ADOLESCENT FEMALE OFFENDERS’ SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF THEIR FAMILIES’ ROLES IN RELATION TO THEIR DELINQUENCY

Hanna Ginner Hau¹ and Azade Azad²
¹Department of Special Education, Stockholm University
²Department of Psychology, Stockholm University

This research was financially supported by grants from the Children’s House Foundation (Grant No. FOA12-0050), the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (Grant No. 2011-1208), and the Faculty of Social Sciences, Stockholm University.

Declarations of interest: none.

We are grateful to the participants for sharing their stories with us, as well as to the social workers for helping us with the recruitment. Finally, we want to thank Markus Karlsson, Sigridur Sigurjónsdóttir, and Stephan Hau for their contributions in the analysis of the data.

Correspondence to: Hanna Ginner Hau, Department of Special Education, Stockholm University, SE 10691 Stockholm, Sweden
Electronic mail may be sent to hanna.hau@speped.su.se
Abstract

Family factors have been regarded as central for both general development and delinquency in adolescence. For female delinquency, family factors appear to be particularly important. The aim of the study was to explore young female offenders’ perspectives on their family contexts in relation to their delinquency. Nine female offenders aged 15-21 were interviewed. Data were analysed using consensual qualitative research. Nine core themes concerning the family were identified that included general descriptions of the family and family roles in relation to delinquency. Descriptions of the families were heterogeneous, but in the delinquency-specific themes, common patterns concerning the process of delinquency and relational aspects were identified. Families were described as being involved in the entire process of delinquency. Relational aspects expressed in the delinquency narratives demonstrated attempts for proximity as well as distance. Another relational aspect was delinquency-related transactions between the participants and their families. Participants’ perspectives of the role of their family contexts in relation to delinquency conveyed aspects typical of adolescence, which might be a possible way to understand the role that the family context plays in delinquency.

Keywords: female delinquency; female offenders’ subjective experiences; family and delinquency; adolescent development
Introduction

Family factors are regarded as key components for limiting the risk of involvement in criminality by several theories, for example, life-course developmental theories (e.g., Moffitt, 1993; Patterson & Yoerger, 2002), as well as social control theories (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). The association between family factors and delinquency is also empirically supported. The results from both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have demonstrated that antisocial behaviour within the family (i.e., familial criminality, drug use, abuse) and inconsistent and harsh parenting are associated with criminal behaviour and predict male as well as female delinquency. In contrast, attachment and bonding seem to be relevant protective factors (Hoeve et al., 2009; Pardini, Waller, & Hawes, 2015).

For female delinquents, family factors appear to be particularly important (Kroneman, Loeber, Hipwell, & Koot, 2009; Kruttschnitt & Giordano, 2009). The results from several studies provide sound reasons to pay attention to family relations when studying female delinquents (e.g., Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010; Keijsers & Poulin, 2013; Kapetanovic, Bohlin, Skoog, & Gerdner, 2017). For both females and males, problem behaviours in general, and delinquency in particular, increase and peak during adolescence (Piquero, Diamond, Jennings, & Reingle, 2013). In most cases, criminal behaviour can be regarded as a transitional developmental process, serving the purposes of emancipation and achievement of respect and independence (Moffitt, 2006; Laub & Sampson, 2001). There is, however, a need to further study this normative, even if sometimes experimental, development that occurs during this period of life (Piquero, Diamond, Jennings, & Reingle, 2013), particularly since the limited research that is available on this group of offenders indicates that even if considered low-risk offenders, they may be at risk of suboptimal development (Moffitt, 2001; Odgers et al., 2008).

The project that includes the present study, as well as a previous project with several studies (Ginner Hau, 2010; Ginner Hau & Smedler, 2011a, 2011b), is based on samples of convicted Swedish youths receiving community-based measures; the focus of the project primarily lies on research questions regarding offenders with limited delinquency who do not exhibit pronounced behavioural problems. Female offenders are less underrepresented in this group of offenders than among offenders with more pronounced behavioural problems (Odgers et al., 2008). Studies with these female offenders have therefore been a priority and, to date we have conducted three studies (Azad, Ginner Hau, & Karlsson, 2018; Azad & Ginner Hau, 2018; Azad & Ginner Hau, 2019). Two of these studies (Azad & Ginner Hau, 2018; Azad & Ginner Hau, 2019) were focused on female offenders (n=144) in a sample of Swedish youths sentenced to community service (total n=938). In both studies, no pronounced behavioural problems were depicted, but the educational deficit that was identified indicated a possible...
risk for a deteriorating quality of life. In addition to these two studies based on quantitative data, in another data collection, a smaller sample of female offenders sentenced to youth service were interviewed with the aim of exploring their own perspectives on their delinquency. When the participants were allowed to offer their own views on their criminality, two aspects appeared central: peers and family. An initial study focused on peers (Azad et al., 2018). The results from this study indicated that from the female offenders’ perspectives, delinquent behaviour was regarded as a way to socialise and that pro-social and delinquent activities with peers seemed to serve similar developmental functions. Furthermore, the female offenders’ delinquency narratives showed awareness of the need to socialise with pro-social friends to refrain from delinquency.

The present study focuses on young female offenders’ perspectives on the role of family with respect to their criminality. Independent of the long-term outcome, the increased levels of risk behaviour in adolescence coincide with parents having to gradually reduce their control and power in favour of adolescent autonomy and independence (Keijser & Poulin, 2013). The transition into adolescence confronts the family with a range of new issues and concerns. During childhood, no other developmental period comes with as remarkable or rapid transformation as adolescence, and even for the most well-functioning families, this is a phase that challenges emotional resources (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). The social context, of which the family naturally is an important part, is an area that is particularly subject to change (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Even if family-related factors are well established to be associated with delinquency, research has not yet provided any clear answers on this topic or on how parents can act preventively (Keijser, 2016). However, the family context during adolescence sets the stage for adulthood that lies just beyond (Kerig & Schultz, 2012). Exploration of the family-related challenges that female offenders with limited delinquency experience could offer a feasible way to build a deeper understanding of this under-researched group.

The overall aim of this study was therefore to contribute to a better understanding of the role of the family context in relation to female offenders with limited delinquency by exploring the role that the offenders themselves assign their families in the narratives of their delinquency. The following research questions were identified:

1. How do female adolescent offenders describe their families?
2. What role do female adolescent offenders ascribe to their families in connection to their delinquency?
3. From female adolescents’ perspectives, how does delinquency influence their family relations?
Methods

Participants
In Sweden, young offenders (15–17) can be sentenced to youth service. The penalty consists of unpaid work and a so-called advocacy programme (Swedish Government, 2006). Youth service is reserved for youth without any apparent need for care or history of severe antisocial background (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2011).

The participants included nine female offenders sentenced to youth service in 2012 and 2013 in two major cities in Sweden. The interviewees were 15 - 21 years of age when interviewed but had committed the crimes they were convicted for at 15–17 years of age. Three of the participants reported that they were convicted for violent crimes, and five had been convicted for theft or shoplifting. For one participant, the crime was unclear, as she reported a felony that does not exist.

Two participants lived with both their parents and seven reported having separated parents. Five out of those seven reported living with single mothers or with their mothers and the mothers’ new partners, one lived with her boyfriend, one lived with relatives and one lived half the time with each parent. All participants had between one and six siblings.

Procedure
All of the female offenders who were enrolled in youth service during the month of October 2012 and the month of February 2013 in two of Sweden’s major cities, except one whose participation was considered inappropriate by the social workers due to her mental health issues, were provided written information about the study. Those interested in participating provided their contact information to the social workers and were then contacted by the interviewer (second author). Three individuals showed interest in participating but declined to participate when approached by the interviewer. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interview. The present study was approved by the Stockholm Regional Ethics Board (2012/1259-31). Parental consent is not always required for youths over the age of 15 in Sweden (in accordance with the Act Concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans, 2003:460). With approval from the Regional Ethics Board in Stockholm, guardians were therefore not asked for consent but were informed about the study.

Interviews
Data were collected by semi-structured interviews. Four central themes were covered by asking about the participants’ attitudes and beliefs about their delinquent behaviour, their sentencing, the path leading to their delinquent behaviour and the future. No specific questions regarding the family were included in the interview guide. However, since all participants mentioned their families on their own, follow-up questions concerning the family were included, although they differed somewhat between participants.
One pilot interview was conducted with the first participant recruited. No major adjustments were needed, and the interview was thus included in the analysis. The interviews lasted 40–70 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Information such as the names of person or places was changed in the transcriptions. The participants were offered a gift voucher of SEK 200 for their participation.

Data coding and analysis

Consensual qualitative research (CQR) (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) was used for analysing the interviews. In this method, several judges take part in the coding process and strive to reach consensus in the different steps. In addition, auditors check the work of the judges to reduce the effects of group think.

The research team

Three judges and two auditors were involved in the coding procedure. They all had previous experience working with similar research topics in research and practice. All members read the relevant literature on CQR (Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 2005; Hill et al., 1997) as well as exemplary studies (Diamond et al., 2011; Sander et al., 2010) prior to taking part in the coding procedure. The interviewer had prior experience and training in conducting general psychological interviews.

Analysis process

Coding of domains – Domains were developed, including all the material related to the same area. Each judge read three interviews independently and categorised the raw material into an appropriate domain. Consensus was reached about the placement of text into different domains and the naming of each domain. Ten different domains were created, and one judge independently coded the rest of the interviews accordingly. No new domains emerged when coding the rest of the interviews. For this study, the data in the domain containing all material on the family were used.

Abstracting core ideas – The main focus of each domain was captured while still staying close to the data. The judges independently formulated core ideas for each domain. Consensus concerning the content and wording of the core idea was reached. Once consensus was reached, one of the judges wrote the core ideas for the remaining cases, and the rest of the team reviewed them and discussed them until reaching consensus.

Cross-analysis/identifying themes – The judges first independently looked for common patterns in the core ideas from all participants for the family domain and then developed themes that best captured these patterns. The judges then presented their themes to each other. The themes and the core ideas they contained were discussed until consensus was reached. For validation, the themes were double-checked with the raw material (i.e., the interviews with each participant).
Auditing – The auditors took part in the process at three points during the coding process. The first point was after the first three interviews had been coded into domains. The second point was after the core ideas had been created for each interview, and the third point was after the cross-analysis. At each point, the auditors wrote individual comments, which were discussed by the judges. If agreed on by consensus, the comments were incorporated.

Results

Within the family domain, the cross-analysis resulted in the following nine themes:

1. Positive and negative aspects of family relationships, independent of delinquency.
2. Physical and/or psychological absence of the parents.
3. Violence and abuse within the family.
4. Criminality and addiction within the family.
5. Delinquency as a consequence of dissatisfaction in family relations.
6. Family reactions to delinquency.
7. Actions undertaken by the family in connection to delinquency.
8. Participants’ feelings about family actions and reactions.
9. Changes in family relations after delinquency.

Based on their content and character, the nine themes are divided into two groups in the results section: A. Themes describing the family and B. Themes describing the family in relation to delinquency. The first group of themes consists of themes 1–4. These themes were derived from statements that were mere descriptions of the female adolescents’ families and their family relationships independent of the participants’ delinquency. The latter group consists of themes 5–9. These themes were based on statements specifically concerned with the family’s role in the participant’s delinquency and characterised by a higher complexity of the narratives and of higher relevance for the study’s objective. The presentation of the results therefore focus in-depth on the latter group of themes.

A. Themes describing the family

The participants’ descriptions of their families and their relations to their families reveal great, sometimes contradictory, variation both between and within the participants. The themes are described below, and quotations exemplifying each theme are presented in Table 1.

1. Positive and negative aspects of family relationships, independent of delinquency. This theme is based on statements describing the participants’ relationships to their families. The descriptions are multifaceted, both within and between the participants. The narratives contain expressions of feeling well in the family and having a good relationship with parents and siblings. Such feelings and relationships are expressed, for example, as enjoying being together with the family. They also contain descriptions of
negative aspects such as not receiving enough attention and feeling a lack of trust. Sometimes a development of the relationship is described, referring to how the relationship used to be, in contrast to how it is now. These are narratives of both negative and positive developments.

2. Physical and/or psychological absence of the parents. In the data, parental absence is described both in terms of a parent that is currently present but has previously been absent and vice versa. For example, this could be a parent that had started a new family after a divorce. Some participants also describe parents that always were absent, for example, a parent living in another country. In addition to these examples of physical absence, absence is also described in terms of a lack of engagement. Independent of the kind of absence, the parent described as absent is almost exclusively the father.

3. Violence and abuse within the family. Violent and abusive aspects of family relations are described. This theme is not a prominent part of the data, but there are statements in the interviews describing both verbal and physical violence and abuse within the families. Even if scarce, the data contain descriptions of violent conflicts between siblings and physical abuse from parents. The data also contain some examples of family members who verbally offended the participants.

4. Criminality and addiction. This theme includes narratives of criminality and alcohol/substance abuse in the immediate or extended family. As with violence and abuse, this is not a prominent part of the data. The data contain narratives about ongoing substance abuse as well as abuse as part of a family member’s history.
Table 1. List of themes that emerged from the cross-analysis and examples of participant quotes (themes 1–4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Positive and negative aspects of family relationships, independent of delinquency.</td>
<td>‘… it [the family relation] has just been bad for two years now; I don’t know why but .. but it has nothing to do with this [delinquency] …’. ‘Well it [the parental relationship] is good; even if I don’t stay with my dad regularly, we have contact regularly …’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Physical and/or psychological absence of the parents.</td>
<td>‘My dad lives in another country. I don’t know where …’. ‘Well, it depends … how she [mother] is doing; sometimes she can avoid you for some months, and then from nowhere starts to talk, how are you, miss you. And then, she doesn’t write more and is like gone and…’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Violence and abuse within the family.</td>
<td>‘That my mother calls me stuff that is not true and goes with what she believes, so she’s like harassing me a bit, so I have not felt well …’: ‘Well, the worst is probably when I fight with my brother /…/ it is really violent … and then I argue with my sister /…/ it can be about clothes, but then ends up really violent …’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Criminality and addiction within the family.</td>
<td>‘He [her uncle] has been using drugs, and he has also abused [drugs] since he was 12, and he is 30 something now /…/ he has abused [drugs], never had a job, made his living from theft and such things…’. ‘No, he [her father] has himself … or … well, he has been a petty criminal and so has been in an mc-gang and been doing drugs and so on’.</td>
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B. Themes describing the family in relation to delinquency

The following themes (5–9) all deal with the role that participants ascribe to their families in their delinquency. The themes are described below, and quotations exemplifying each theme are presented in Table 2.

5. Delinquency as a consequence of dissatisfaction in family relations. This theme contains narratives in which delinquency is explained as a consequence of the quality of family relationships. These narratives constitute a prominent part of the data. Statements belonging to this theme mainly concern the parents. Despite theme 1 (Positive and negative aspects of family relationships) partly containing statements describing family relations as strained and conflict laden, the data include neither direct accusations against the family nor expressions of holding the family responsible for the criminal behaviour. Instead, delinquency is explained in various ways as a consequence of the quality of the family relationship. Some of the statements express an explicit idea of engaging in delinquency as a way to alter participants’ relations with the parents, for example, as a way of obtaining attention. In contrast,
other statements demonstrate delinquency as the result of a wish for a higher degree of independence from the family. As an example, shoplifting or stealing is expressed as a way to attain financial freedom from the parents. Another way of attributing delinquency to family relationships is to regard the behaviour as a way of dealing with a deficit in the parental relationship. For example, one participant states that she committed crime as a way of comforting herself during a problematic family situation.

6. **Family reactions to delinquency.** This theme consists of the participants’ descriptions of their experiences of their families’ reactions to their crimes. This theme not only contains descriptions of both parental and sibling reactions. Different ways of experiencing the family as supportive and understanding are expressed in the material, but there are also descriptions of families reacting with anger when they became aware of what the adolescent had done. Another kind of reaction that is described in the statements in this theme is reactions of disappointment and parents reacting with sadness rather than anger. However, a total lack of reaction is also described. In connection to these statements, some participant reflections question whether parents reacting with indifference were bothered at all by the crime. This kind of reaction is also described as the crime making the parents withdraw and not wanting to have anything to do with the criminal behaviour of their children.

7. **Actions undertaken by the family in connection to delinquency.** This theme contains data concerning participants’ perspectives on the actions the family undertook in connection to the crime. One kind of action the parents undertook could be regarded as actions intended to prevent the adolescent from further delinquency. This kind of action is demonstrated, for example, in statements describing parents as actively restricting and controlling the adolescent. In the interviews, the participants shared experiences of parental actions such as forcing the adolescent to take drug tests, reporting to the police when the adolescent ran away from home and forcing the adolescent to go to a psychologist. Another kind of action is providing active parental support through the legal process. For example, the participants describe how parents had followed them to the police station and accompanied them to court trials. Some statements describe being heavily questioned by the family; for example, participants’ families demanded answers about delinquent behaviour and stated the participants’ responsibility for delinquency.

8. **Participants’ feelings about family actions and reactions.** This theme is constituted by statements of the adolescents’ own feelings towards their parents’ actions and reactions when finding out about their delinquency. The material contains expressions of feeling guilty and ashamed about the misconduct, including being embarrassed because of knowing that one had done something wrong. There are also expressions of feeling remorseful towards the parents due to a perception that the misconduct has been a burden to them. There are also statements describing the difficulty and distress of seeing one’s parents angry, sad or disappointed, for example, during a trial. Furthermore, feelings of guilt and being worried about letting the parents down are expressed. The negative feelings described in connection to the
parent’s actions and reactions to the crime are, however, not described as a hindering factor for committing new crimes.

9. Changes in family relations after delinquency. The participants express how their family relationships changed after delinquency. These changes are both negative and positive. Examples of positive changes are a closer relationship with fewer conflicts and a greater appreciation of the family. Negative changes are mainly expressed in terms of having lost parents’ trust. However, changes are also described as an ongoing process; for example, one participant describes that she is now working to improve her relationship with her parents. In the same way, just as there are elements in the data attributing delinquency to family relational aspects, there are also statements attributing both positive and negative changes in the family relations to delinquency.

Table 2. List of themes that emerged from the cross-analysis and participant quotes (themes 5–9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
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| 5. Delinquency as a consequence of dissatisfaction in family relations. | ‘I’m 18 soon, and I wanna be able to buy my own clothes and not depend on my mum and dad and go to them and nag them for things. So I might as well go and take care of it myself’.  
‘She [her mother] was about to quit using [drugs], but then she started again and that just /.../ it broke my heart /.../ I would say that it was that I wanted to comfort myself, but really I didn’t want to do it. I don’t know how to explain it; it sounds illogical, but in my head, it sounded good /.../ I didn’t want the stuff, but I thought it would cheer me up’.  
‘It has been very hard to not be in the centre of attention /.../ when I was younger I started to do stupid things just so they would see me’. |
| 6. Family reactions to delinquency.                                    | ‘When I got home, I told my mum that I got busted for shoplifting again and … well, she started crying, and she was really disappointed … really, really disappointed and really sad and mostly disappointed that I’ve done this and said that they hadn’t raised me like this’.  
‘She told me from the start that she wanted nothing to do with any of that. I guess it was that she didn’t want to be a part of the bad things in my life…’.  
‘Well my family wasn’t angry with me. They just said don’t do it again …’. |
7. Actions undertaken by the family in connection to delinquency.

“They sent me to the social services and wanted me to take a drug test like every day, but I never went there …”.

“But she was still, like, she went with me to the trial and so on. And she has always been … even though I have done stupid things, she has always been very supportive’.

‘Mum made me go there [to the psychologist] /…/ because she [her mother] knows that I been feeling really bad and everything with [the offense] and then in the autumn it just became too much /…/ then she [her mother] felt that now it is enough, you [the participant] have to go and talk to someone’.

8. Participants’ feelings about family actions and reactions.

‘I mean, I know I’ve done something wrong, and I hate to disappoint her, and I know that during all my life I’ve disappointed her over and over again, and then when you do things you know are wrong and she finds out, it’s embarrassing, or it’s just like hard’.

‘As we always talk to each other and … so… eehm… I felt very lonely .. But that was something I had to take as I had let her down’.

‘It was hard because she’s always been there for me during stuff like that, and I understand that she didn’t want to be there and that it was hard for her, but it was still hard for me too’.

9. Changes in the family relations after delinquency.

‘It’s gotten better; it feels like I’m more open with her /…/ we fight less, and I think, before all this happened we hardly spent any time together, and I think she feels that’s why I did this, so we’ve started spending more time with each other’.

‘I know that I sometimes have taken her for granted, so that is why I fight pretty hard to get contact or good contact with her again’.

‘We were not allowed to be outside as long and such things … and well, it has been like a lot of questioning all the time… that has been tough’.

Relational aspects of participants’ views of their families’ roles in their delinquency

As the main objective of the current study was to explore the role that participants ascribed to their families in their delinquency narratives, the themes describing the family in relation to delinquency were further evaluated. Although not necessarily chronologically reported in the interviews, these themes could be regarded as having different temporal positions in relation to the crime. While theme 5 (Delinquency as a consequence of dissatisfaction in the family relations) refers to what happened prior to delinquency and contains narratives of family-related factors that brought the crime about, themes 6, 7, and 8 (Family reactions to delinquency; Actions undertaken by the family in connection to delinquency; and Participants’ feelings about family actions and reactions) consist of participants’ statements concerning what happened when their delinquency ‘entered the family’. Finally, the last theme (Changes in family relations after delinquency) concerns how family relations are perceived in the aftermath of delinquent behaviour. In some cases, changes are seen as a consequence of delinquency (see Table 3).
To further investigate the relational aspects from the identified themes, the crucial points of what happened between adolescent and family were identified across both themes and participants. The key relational aspects were identified as ‘proximity’, ‘transactions’ and ‘distance’, which could be regarded as different relational positions in relation to the family (see Table 3).

Aspects of the themes of closeness or a desire for closeness (e.g., closer relationship, attention) on part of the participants or of parental actions to keep the adolescent close (e.g., support, control) were considered to convey ‘proximity’. This relational aspect included both the participants wanting their families to be closer, as well as parents being there for the participants and supporting them or keeping them close by controlling them in different ways. Aspects of the theme of the family and adolescent seeking distance from one another (e.g., independence, withdrawal, loosing trust) were regarded to convey ‘distance’. This relational aspect was expressed in terms of both the participants striving for independence and the parents distancing themselves from the crime. Finally, aspects that appeared to be expressions of some sort of emotional turbulence (e.g., conflicts, disappointment, questioning, guilt), where the families and the adolescents affected each other in various ways, were considered transactions. Sometimes these transactions could be interpreted as processes going back and forth between the parents and the participants, for example, the parents being disappointed or angry because of their children’s delinquency or the participants feeling ashamed or remorseful because of the parents’ disappointment and anger. These ‘transactions’ were regarded as having a position between proximity and distance, as this transactional process could potentially lead the relation in the direction of proximity, as well as in the direction of distance, see Table 3.
Table 3. Temporal positions of themes and relational positions of the core aspects of the themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temporal positions</th>
<th>Relational positions</th>
<th>Proximity</th>
<th>Transactions</th>
<th>Distance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior to the delinquency</td>
<td>Delinquency as a consequence of dissatisfaction in the family relations</td>
<td>Attention</td>
<td>Conflicts</td>
<td>Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delinquency enters the family</td>
<td>Family reactions to delinquency</td>
<td>Understanding Support</td>
<td>Anger Disappointment</td>
<td>Withdrawal Indifference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Actions undertaken by the family in connection to delinquency</td>
<td>Restriction Control</td>
<td>Questioning Demanding answers</td>
<td>Holding the adolescent responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants’ feelings about family actions reactions</td>
<td>Seeking professional help</td>
<td>Reporting to police</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After delinquency</td>
<td>Changes in the family relations after delinquency</td>
<td>Closer relationships</td>
<td>Fewer conflicts More appreciation</td>
<td>Loss of trust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

To contribute to a better understanding of the role of the family context in relation to female offenders with limited delinquency, the aim of this study was to explore the female offenders’ own perspectives on the roles of their families. The results retrieved from the open interviews showed that in their delinquency narratives, the participants assigned their families, particularly their parents, a leading role.

The sample was heterogeneous with regard to family aspects. At a concrete level, the participants’ descriptions of their families varied greatly. Some participants appeared to have family relations that were basically well functioning, whereas others were far more problematic. At a higher level of abstraction, however, focusing on the processes and relational aspects of delinquency, clear patterns appeared. Focusing on their narratives concerning their families’ roles in their delinquency, we found that the family was regarded as being present in the entire delinquency process. In the delinquency narratives, family relations had a central role in all parts of what could be regarded as the delinquency process. Narratives of the role of family relations in the delinquency process described the prologue of delinquency, i.e., the family’s role before delinquency, what happened when the crime entered the
family, and finally, the epilogue of delinquency, i.e., the state of the family relations directly after the events related to delinquency.

In the prologue phase, delinquency was described as a consequence of the adolescent’s relation to the family. It should be noted, however, that the participants never explicitly blamed their families or regarded the family as a resource for desisting from future delinquency. This finding contrasted with the results from our previous study focusing on peer relations (Azad et al., 2018), where peers were regarded by female offenders as the root cause for both committing and desisting from delinquency. When crime entered the family, the participants appeared to ascribe importance to the families’ actions and reactions and described them as making them feel guilty, ashamed and remorseful. These feelings were not reasons to desist from future delinquency. In the epilogue of the crime, the participants described changes in their family relations. These changes were often directly connected to their previous delinquency, described as something that the crime had brought about. Here, the most noteworthy result was that the crime was not always described as having had a negative effect on the relationship; it had in some cases instead led to a closer relationship with the family.

Studying the participants’ perspectives on their delinquency unconstrained, i.e., by both collecting and coding data openly, i.e., by both collecting and coding data without presuppositions, we obtained results from the participants’ perspectives, in which the family had a leading part in the participants’ delinquency. When allowing the participants to provide their view on their families’ roles in delinquency, we discerned that the role they ascribed to their families in their delinquency could be regarded as woven into the significant role that the family plays in the social context of adolescent development. In the delinquency narratives, the role of the family context is, as previously mentioned, described neither as a cause of delinquency nor as a reason to desist. Instead of regarding family as directly causing delinquency, the core aspects of the narratives could be interpreted as expressing the family relational matters of the crime. Content, which could be viewed qualitatively as a notion of being close/becoming closer to or being independent/becoming more distant from the family, was depicted in the data across both participants and themes. Not surprisingly, the way the participants related to their parents in connection to delinquency could be regarded as conveying central aspects of the developmental phase they were in. During this period of life, the parent–adolescent relationship starts to be reorganised from a hierarchical structure to a more egalitarian structure (Smetana, Campionne-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). As adulthood begins, the relation is fundamentally different than it was at the transition to adolescence. The increased levels of risk behaviour in adolescence coincide with parents gradually having to reduce their control and power in favour of adolescent autonomy and independence (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013).

The aspects of the themes that were regarded to convey either proximity or distance could be interpreted as being linked to this process towards a more egalitarian relationship. However, even if
adolescents orientate themselves away from the family, parents continue to be an important resource for advice and emotional support (Smetana et al., 2006). The key aspects of the themes conveying both proximity and distance, as well as participants’ views of their families’ roles in their delinquency, could also be regarded as capturing the ambivalent qualities of this process.

In identifying the key relational aspects, processes where the families and the adolescent participants affected each other in various ways were considered ‘transactions’. As these transactional processes could potentially lead the relationship in the direction of proximity, as well distance, they were positioned between ‘proximity’ and ‘distance’ in the results section. These interactional processes were expressed in terms of the participants being involved with their families, with the participants and their families mutually influencing each other. In connection to delinquency, these transactions were to a large extent characterised by negative aspects such as conflicts. However, these negative aspects do not necessarily mean that the conflict-laden transactions described in the delinquency narratives had a negative effect on the family relationships. Conflicts between parents and an adolescent can be regarded as a process through which the adolescent relationship transformation occurs, and depending on the context, these conflicts can offer benefits to psychosocial adjustment and development (Branje, 2018). Even if we do not know if that was the case in the participants’ families, we cannot exclude the possibility that delinquency-related conflicts can also serve these purposes.

The social context, of which the family naturally is an important part, is an area that is particularly subject to change (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The social context is also a part of the adolescent’s life that has been theoretically central, for example, in Erikson’s (1980) psychosocial theory of development, where adolescent identity development is defined as a process of the interactions between person and context (Kroger, 2004). The need for conceptualising identity formation as a process of the interactions or transactions between the person and context has also been stressed by other authors (e.g., Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Kroger, 2004). From this perspective, the balance between the self and those the adolescent is surrounded by is what conceptualises identity in adolescence (Kroger, 2004), which might be a way of understanding the role of both peers and family in relation to delinquency.

It can be questioned to what extent it is meaningful at all to relate qualitative findings from interviews with a very limited sample to, for example, longitudinal studies or to large quantitative studies. It is worth noting, for example, that adolescent disclosure rather than parental monitoring has been identified as central for preventing delinquency (e.g., Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010), and research in this area has developed to suggest not only that parents affect their children but also that children affect their parents, conceptualising families as a transactional system (Keijser, 2016). Even if these conclusions are based on fundamentally different data than ours, they point in the same direction as our conclusions based on studying families’ roles from the perspectives of female delinquents. This consistency in conclusions, together with the significant role that family relations play in female delinquency (e.g., Kerr & Stattin,
2000; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010; Keijsers & Poulin, 2013; Kapetanovic, Bohlin, Skoog, & Gerdner, 2017), suggests that this is a field of research that needs further attention, particularly for the under-researched group of female offenders with limited delinquency. For this group, the practical implications suggested from our results would be that for professionals who meet female offenders with limited delinquency and their families in their practice, one option could be to explore the role that delinquency plays in the adolescent family context together with their clients. In the stressful situation that a delinquent adolescent creates, it might be helpful to view delinquency as a form of transformation of the family context that is common during adolescence. Considering delinquency as serving the purpose of both becoming closer to and more distant from each other, as well as considering that in connection to the crime, there are transactions between family members that, even if problematic, could be regarded as fairly normal for this developmental phase, might be a constructive way of dealing with the adolescent’s behaviour.

Furthermore, as mentioned initially, this study was preceded by a project that sampled young male offenders receiving community-based measures (Ginner Hau, 2010; Ginner Hau & Smedler, 2011a, 2011b), and the study is part of a project with both male and female offenders in youth service. Even if female offenders with limited delinquency initially have been of priority in this project (Azad et al., 2018; Azad & Ginner Hau, 2018; Azad & Ginner Hau, 2019), there is nothing in the results indicating that viewing the families’ roles from a developmental perspective would not also be meaningful for male offenders with limited delinquency. Thus, it may be an approach to be further investigated in connection with community-based measures for both female and male young offenders with limited delinquency.

**Limitations**

The recruitment of a sample from the population of female adolescent offenders receiving community-based measures is complicated. Therefore, a small convenience sample was used. It is not unlikely that the female offenders who agreed to participate differed substantially from those who did not. Recruiting participants from two larger cities might also have had an impact on the results. The interviews were open and did not specifically focus on family factors but rather asked general questions about the participants’ views on their delinquency. The results could naturally have been different if the focus had been explicitly on family factors. However, the spontaneous focus on the family, unguided by the interviewer, can also be regarded as a strength, as the spontaneous reports on the families’ roles show that the participants viewed their families as central in relation to their delinquency. The aim of a study such as the present one naturally cannot be to generalise to an entire population or to provide directions for interventions. However, what this study can contribute is an alternative perspective or a different way of understanding this group of offenders than is possible to grasp within a quantitative approach.


References


