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Life satisfaction and status among adolescent law offenders

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ABSTRACT

Background *Life satisfaction among young offenders may be affected by the subjective experience of their social status and by the feeling of being a ‘loser’ compared with others, but it is not clear what variables affect such experiences in this group.*

Aims *To examine relationships of type of sentence (prison or probation) and of gender with subjective social status, sense of defeat and life satisfaction among young offenders.*

Methods *One hundred and five participants were randomly selected from a cohort of young offenders, stratifying for sentence type and for gender. They were interviewed by trained and experienced interviewers.*

Results *Young people in a correctional facility experienced lower life satisfaction and greater sense of defeat than those on probation. Independently of judicial measure, low life satisfaction was correlated with sense of defeat among young men but not young women, whereas among young women, but not young men, low life satisfaction was associated with low subjective status.*

Conclusions and implications *Our findings of a correlation between sentence type and life satisfaction needs new, longitudinal research to determine the direction of this relationship. Whether low life satisfaction is predictive of a custodial disposal for young offenders or such a sentence lowers life satisfaction, those trying to supervise or help these young people may need to take account of it. Further, our findings suggest that young male and young female offenders should perhaps be treated in different ways to improve their sense of satisfaction with life, which may, in turn, reduce their risk of reoffending.* Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Adolescence is often a turbulent life stage with many hormonal, psychological and social changes and may be associated with impulsive behaviour and sensation seeking (e.g. Romer, 2010). Moreover, adolescents are in a process of probing their actual and potential position in social hierarchies, and may often experience concerns that they may not be able to attain a high status, for example when they feel they cannot do well at school. According to social strain theory, frustration resulting from such a situation, in which one perceives that others are preventing one from achieving positively valued goals, could lead young people to engage in criminal activities (Agnew, 1993). When they do so and get caught, they may be put in a correctional facility or may serve a period of probation. Both measures limit one's autonomy, freedom and independence, as well as one's access to family and social support, and one's future work prospects (e.g. Blevins et al., 2010).

Our aim was to evaluate how life satisfaction was related to subjective sense of social status and sense of defeat among young Spanish offenders and to test the extent to which any such relationship differs between those in prison or on probation and according to gender. Our hypotheses were based largely on the social competition hypothesis of depression (Price et al., 1994; Gilbert & Allan, 1998), which states that, as many other social animals, humans compete with each other for status and prestige in groups. From an evolutionary perspective, high status has been regarded as more important for men's than for women's reproductive success, for example for their ability to attract and keep mates and their potential to produce viable offspring (e.g. Betzig, 1986). Status as conceptualised by Gilbert and Allan (1998) and Price et al. (1994), however, includes not only the perception of how well one is doing in comparison with others in terms of strength and power, but also in terms of one's social attractiveness and talent and fit with the desired group. Buunk et al. (2007) argued that these last two aspects may be more important for women than for men, given the value attached by women to being closely connected to others. Indeed, they found that among women, and not among men, low status was associated with a higher rate of later burnout. In contrast, like their primate ancestors, men, from an early age, engage more in physical and non-physical forms of competition than women (for reviews, see Cummins 2005; Campbell 2002). Therefore, the feeling of being a 'loser' will affect men more than women, especially when this feeling is a general, stable feature of self-perception. This type of feeling is captured by the concept *sense of defeat* introduced and operationalised by Gilbert and his colleagues (e.g. Sloman et al., 1994; Gilbert & Allan, 1998), and implies that no escape is felt to be possible and that the state of mind is of 'giving up' (e.g. Buunk & Brenninkmeyer, 2000). Indeed, Buunk et al. (2007) found that a sense of defeat was associated with later burnout among men but not women.

We, therefore, first examined if these young offenders differed according to sentence type (prison or probation) in their life satisfaction, subjective status

and sense of defeat. We then tested the hypotheses that (1) low subjective social status would be inversely related to life satisfaction among young women but not young men and (2) that sense of defeat would be inversely related to life satisfaction among young men but not young women. In these analyses, sentence type was included as a control variable.

Method

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Valencia.

Participants and procedure

Participants were randomly selected from the population of all youngsters without work who were registered in the Valencian regional government's protection and re-education system, stratifying for age and gender. Thus, for each group, the number of selected participants was proportional to the number of adolescents and of men and women in those groups. Data were collected by professional interviewers working for GFK-Emer, a well-known survey company. The interviewers work regularly for this company and had additional specific training before conducting the interviews for this study. The interview was adapted after a series of pilot interviews, and the interviewers were instructed how to act if specific issues arose. Each prospective participant was approached three times to obtain his/her collaboration. If it was still not possible to contact the participant, or if s/he refused to participate, s/he was replaced by another randomly selected participant. Participation was voluntary, but a €10 economic incentive was offered to completing participants.

Measures

The interviews were conducted with the aid of a laptop computer. The interviewer posed the questions and typed in the responses. The following measures were included in the interview.

Life satisfaction: Participants were asked to indicate how satisfied they felt with their lives in general, on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = not at all, 5 = not much/not little, 10 = totally satisfied).

Subjective status: This variable was measured with the Social Comparison Scale (SCS; Allan & Gilbert, 1995), which rates how individuals perceive their social rank relative to others, and their feelings of being included or excluded by others. Participants were asked to complete the sentence 'In relationship with others I generally feel' followed by 11 bipolar constructs, including inferior/superior, left-out/accepted, different/same and unattractive/attractive. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.89.

Sense of defeat: This variable was measured using an adapted version of the Sense of Defeat Scale (Gilbert & Allan, 1998). Just 11 of the original 16 items were selected, because there was considerable overlap between some original items, which might irritate in this sample. Example items are: 'I have the feeling that others don't respect me enough' and 'I feel that I am basically a winner' (reverse code). Items were assessed on a 5-point scale (0 = never, 4 = always). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.84.

Preliminary analyses

Low subjective status and sense of defeat may seem closely related conceptually, and, indeed, the correlation between these variables was significant ($r = -0.52$, $p < 0.001$). Nevertheless, a factor analysis, with Varimax rotation, fixing the number of factors at 2, suggested that the two variables were conceptually relatively independent: 10 of the 11 items of the subjective status scale loaded at 0.55 or higher on the first rotated factor and lower than 0.40 (in most cases lower than 0.30) on the second rotated factor, while 9 of the 11 items of the sense of defeat scale loaded at 0.55 or higher on the second factor and lower than 0.27 on the first factor. We looked for outliers for the variables in the study (scores with values 3 SDs higher or lower than the mean). One outlier was found for subjective status and removed from the analyses.

Results

Characteristics of the sample

One hundred and five adolescents were recruited from the Comunidad Valenciana, of whom 84 (80%) were men and 21 (20%) women. Their mean age was just over 17 years (17.28, standard deviation [SD] 1.31, range 16–24). About half (43 men, 10 women) of the participants were in a juvenile correctional facility, and the rest (41 men, 11 women) were under probation. Most of the participants (63, 60%) were still at school, but about a third (39, 37%) had dropped out. Very few (3, 3%) had finished some type of secondary education.

Descriptive findings

Analyses of variance were conducted with judicial status as independent variable, and life satisfaction, subjective status and sense of defeat as dependent variables. Judicial status was treated as a binary variable: being in a correctional facility or being under probation. Table 1 shows that those in a correctional facility rated themselves as less satisfied with life ($F(1, 96) = 7.91$, $p < 0.01$) and as having a higher sense of defeat ($F(1, 96) = 9.25$, $p < 0.01$) than those under probation. There was no difference between these groups in subjective status ($F(1, 96) = 0.14$, ns).

Table 1: Life satisfaction, subjective status and sense of defeat in young people in a correctional facility and under probation

	Correctional facility		Under probation	
	Mean score	SD	Mean score	SD
Life satisfaction	5.49	2.83	6.81	1.81
Subjective status	68.13	18.27	69.02	12.00
Sense of defeat	27.42	9.28	22.60	6.49

Life satisfaction

Overall, life satisfaction was significantly but modestly correlated with subjective status ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$) and was inversely correlated with sense of defeat ($r = -0.34$, $p < 0.001$).

First, a regression analysis was conducted for the young men, with life satisfaction as the dependent variable and judicial status, social status and sense of defeat as independent variables. An ANOVA showed that the model was acceptable ($F(3, 75) = 4.95$, $p < 0.001$), with a moderate multiple correlation ($R = 0.49$). Judicial status was independently correlated with life satisfaction ($\beta = .24$, $t(74) = 2.2$, $p < 0.05$), and sense of defeat was independently and inversely correlated ($\beta = -0.30$, $t(74) = 2.42$, $p < 0.05$), but subjective status was neither ($\beta = 0.07$, $t(74) = 0.60$, ns). Among the young women, in spite of the small sample size, an ANOVA showed that the fit of the model was acceptable ($F(3, 16) = 5.87$, $p < 0.01$, with a high multiple correlation, $R = 0.72$). Subjective status was independently correlated with life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.74$, $t(15) = 2.79$, $p < 0.05$), but neither self defeat ($\beta = -0.07$, $t(15) = -0.28$, ns) nor judicial status ($\beta = 0.19$, $t(15) = 0.28$, ns) were.

Discussion

Among young, male Spanish offenders we found that sentence type was strongly correlated with life satisfaction, but still, as predicted, sense of defeat was also independently correlated. Among young women, only low subjective status was correlated with life satisfaction after controlling for sentence type and sense of defeat. These findings are nicely in line with one of our earlier studies (Buunk et al., 2007) that showed that sense of defeat predicted later burnout only among men, whereas a low status did so only among women.

Our hypothesis was also sustained with respect to subjective status, as this was the only independent correlate of life satisfaction among the young women. As suggested in our introduction, this may be because of the fact that subjective status was measured as an evaluation of the self in the context of dyadic and

personal relationships with others. In general, whereas women place more value on their dyadic relations with others, men place more value on collective groups (Foels & Tomcho, 2007). As a result, both being under probation and being in a correctional institution may affect women's subjective sense of status in terms of their dyadic or personal relations with others. These findings suggest that it may be too simplistic to assume that men are in general more concerned with status striving than women. For both men and women status mattered in relation to life satisfaction, although the reasons why and the specific status related variables that are associated with life satisfaction seem to differ.

Young men in a correctional facility experienced the highest sense of defeat and the lowest life satisfaction. This may be the result of a selection effect—that those with more psychological problems are more likely to end up in a correctional facility rather than serving probation. Alternatively, correctional facilities may have an effect on personal self-appraisal, because access to resources is gravely limited, and one has little control over one's life. This may feed feelings of 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1975) that seem characteristic of a sense of defeat, i.e. the feeling that there is nothing one can do to improve one's situation. It is not, however, clear why this would not apply to women.

Limitations and implications

Our study has a number of limitations. First, the sample included few young women. This, however, reflects reality, as men are overrepresented in criminal statistics. Moreover, there was a strong association between a low status and well-being in the small group of female offenders that is compatible with research findings in a different domain, namely occupational burnout (Buunk et al., 2007). A second limitation is that, as this was a cross sectional study, we were not in a position to attribute cause and effect, although the findings are indicative of the importance of future longitudinal research on the impact of the different types of sentence.

Conclusions

Our findings of a correlation between sentence type and life satisfaction need new, longitudinal research to determine the direction of the relationship in order to maximise the potential practical benefits of the findings. First, whether low life satisfaction is predictive of a custodial disposal for young offenders or such a sentence lowers life satisfaction, those trying to supervise or help these young people may need to take account of it. Further, our findings suggest that young male and young female offenders should perhaps be treated in different ways to improve their sense of satisfaction with life, which may, in turn, reduce their risk of reoffending.

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