments

The How I Think Questionnaire (HIT; Barriga et al., 2001) – This questionnaire was designed to evaluate anti-social behaviours (Opposition-Defiance, Physical Aggression, Lying, Stealing) and self-serving cognitive distortions (Self-Centred, Blaming Others, Minimizing/Mislabelling, Assuming the Worst; Barriga et al., 2001). HIT (Barriga et al., 2001) consists of 54 questions, with 6-point Likert response scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). Of the 54 items, 39 were designed to evaluate the four self-serving cognitive distortions and the four categories of antisocial behavior, 8 questions assess the level of Anomalous Responding and 7 items were designed as positive filters to masquerade the 39 questions (Barriga et al., 2001). The sum of sub-scales Opposition-Defiance and Physical Aggression compose the Overt Scale (anti-social actions are represented by direct confrontation with the victim) and the sum of Lying and Stealing sub-scales builds the Covert Scale (represented by antisocial acts that confront the victim indirectly); overall, the questionnaire consists of 12 scales and sub-scales (Barriga et al., 2001). HIT was linguistically validated for usage in Romanian language in a previous study, indicating an internal consistency varying between .531 (positive filters) and .863 (scaled scale) with a coefficient on the whole .914 questionnaire (Demeter et al., 2018).

Design and procedure

In the present study, a non-experimental comparative design was used. The independent variable is the personal status of the participants: non-institutionalised and institutionalised adolescents. The dependent variables are the levels of self-serving cognitive distortions and anti-social behaviours, which were assessed with the HIT Questionnaires (Barriga et al., 2001).

HIT (Barriga et al., 2001) was administered to the participants by the pen and paper format and they were informed that they were participating in a

research regarding young individuals, guaranteeing the confidentiality of the data. The data collection took place between October 2017 and November 2017, and the completion of the questionnaire was approximately 20-25 minutes for each participant. Some of the participants needed assistance regarding some items of the questionnaire, because of their difficulties to read and to understand the meaning behind the investigated concepts.

Results

The data was processed using the SPSS 17 software. Besides the variables mentioned above, the scores for the Anomalous Responding scale of the HIT Questionnaire (Barriga et al., 2001) was calculated in order to control the sincerity of the answers given in this study. According to literature (Barriga et al., 2001), if the score on the Anomalous Responding scale is higher than 4.00, then the protocol is suspect as to the sincerity of the response; if the score is higher than 4.25 then the protocol may not be considered as valid. The mean values for the Anomalous Responding scale of the two groups were: $M = 3.21$ ($SD = .95$) for non-institutionalised adolescents ($N = 96$) and $M = 3.04$ ($SD = .84$) for institutionalised adolescents ($N = 27$). These values indicate that the participants provided honest answers to the questionnaire elements.

The normality of the data distribution was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test (Table 1).

Table 1. Shapiro-Wilk test for the HIT (Barriga et al. 2001) scales and subscales for the 2 groups (institutionalised and non-institutionalised adolescents).

	Non-institutionalised			Institutionalised		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Anomalous Responding	.982	96	.218	.952	27	.233
Total HIT	.939	96	.000	.958	27	.341
Overt Scale	.947	96	.001	.943	27	.142
Covert Scale	.941	96	.000	.941	27	.132
Self-Centred	.956	96	.003	.924	27	.050
Blaming Others	.956	96	.003	.976	27	.766
Minimizing/Mislabelling	.954	96	.002	.977	27	.786
Assuming the Worst	.941	96	.000	.963	27	.427
Opposition-Defiance	.978	96	.114	.945	27	.160

	Non-institutionalised			Institutionalised		
Physical Aggression	.927	96	.000	.976	27	.761
Lying	.982	96	.218	.977	27	.783
Stealing	.900	96	.000	.973	27	.689

The normal distribution of the data was respected for all the scores to the scales and sub-scales of the HIT questionnaire (Barriga et al. 2001) for the institutionalised adolescents. As for the non-institutionalised adolescents, only the Anomalous Responding, Opposition-Defiance and Lying scales respected the normal distribution (Tabel 1).

Table 2. Mean values and standard deviations for the self-serving cognitive distortions and anti-social behaviours for the two groups: institutionalised and non-institutionalised adolescents.

	Statut	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total HIT	Non-institutionalised	96	2.5216	.74597	.07614
	Institutionalised	27	2.9823	.76134	.14652
Overt Scale	Non-institutionalised	96	2.6562	.82469	.08417
	Institutionalised	27	3.0259	.81670	.15717
Covert Scale	Non-institutionalised	96	2.4165	.75025	.07657
	Institutionalised	27	2.9442	.79157	.15234
Self-Centred	Non-institutionalised	96	2.7130	.97115	.09912
	Institutionalised	27	3.2428	.99621	.19172
Blaming Others	Non-institutionalised	96	2.5177	.78055	.07966
	Institutionalised	27	2.9963	.79879	.15373
Minimizing/Mislabelling	Non-institutionalised	96	2.3519	.83921	.08565
	Institutionalised	27	2.8642	.87235	.16788
Assuming the Worst	Non-institutionalised	96	2.4451	.79521	.08116
	Institutionalised	27	2.8148	.83870	.16141
Opposition-Defiance	Non-institutionalised	96	2.8760	.79561	.08120
	Institutionalised	27	3.1296	.87170	.16776
Physical Aggression	Non-institutionalised	96	2.4365	.94414	.09636
	Institutionalised	27	2.9222	.92209	.17746
Lying	Non-institutionalised	96	2.8776	.87528	.08933
	Institutionalised	27	3.1343	1.00893	.19417
Stealing	Non-institutionalised	96	1.9555	.75819	.07738
	Institutionalised	27	2.7542	.78964	.15197

The statistical analysis indicates differences regarding the scores of the scales and sub-scales of the HIT questionnaire (Barriga et al., 2001) between non-institutionalised and institutionalised adolescents (Table 2). In order to investigate if the differences between the means are statistically significant, t-test was used. Literature indicates that t-test can be used with not normally distributed data if the sample is not so small and if there is similar variance between the groups (Skovlund & Fenstad, 2001; Statistics How To, n.d.). As it can be observed in Table 1, only the non-institutionalised group did not respect the normal distribution, but all the variables respected the variance condition at the Levene's Test (Table 3).

Table 3. Levene's test and t-test for the self-serving cognitive distortions and anti-social behaviours between the two groups (institutionalised and non-institutionalised adolescents).

	Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Total HIT	.096	.758	-2.822	121	.006	-.46065	.16323
Overt Scale	.443	.507	-2.062	121	.041	-.36968	.17928
Covert Scale	.037	.848	-3.190	121	.002	-.52769	.16541
Self-Centred	.017	.897	-2.491	121	.014	-.52984	.21274
Blaming Others	.006	.937	-2.800	121	.006	-.47859	.17090
Minimizing/ Mislabelling	.049	.826	-2.779	121	.006	-.51235	.18439
Assuming the Worst	.292	.590	-2.109	121	.037	-.36974	.17531
Opposition- Defiance	1.523	.220	-1.433	121	.155	-.25359	.17701
Physical Aggression	.000	.988	-2.374	121	.019	-.48576	.20465
Lying	.502	.480	-1.301	121	.196	-.25666	.19729
Stealing	.095	.758	-4.792	121	.000	-.79872	.16666

As it can be observed in Table 3, all the registered differences are statistically significant except the scores for the Opposition-Defiance and Lying

scales, with the non-institutionalised adolescents having higher mean values than the non-institutionalised adolescents, regarding self-serving cognitive distortions and anti-social behaviours.

Discussions and conclusions

This study investigated if there are any differences regarding self-serving cognitive distortions (Self-Centered, Blaming Others, Minimizing/Mislabelling, Assuming the Worst) and anti-social behaviours (Opposition-Defiance, Physical Aggression, Lying, Stealing) between institutionalised adolescents and non-institutionalised adolescents in Romania. The hypothesis of this study is confirmed, all the registered differences are statistically significant (except for the Opposition-Defiance and Lying scales), with the non-institutionalised adolescents having higher mean scores than the non-institutionalised adolescents, regarding self-serving cognitive distortions and anti-social behaviours.

It is stated in literature that there are a lot of risk factors that may be predictors or may have a significant link with juvenile delinquency or anti-social behaviours, and some of these factors were met at the institutionalised group, i.e. low levels of education, dysfunctional family background, abuse and neglect (Moitra & Mukherjee, 2010; Draper & Hancock, 2011; Steinberg, 2008; Maccoby, 2000; McConnell, Breitkreuz & Savage, 2011; Patterson et al., 1998; Zimring, 1981; Marica, 2007). In our study, the statistically significant differences might be explained by the fact that most institutionalised adolescents from this study have a low to medium education level, most of them are without parents or come from a single parent homes and most of them were treated with neglect, suffer from poverty or come from dysfunctional backgrounds.

These findings underline the necessity to take into account institutionalised adolescents as well, when addressing the anti-social behaviours and delinquency. Institutionalised adolescents are individuals at risk, because they come from dysfunctional backgrounds or face serious difficulties and these children have higher chances to become juvenile delinquents or engage in criminal activities when they become adults. As it is stated in literature as well (Marica, 2007, Shoemaker, 2009; Shoemaker, 2010) there are a number of factors that encourage the development of anti-social behaviours and these institutionalised children are enveloping a high number of these factors. For example, a recent study that took place in Sweden showed that self-serving cognitive distortions were more common among adolescent offenders as well as adult offenders than in non-offenders (Wallinius et al., 2011).

In order to reduce the levels of self-serving cognitive distortions and the emergence of anti-social behaviours in adolescents, it is recommended to

explore the already existent educational programs in the literature. For example, an efficient educational program that is often referred as an example of good practice is the EQUIP program (Gibbs, 1995). The EQUIP program is a multi-component peer-helping plan that aims to reduce recidivism among delinquent adolescents by decreasing the levels of their cognitive distortions, by developing and remodelling their social skills and by stimulating and cultivating their moral development (Brugman & Bink, 2011). Our preliminary data presented in this paper indicate the necessity of taking into consideration the development and implementation of such educational programs targeting the decrease of the levels of cognitive distortions in the Romanian categories of adolescents at risk, such as the institutionalised ones.

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THE SOCIO-PROFESSIONAL REINSERTION FROM THE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Socio-professional integration is the process of assimilating a person in the professional environment, adapting it to the work and behavior requirements of the team in which he works, the suitability of his / her personality to that of the group. The research has started from the assumption that finding a workplace and job satisfaction is a function of the skills and competencies of the social worker's professional counseling. It had been studied a group of 30 job seekers with different forms of disability. The subjects were introduced into a career counseling program, counseling that was did with the social workers of the institution. The results show that the involvement of the social-assistant by counseling was beneficial for finding a job faster and in accordance with the abilities of the subjects.

Key words: people with hadicap, counseling, job, professional integration

Theoretical frame

The qualification of young people in the institutions should be done taking into account the trends in the evolution of the labor market and the expressed skills and desires of those concerned. The imposition of a young