

CHAPTER 12: TEACHERS' RATINGS OF BEHAVIOUR

Introduction

One feature of the Edinburgh Study is the use of multiple methods to track the development of young people, their involvement in delinquency, and their contacts with the official systems (social work, police, children's hearings, courts). No one source of information about offending is complete or ultimately authoritative; but all sources gain from being set in the context of others. Whereas we obtain information every year from young people themselves, and from social work and children's hearing files, we also obtain information from various other sources from time to time. Two other such sources are parents and teachers.

In the autumn term of 2001/2002, the cohort's fourth year at secondary school, we plan to carry out a survey of the main care-giver (most commonly the mother) of each member of the cohort. This will provide more detailed information about the family background than can be obtained from the young people. It will also give us another account of the behaviour of the young people in the cohort, this time from the perspective of one of their parents; and will form the basis for a broader study of family functioning and its influence on the later development of young people.

In the autumn term of 1999/2000, we arranged that pastoral teachers at each school would complete a short questionnaire about each individual cohort member. The main objective here was to open another perspective on the behaviour of cohort members. This will provide one of many checks on the validity of the measures of self-reported delinquency, and will also show how far misbehaviour and criminal offending is visible to a teacher who knows the child reasonably well. To the extent that it is invisible, this may be because it happens mainly outside school, or because it tends to be hidden within the school setting.

Normally it was the teacher with pastoral responsibility for the child who completed the questionnaire, and this was done at the beginning of the second year, so that teachers would have got to know the children they were describing.¹ The questionnaire consisted of a single instrument: the short version of Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties scale.² This consists of ten items rated on a three-point verbal scale (not true, somewhat true, certainly true) plus an overall rating (see Table 12.1). The ten items are used to compute a single score ranging from 0 (no difficulties) to 20 (many difficulties), and the overall rating provides an additional, separate measure.³ As indicated in Table 12.1, pairs of items also form small sub-scales measuring lack of pro-social behaviour, hyper-activity,

¹ Among members of the cohort included in sweep 2, teacher's questionnaires were completed for 94.2 per cent (N = 4060). Most teachers (90.5 per cent) had known the child for 6 months or more.

² Goodman (1997).

³ Reliability of the ten-item scale was good (Cronbach's alpha = .8552).

disobedience or conduct disorders, peer problems, and emotional problems.⁴ Clearly, this questionnaire does not aim to measure delinquency or criminal behaviour as such. On the other hand, we might expect to find some correlation between the total score and measures of delinquency. Also, we should expect certain sub-scales (for example, disobedience or conduct disorders) to correlate more highly with delinquency than others (such as emotional problems).

Table 12.1: Goodman’s strengths and difficulties questionnaire items

	Scoring	Sub-scale
Considerate of other people’s feelings	-	Pro-social
Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long	+	Hyper-active
Generally obedient, usually does what adults request	-	Disobedient, conduct disorder
Rather solitary, tends to play alone	+	Peer problems
Often has temper tantrums or hot tempers	+	Disobedient, conduct disorder
Helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill	-	Pro-social
Often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful	+	Emotional problems
Has at least one good friend	-	Peer problems
Many fears, easily scared	+	Emotional problems
Sees tasks through to the end, good attention span	-	Hyperactive
Overall, do you think that he or she has difficulties in one or more of the following areas: emotions, concentration, behaviour or being able to get on with other people?	No Yes – minor difficulties Yes – definite difficulties Yes – severe difficulties	

The total score on the 10 items was distributed rather like the delinquency measures, with most cohort members having low scores and a diminishing tail having high ones. Thus, although the score has a range of 0-20, the median value was 2.02, and only 6.7 per cent of the cohort had scores of 10 or more.

⁴ Reliability of the sub-scales is inevitably rather poor in the shortened version that we used, because there were only two items in each sub-scale. Yet as shown below, findings for the sub-scales are readily interpretable.

The strengths and difficulties score is quite strongly related to gender and family background (Table 12.2). It was considerably higher among males than females, and more than twice as high among the lower as among the upper social classes. Also, it was twice as high among those who had ever been in care compared with the rest who had never been in care.

Table 12.2: Strengths and difficulties score by gender, social class, family structure and experience of care – sweep 2

Mean and standard error of mean

	Mean score	SE
<i>Gender</i>		
Males	4.43	.089
Females	2.63	.075
<i>Social class</i>		
Class 1	2.13	.141
Class 2	2.91	.102
Class 3 non-manual	3.08	.176
Class 3 manual	3.60	.138
Class 4	3.89	.229
Class 5	5.31	.363
No parent working	5.59	.246
Not living with parents	5.98	.665
<i>Experience of care</i>		
Ever in care	7.30	.496
Never in care	3.44	.060
<i>Family structure</i>		
Two birth parents	3.11	.066
Parent + step parent	4.55	.226
Single mother	4.27	.157
Single father	5.47	.580
In care/not with parents	5.98	.665

Again, the score was rather strongly related to family structure. Setting on one side those in care or for other reasons not living with their parents, the score was highest among those living with a single father, and next highest among those with a single mother. Also, it was substantially higher among those with a step parent than those with two birth parents. In general, this whole pattern was similar to the pattern for self-reported delinquency, but the differences between groups were considerably larger in the case of the strengths and difficulties score.

As shown in Table 12.3, there is a moderate correlation between the strengths and difficulties score and the four measures of self-reported delinquency. The correlations are just marginally stronger for the sweep 2 than for the sweep 1 measures, as might be expected given that the teachers' questionnaire was completed at the beginning of the second year. These findings lend some weight to the argument that the measures of self-reported delinquency are valid, but they also indicate that the difficulties indexed by Goodman's scale are markedly different from the behavioural problems that are manifested in delinquency.

Table 12.3: Correlation between strengths and difficulties score and four measures of self-reported delinquency – sweep 2

Measure of delinquency	<i>Spearman's rho</i>
	Correlation coefficient
<i>Sweep 1</i>	
Variety of delinquency	.240**
Volume of delinquency	.253**
<i>Sweep 2</i>	
Variety of delinquency	.259**
Volume of delinquency	.267**

What is concealed in Table 12.3 is that two of the five sub-scales are unrelated to self-reported delinquency, whereas the remaining three are fairly strongly related to it (see Table 12.4). The two unrelated sub-scales are peer problems and emotional problems. The sub-scale that predicts delinquency most strongly is the one that taps disobedience or conduct problems, while hyperactivity comes second, and lack of pro-social behaviour third. A scale made up of these three sub-scales correlates quite highly (.325) with volume of delinquency at sweep 2. This pattern rather strongly supports the validity of the measures of self-reported offending.

Table 12.4: Correlation between strengths and difficulties sub-scales and volume of delinquency - sweep 2

Spearman's rho

Measure of delinquency	Correlation coefficient
Not pro-social	.249**
Hyper-active	.296**
Disobedient	.334**
Peer problems	-.004
Emotional problems	.053**
Not pro-social, hyper-active, disobedient	.325**

Children who had been referred to the social work department or children's hearings tended strongly to have difficulties, according to teachers' ratings (Table 12.5) and the difficulties were greatest where there was evidence of offending on file.

Table 12.5: Strengths and difficulties score by contact with hearing system and social work department and evidence of offending – sweeps 1 and 2

Mean and standard error of mean

	Sweep 1		Sweep 2	
	Mean score	SE	Mean score	SE
<i>Children's Hearings</i>				
Referred: evidence of offending	8.67	.449	9.49	.552
Referred: no evidence of offending	6.02	.338	7.58	.399
Not referred	3.31	.059	3.33	.059
<i>Social Work Department</i>				
Referred: evidence of offending	8.85	.620	8.42	.496
Referred: no evidence of offending	6.44	.330	7.86	.517
Not referred	3.31	.059	3.36	.059

1. Sweep 1 refers to agency contact from birth to 31 August 1998. Sweep 2 refers to agency contact from 1 September 1998 to 31 August 1999 (see chapter 13).

However, the strengths and difficulties score was, in fact, more strongly related to self-reported delinquency than it was to referral to the social work department and children's hearings.⁵ This means that the score predicts actual behaviour (as indexed by self-reports of delinquency) better than targeting by the official systems. This again provides support for the validity of the measures of self-reported delinquency. In line with this pattern of findings, the number of times respondents had been caught by the police or adults was less strongly correlated with the strengths and difficulties score than were the measures of self-reported delinquency.

Conclusion

Teachers' ratings of behaviour of individual children tend to support the validity of the self-report measures, especially since the particular sub-scales concerned with disobedience and hyperactivity are most strongly related to delinquency. Second, they suggest that pastoral teachers can fairly accurately identify children with problems and difficulties. Third, and perhaps most interesting, they show that problems and difficulties of the kind measured by Goodman's scale are more closely related to gender and family background than delinquency is. Unlike personal and emotional problems, delinquency is rather weakly related to deprivation, low status or income, and non-standard family forms.⁶ These findings may suggest that for 12 or 13 year olds, delinquency is not a problem in the sense that it is a problem to have no friends, or to be emotionally insecure or unable to concentrate. At any rate, it is not related, as these other problems are, to various forms of deprivation.

⁵ This is not obvious from the tables shown here, because these give correlation coefficients in one case and mean scores in the other; however, appropriate comparisons (for example of means) show that it is the case.

⁶ This statement refers to the individual level. We show in Chapter 14 that at the neighbourhood level, delinquency is rather strongly related to an index of deprivation.