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journal or publication title	Tohoku psychologica folia
volume	63
page range	112-118
year	2005-03-31
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10097/54732

Causal Perception of Juvenile Delinquency and Approval Attitude toward Punitive Amendments of the Juvenile Law

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The present study examined Japanese people's attitudes toward punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law, which were executed from April 1, 2001. We had 345 adults rate the appropriateness of four punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law and possible causes of juvenile delinquency in five domains (personality, family, school, community, and society). The results showed that the respondents showed strong approval for all punitive amendments, especially for "the youth offenders of 16 or more than 16 who committed intentional murders are sent to the prosecutor process." Those who attributed causes of delinquency to personality factors tended to support the punitive amendment to lower the age limit of detective punishment from 16 to 14. And, those who attributed causes of delinquency to school factors tended to support the punitive amendment to extend the imprison period necessary for parole until 10 years.

Key words: causal perception, punitive attitude, juvenile delinquency.

Introduction

Juvenile delinquency has increased in 90's and a shocking case of juvenile serial murders occurred in Kobe, 1997. For these reasons, Japanese people's attitudes toward juvenile delinquency have become more punitive (Ishii, Tsuboi, & Hirayu, 2001). Responding to such a public tendency, the Japanese government undertook amendment of the Juvenile Law into a more punitive direction. On November 28, 2000, the Diet of Japan passed the new Juvenile Law and decided to enforce it on April 1, 2001. It includes four major changes as the followings: (1) lowering the age for detective punishment from 16 to 14; (2) youths at 16 or more than 16 committed murders are, in principle, subjected to the prosecutor process; (3) a provision that imprisonment of a youth at forced labor for life is reduced into that for a definite period is repealed, and instead, it is decided by a juvenile court; and (4) a practice that a youth who was commuted a death sentence into life imprisonment was applied to parole after 7 years of the imprisonment is repealed, and instead, the period of imprisonment necessary for application to parole is 10 years, as that for adult prisoners.

Punitive attitude toward juvenile delinquency is not only seen in Japan, but also in western societies since 80s. For example, several punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law which include

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severe punishment against and strict control of juvenile delinquencies were passed in Canada from 1986 to 1992 (Timothy & Stephen, 1996). However, there are differences in attitudes toward juvenile delinquency between people according to their demographic variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, education level, and parental status (Schwartz, Abbey, & Barton, 1990, Schwartz, Guo, & Kerbs, 1993, Stinchcombe, Adams, Heimer, Scheppele, & Taylor, 1980, Cullen, Clark, Cullen & Mathers, 1985).

Researches have focused on relationships between causal attributions of crimes and a punitive attitude. Shaver (1975) theoretically predicted that those who make dispositional attributions of a crime perceive the offender as more blameworthy and thus as deserving of more severe punishment. Empirical studies conducted in USA provided evidence consistent with Shaver's predictions: Carroll and Payne (1977a) found that dispositional attributions are associated with more punitive responses to crimes; Hawkins (1981) found that people who attributed juvenile delinquencies to dispositional factors than those who attributed them to situational factors preferred more severe punishments against them; and Scheingold (1984) suggested that people who see a criminal behavior as resulting from internal factors approved punitive amendments of the criminal law than those who attend to environment factors; and Cullen, Clark, Cullen, and Mathers (1985) found that people's dispositional causal attributions strongly correlate with punitive attitudes toward juvenile offenders. In Canada, Timothy and Stephen (1996) also found people's punitive tendency toward juvenile delinquency and its strong correlation with dispositional causal attributions of juvenile delinquency. In summary, the punitive attitude toward juvenile delinquency is a widespread tendency in many countries, and the research indicated that dispositional attributions increase greater punitive attitude against juvenile delinquency, while environmental attributions decrease it.

Regarding the relationships between causal attribution and punitive attitude, Cullen, Clark, Cullen, and Mathers (1985) suggested that dispositional attribution tendency makes people believe that the juvenile has more responsibility with the delinquency and that he or she committed it with his or her freewill. As a reason why dispositional attributions enhance punitive attitudes, Baron and Hartnagel (1996) suggested that those who make this type of causal attributions expect that severe punishment are effective in correcting the offenders. Grasmick and McGill (1994) found that people who have a conservative social value tend to make dispositional attribution of juvenile delinquency, suggesting that their punitive attitudes reflect their strong value for social order and support for revenge against crimes and delinquencies. In summary, the relationship between dispositional causal attribution of delinquency and punitive attitude against it is mediated by perception of responsibility, expectation of corrective punishment, and conservative social values.

As we said above, a punitive attitude against juvenile delinquency has been enhanced also in Japan since 90s. However, it is not empirically clear in Japan how people's causal attributions influence their responses to punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law? The purpose of the present study is to examine this issue.

Methods

Respondents

We randomly selected 1,000 adults from residents of the Aoba (N = 400), Izumi (N = 400), and Miyagino Wards (N = 200) of Sendai City based on the 2001 electoral roll for the Miyagi Governor. We mailed our questionnaire to them in October through December in 2003, and obtained 345 respondents (response rate = 34.5%; 191 were females, 152 were males, and 2 were unidentified gender). The respondents' mean age was 50.35 (SD = 14.31, ranging from 20 to 83).

Questionnaire

To measure positive attitudes toward four amendments of the Juvenile Law, we asked respondents how much they approve or disapprove each of the four amendments of the Juvenile Law, which were planned to reduce juvenile delinquencies, and to show their attitudes by rating on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*disapproval*) to 5 (*approval*). The four amendments were (1) lowering the age for detective punishment from 16 to 14 (lowering age); (2) youths at 16 or more than 16 committed murders are, in principle, subjected to the prosecutor process (prosecutor process); (3) a provision that imprisonment of a youth at forced labor for life is reduced into that for a definite period is repealed, and instead, it is decided by a juvenile court (non-reduction of period); and (4) a practice that a youth who was commuted a death sentence into life imprisonment was applied to parole after 7 years of the imprisonment is repealed, and instead, the period of imprisonment necessary for application to parole is 10 years, as that for adult prisoners (10years to parole).

We used 64-items to measure causal attributions of juvenile delinquency in 5 domains, which were developed by Tai and Ohbuchi (2002). Showing each item, we asked the respondents how definitely they thought the item was true for personality (family, school, community, and society) of juveniles who committed delinquencies, and we asked them to rate it on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*definitely*). Personality domain consisted of items to measure low self-control, egotism, risk seeking, strong desires, and dependence on friends; family domain consisted of items to measure poor parental discipline, low socioeconomic status of parents, parents' personality problem, negative family relationship, and parental dominance; school domain consisted of items to measure poor guidance, high achievement orientation, inappropriate treatment with delinquency, and problems in education system; community domain consisted of items to measure low community vigilance, temptation to delinquency, and poor community facilities for youths; and society domain consisted of items to measure poor social bonds, low morality, materialistic social values, and negative influence of mass media.

Results

The positive attitude toward the four punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law

The approval for the four punitive amendments showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .77$, $p < .01$), with all of them highly correlating with each other (see Table 1) .

Table 1 Correlations between four punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law

	lowering age	prosecutor process	non-reduction of period	10 years to parole
lowering age		0.474**	0.468**	0.424**
prosecutor process			0.482**	0.394**
non-reduction of period				0.561**
10 years to parole				

** $p < .01$

The mean approval scores of four amendments were generally high (grand $M = 4.18$), and among them, that for prosecutor process was the highest and that for non-reduction of period was the lowest (see Figure 1). These results indicate that the respondents had generally strong positive attitudes toward the punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law, especially approving the punitive prosecutor process.

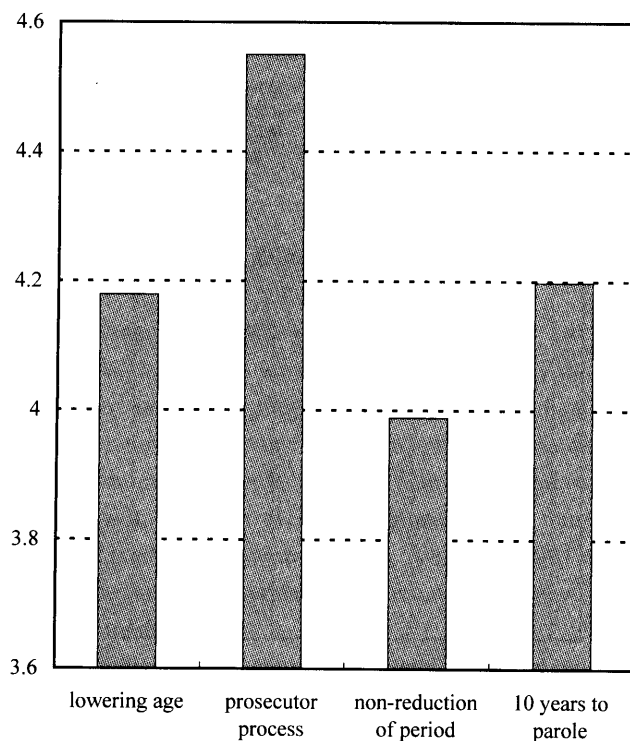


Figure 1. Approval attitude scores of four punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law

Causal attribution and punitive approval attitude

To examine how causal attributions of juvenile delinquencies influenced approval of punitive amendments, we conducted the following statistical analysis. First, we computed the mean attribution scores of personality domain by averaging all the items in each respondents, and then, we divided the respondents into high and low groups ($N = 169$ and 169) by the median (3.79). We repeated the same procedure with the other four domains (the medians were 3.50 , 3.65 , 3.33 , and 3.79 , respectively for family, school, community, and society), and tested differences between these groups in the four approval scores. A one-way ANOVA for each approval showed that the differences between the groups were significant only in the personality and the school domains. The high personality attribution group showed generally higher approvals ($F(1,325) = 8.06$, $p < .01$, $M = 4.34$, 4.10), specifically for lowering age, prosecutor process, and non-reduction of period ($p < .05$) (see Figure 2).

The high school attribution group showed generally higher approvals than the low school attribution group ($F(1,333) = 12.52$, $p < .01$, $M = 4.36$, 4.10), specifically for prosecutor process, non-reduction of period, and 10 years to parole ($p < .01$) (see Figure 3).

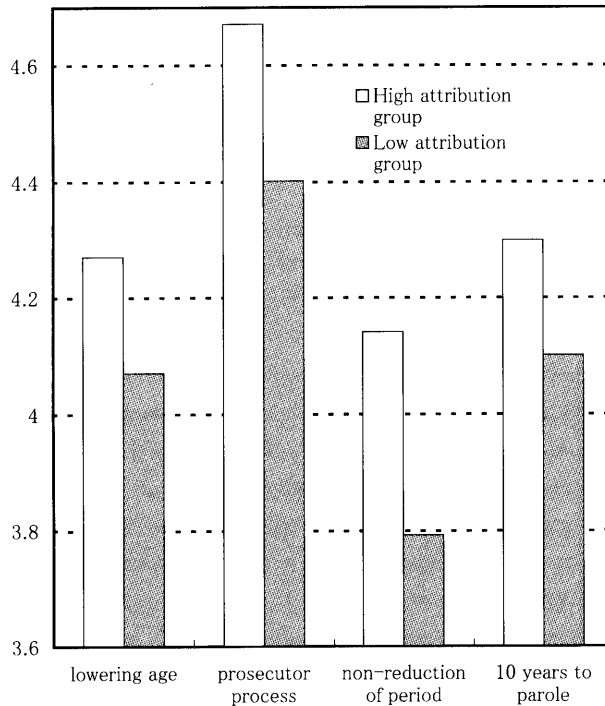


Figure 2. Punitive approval attitude score by each personality attribution group

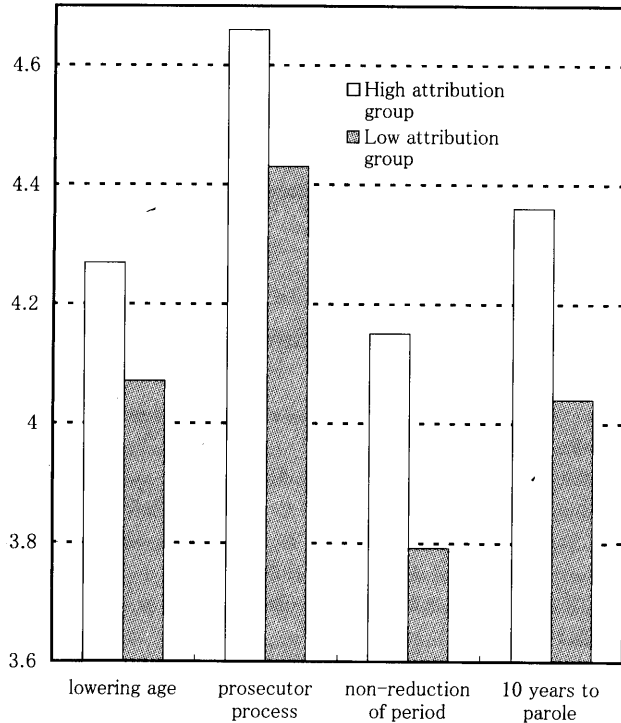


Figure 3. Punitive approval attitude score by each school attribution group

Discussion

The present study examined Japanese people's positive attitudes toward punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law, which were executed from April 1 in 2001. The respondents of the present study showed generally strong approvals for all the four punitive amendments, especially for strict application of the punitive procedures with juvenile murderers. Sheley (1985) argued that the mass media causes people's punitive attitudes against juvenile delinquencies because of its biased reporting, that is, its over-focusing on shocking murder cases committed by youths. As the same type of media bias is seen in Japan (Ayukawa, 2001), we interpreted that the respondents' strong positive attitudes toward punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law were partially caused by such a media bias.

Then, we examined relationships between causal attributions of juvenile delinquencies and approvals of punitive amendments. The respondents who attributed delinquencies to juveniles' personality showed a strong approval of lowering age, prosecutor process, and non-reduction of period. Research have suggested that those who attribute delinquencies to juveniles' personality tend to see the juveniles as more responsible with the delinquencies (Cullen, Clark, Cullen, & Mathers, 1985) and to believe the juveniles have stable negative traits (Timothy & Stephen, 1996). Assuming that these suggestions are the case with the present respondents, we interpreted

that these variables prompted their approval of the punitive amendments of the Juvenile Law with an expectation that they prevent early teenagers to commit delinquent behaviors.

On the other hand, the respondents who attributed delinquencies to school problems showed a strong approval of prosecutor process, non-reduction of period and 10years to parole. Since lots of problems regarding educational systems recently occurred in this country, people lose trust for formal school education systems and, instead, they seem to expect the effect of correctional education to prevent juvenile delinquencies.

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(Received September 30, 2004)

(Accepted October 30, 2004)