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of Responsibility and  
Punishment for  
Delinquent Acts**

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[1987]

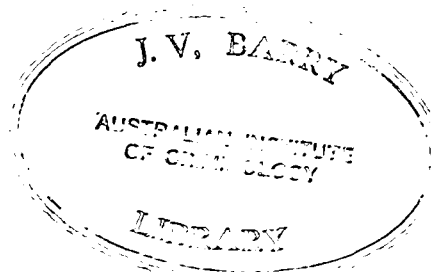
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Running Head: RESPONSIBILITY AND PUNISHMENT

This paper was prepared with support from the Criminology Research Council of Australia. Thanks are due to Simon Dinwiddy for his assistance in conducting the study and to the Queensland Department of Education for supplying a subject pool. Author's address: Department of Psychology, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Australia. 4067.



## Abstract

Adolescents in three age groups (14, 16, and 18 years) were asked to assign responsibility and punishment for the smoking, drinking, and shoplifting of 14, 16, and 18 year old culprits. In contrast to shoplifting, smoking (e.g., through the underage purchase of cigarettes) and drinking are "status" offences determined by a legal age of responsibility. There were significant age of subject and age of culprit differences in attributions of responsibility for status and nonstatus offences. Compared to 16 and 18 year old subjects, 14 year olds assigned more responsibility to 14 year old culprits. Both 14 and 16 year subjects assigned more responsibility to 16 year old culprits than did their 18 year old counterparts. Subjects aged 16 years were most lenient in their punishment of young smokers and drinkers. Compared to 18 year olds, 14 and 16 year olds assigned less punishment for shoplifting regardless of the culprit's age. Subjects were generally more likely to accept a problematic family environment as grounds to reduce responsibility and punishment for smoking and shoplifting than for drinking. Issues of responsibility and punishment are discussed in terms of the relation between adolescents' compliance and perceptions of the law.

Adolescents' Assignment of Responsibility and Punishment  
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Attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973) concerns the general process by which persons make causal attributions or inferences for a behaviour when a number of alternative explanations exist. Attributions of responsibility for behaviour have relevance for the study of criminal justice processes (Fincham & Jaspers, 1980). For example, two plausible explanations for unlawful behaviour in adolescents are that the behaviour was internally motivated or that it was determined by external factors beyond the person's control. A major external factor in attributions is a problematic family environment which, when examined in terms of composite measures, is most predictive of male delinquency (Loeber & Dishion, 1983) and is frequently mentioned by juvenile offenders themselves as the cause of delinquency. (Irving & Siegal, 1983; Kraus, 1977; West, 1982). The assignment of attributions to the perpetrator is a critical element in criminal justice since, as Morse (1979, p. 272) observes, "support and respect for the criminal law requires that only those persons who are truly incapable of obeying the law should be singled out as not responsible."

Attributions of responsibility as provided by peers have three implications for research on adolescents' perceptions of the law. First, attributions serve to indicate when adolescents ordinarily are expected by their peers to demonstrate "internalized" behaviour through following laws in the absence of external surveillance. Second, depending on the nature of adult supervision, the peer group may influence the likelihood of a boy engaging in criminal activities (Rutter & Giller, 1983, pp. 225-228, 248-250). Thus the attributions of peers may be used to convey to potential

offenders an expectation of responsibility (Hogan & Mills, 1976, p. 269). Third, the legality of acts is often determined by age. For example, in many jurisdictions it is a "status offence" to enter places where alcohol is served. Adolescents may perceive the ages at which different acts become legal to be set arbitrarily, contributing to a disrespect for the law. Should young adolescents view status offences to be justifiably committed by responsible persons, they should be reluctant to punish the culprits.

The purpose of this study was to examine the attributions of adolescents for delinquent acts committed by perpetrators of different ages. The objective was to ascertain the ages at which, despite a problematic family environment, offenders are ordinarily held to be internally responsible by their peers. Given the prevalence of underage drinking and other status offences (Loeber, 1982), it was predicted that young adolescents would assign more responsibility and less punishment to perpetrators of these acts than would 18 year olds. In addition, if young adolescents are alienated from the law, they should prescribe less punishment for nonstatus offences such as shoplifting which are unlawful regardless of the perpetrator's age.

#### Method

##### Subjects

A total of 120 adolescents participated in the study. There were three age groups of 14, 16, and 18 year olds with 20 girls and 20 boys in each. The 14 and 16 year olds attended state supported high schools in middle-class areas of Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. They were mainly enrolled in preparation courses for arts subjects at college and university

education. The 18 year olds were first year undergraduate students enrolled as first year arts students at the University of Queensland.

### Procedure

A male experimenter saw each of the adolescents individually. He presented successively in a random order descriptions of three behaviours said to be committed in each instance by boys of three different ages (14, 16, and 18 years) alone and undetected by others in separate incidents. The behaviours were purchasing cigarettes (which is illegal under the age of 16 in Queensland), drinking alcohol (which is illegal under 18 years), and stealing. Culprits were described as (1) going into a restaurant to buy cigarettes from a machine and smoking, (2) entering a bar to drink a few glasses of beer, and (3) shoplifting a packet of chocolate bars from a supermarket.

The adolescents were told to consider each situation in the case of a 14, 16, and 18 year old boy. They were asked, "Do you think a (x) year old would (commit the act) because he really wanted to (internal attribution) or because he didn't know any better (noninternal or external attribution)?" They then indicated how sure they were of their answers to this question on a 1 to 5 scale: 1 = not sure at all, 2 = a little bit sure, 3 = half sure, 4 = a lot sure, and 5 = very sure. Responses were converted into a responsibility score ranging from 1 (very sure-internal) to 10 (very sure-external). The following question was "how much should he be punished for (committing the act)?" Responses were scored on a 5 point scale: 1 = no punishment, 2 = a little, 3 = some, 4 = a lot, and 5 = very much.

The next part of the procedure resembled that used in earlier studies (e.g., Darley, Klosson & Zanna, 1978). The adolescents were asked to

reconsider their answers on responsibility and punishment in the context of possible mitigating circumstances:

In all of the boys' families, there is a large amount of tension. Their fathers are unemployed and have been for a very long time. There are fights and arguments between the boys' mothers and fathers. Owing to these problems, the boys have not been told or taught any differently by their parents about their behaviour in the situations described before.

The adolescents were told that they were free to change their answers or to give the same ones. Half assigned ratings in ascending order of the culprits' ages and half in a descending order.

### Results

Preliminary analyses indicated no significant main or interaction effects attributable to the sex of the subjects. Therefore the responsibility and punishment scores were analyzed in two separate 3 (age of subject) x 3 (age of culprit) x 3 (situation) x 2 (mitigating circumstance: absent vs. present) analyses of variance. Age of subject was a between-subjects factor and age of culprit, situation, and mitigating circumstance were within-subjects factors.

On the responsibility measure, two main effects were significant: age of culprit,  $F(2,234) = 338.37, p < .001$ ; and mitigating circumstance,  $F(1,117) = 85.85, p < .001$ . The age of subject x age of culprit interaction effect was also significant,  $F(4,234) = 2.96, p < .021$ . Means and standard deviations of the responsibility scores of the three groups are presented in Table 1 as a function of the age of the culprits. The 14 year old subjects assigned more responsibility to 14 year old culprits than did

subjects who were 16 ( $t = 3.27, p < .001$ ) or those who were 18 ( $t = 2.28, p < .03$ ).<sup>1</sup> Both 14 and 16 year old subjects assigned more responsibility to 16 year old culprits than did 18 year old subjects ( $t$ 's = 2.89 and 2.42 respectively,  $p$ 's  $< .01$ ). The three age groups rated 18 year old culprits similarly.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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While no three- or four-way interaction effects were significant, there were four other significant two-way interactions: age of subject x situation,  $F(4, 234) = 3.97, p < .004$ ; age of culprit x situation,  $F(4, 468) = 4.37, p < .002$ ; age of culprit x mitigating circumstance,  $F(2, 234) = 13.94, p < .001$ ; and situation x mitigating circumstance,  $F(4, 234) = 5.68, p < .004$ . These four interactions are illustrated in Figure 1. (For comparison purposes, they are shown in bar graphs). First, adolescents with increasing age were more likely to respond that those who smoke and especially those who drink do so because they do not know any better, suggesting that a recognition of uncontrolled or externally controlled behaviour develops during the teenage years. Second, unlike 14 year olds, 16 and 18 year olds were judged to be more internally responsible for smoking and shoplifting than for drinking. Third, as would be expected, 14 year olds were generally held to be less internally responsible for their actions than were older adolescents. Fourth, in the presence of mitigating circumstances, culprits were held to be more internally responsible for drinking than for smoking and shoplifting; the reverse was the case when mitigating circumstances were absent.



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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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The analysis of variance on the punishment scores yielded 11 significant effects, including two three-way interactions (see Table 2). Of particular interest, the age of subject x age of culprit x situation interaction effect was significant,  $F(8,468) = 2.50, p < .012$ . The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 3. The 16 year olds were more lenient than the 14 year olds in their punishment of 14 and 16 year old smokers ( $t$ 's = 2.50 and 2.11 respectively,  $p$ 's < .01 and .05). At 16, subjects were also more lenient than were 18 year olds in their punishment of 16 year old smokers. In addition, they assigned less punishment to 14 and 16 year old drinkers ( $t$ 's < 3.22,  $p$ 's < .01). Compared to 18 year olds, 14 and 16 year olds were more lenient toward shoplifters regardless of the culprit's age ( $t$ 's < 2.82,  $p$ 's < .01).

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Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here  
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The other significant three-way interaction effect was for age of culprit x situation x mitigating circumstance,  $F(4,468) = 3.04, p < .017$ . When mitigating circumstances were present, subjects acted to reduce punishment in the case of 14 year old smokers ( $t = 2.70, p < .01$ ) and for shoplifting regardless of the culprit's age ( $t$ 's  $\geq 3.47, p$ 's < .01).

#### Discussion

As predicted, the age of the culprit was a significant determinant of adolescents' assignment of responsibility and punishment. Compared to 16 and 18 year olds, the 14 year olds attributed more responsibility to 14

year old culprits, though the scores of all three age groups of subjects were broadly in the middle or unsure range of the 10 point scale. Compared to 18 year olds, 16 year olds attributed more responsibility to both 14 and 16 year olds. They were often more lenient in their punishment of culprits regardless of age.

According to Hirschi's (1969) social control theory, the adolescent's weak bond to society is a critical determinant of delinquent acts. Attachment to particular persons, commitment to an organized society, a belief in a common value system, and an involvement in conventional activities contribute to the bond. The discrepancy between young adolescents' judgments of responsibility and those of 18 year olds point to the existence of differences in values. Since the young are denied access to the conventional activities of smoking and drinking, the tie between the individual and society may be weak. At 15-16 years, the discrepancy between the values of adolescents and adults appears to peak (Berndt, 1979). This may be particularly true for the case of underage drinking in view of the lenient punishment accorded to this offence by 16 year olds. However, adolescents were often not willing to accept family circumstances as grounds to reduce responsibility or punishment for drinking. Weak bonds and lack of parental restraint cannot alone account for delinquent acts (Rutter & Giller, 1983, p.251). By the age of 16, drinking may be seen as a personal decision or social convention despite adult prohibitions to the contrary (see Nucci & Herman, 1982; Siegal, 1985).

Shultz, Wright and Schleifer (1986) maintain that the determination of causation of a delinquent act is prior to (or "presupposes") the determination of responsibility. Considerations of responsibility in turn are prior to the determination of punishment. In this study, causation was

supplied and adolescents were asked to assign responsibility and punishment. For smoking and drinking, the 14 year olds differed from 18 year olds on responsibility only while the 16 year olds differed from 18 year olds on punishment as well. The discrepancy between 14 year olds and their elders on the question of responsibility for status offences may transform 16 year olds into rather lenient exponents of punishment for these acts, especially as young adolescents are already lenient in the punishment of shoplifters. According to a recent longitudinal study by Massey and Krohn (1986), as the perceived legitimacy of adult norms weakens, adolescents are increasingly likely to endorse delinquent acts and to associate with their perpetrators.

Further research is required to clarify adolescents' perceptions of the legitimacy of laws defining status and nonstatus offences. A significant applied issue is at stake here. Since adherence to rules and laws is influenced by shared meaning and expectations between age groups (Hogan & Mills, 1976; Siegal & Francis, in press), a knowledge of adolescents' viewpoints on responsibility and punishment may assist authorities to frame and enforce laws in a manner of consultation. This method could encourage adolescents to identify more readily a rational basis for compliance.

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Footnote

<sup>1</sup>For each culprit, the 40 subjects in an age group made 6 choices(3 situations x 2 mitigating circumstances) for a total of 240. The percentage of noninternal/external choices of the alternative "because he didn't know any better" for 14 year old culprits was only 48.3% (116/240) in the 14 year old group in contrast to 65.0% (156/240) and 59.6% (143/240) in the 16 and 18 year old groups respectively. These choices were similar to the responsibility scores. In each age group, the percentage of noninternal/external choices was under 20% for culprits aged 16 and under 10% for those age 18.

Table 1

Mean responsibility scores assigned by the three age groups to culprits aged 14, 16, and 18 years.

Age of culprit	Age group		
	14 yrs	16 yrs	18 yrs
14 yrs	5.39 (3.33)	6.32 (3.07)	6.04 (3.16)
16 yrs	3.15 (2.54)	3.28 (2.75)	3.97 (3.02)
18 yrs	2.13 (1.82)	2.13 (1.94)	2.50 (2.44)

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Note: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. Responses were distributed on a 10 point scale: 1 = absolutely sure - internal, ("really wanted to"), 2 = a lot sure - internal, 3 = half sure - internal, 4 = a little bit sure - internal, 5 = not sure at all - internal, 6 = not sure at all - external or noninternal ("didn't know any better"), 7 = a little bit sure - external, 8 = half sure - external, 9 = a lot sure - external, 10 = very sure - external.

Table 2

Significant effects from the analyses of variance on the punishment scores.

<u>Effect</u>	<u>MS</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
age of subjects (AS)	26.16	2,117	3.69	.028
age of culprits (AC)	124.96	2,234	92.43	.001
situation (S)	528.47	2,234	478.37	.001
mitigating circumstance(AC)	26,89	1,117	24.64	.001
AS X AC	5.73	4,234	4.24	.002
AC X S	11.94	4,234	10.81	.001
AC X S	72.64	4,468	131.00	.001
AC X MC	4.00	2,234	7.92	.001
S X MC	26.20	2,234	42.30	.001
AS X AC X S	1.38	8,468	2.50	.012
AC X S X MC	0.97	4,468	3.04	.017



Table 3

Mean punishment scores assigned by the three age groups to culprits aged 14, 16, and 18 years in each situation.

	Age of Culprit	Age group		
		14 yrs	16 yrs	18 yrs
smoking	14	2.84 (1.01)	2.44 (0.99)	2.70 (1.00)
	16	2.28 (1.15)	1.90 (1.13)	2.28 (1.14)
	18	1.48 (1.08)	1.45 (0.97)	1.23 (0.72)
drinking	14	2.95 (0.98)	2.66 (0.95)	3.18 (1.14)
	16	2.45 (1.11)	2.13 (1.14)	2.75 (1.23)
	18	1.48 (1.02)	1.40 (1.05)	1.13 (0.54)
shoplifting	14	3.34 (0.95)	3.08 (0.94)	3.85 (1.06)
	16	3.38 (1.08)	3.35 (0.99)	4.13 (0.96)
	18	3.48 (1.31)	3.71 (1.14)	4.33 (0.96)

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Note: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. Responses were distributed on a 5 point scale: 1 = no punishment, 2 = a little, 3 = some, 4 = a lot, 5 = very much.

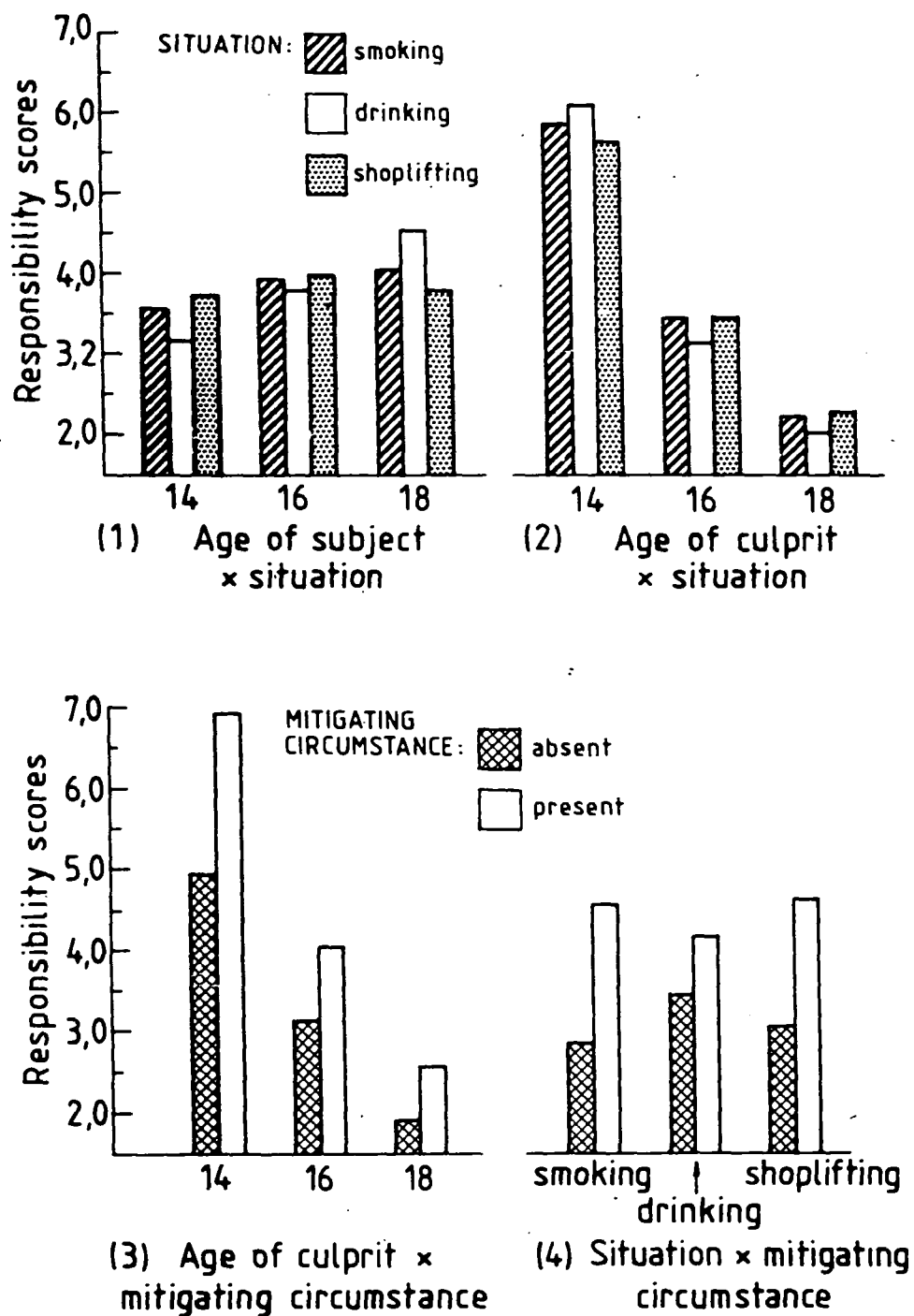


Figure 1. Four significant two-way interaction effects in adolescents' attributions of responsibility.