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Interpersonal Determinants of the Functioning of Juvenile Homicide Offenders

Abstract: The commission of a crime is generally attributed to adults; however, as both Polish and international literature on the subject indicates, such acts are also committed by minors and juveniles. Given that homicide is, by nature, an interpersonal act, our research interest focused specifically on this aspect of the functioning of juvenile homicide offenders. Based on available data, an analysis was undertaken to examine differences in interpersonal functioning between juveniles who do not violate legal norms and juvenile homicide offenders. Differences in interpersonal functioning were also examined within the group of juvenile offenders. For this purpose, the Interpersonal Attitudes Scale (IAS), the Empathic Sensitivity Scale (ESS), Shalit's "Circle" Perception Style Questionnaire, and a custom survey developed for the purposes of this study were used. The conducted research revealed that, compared to the non-offending youth group, juvenile homicide offenders display hostility and a lack of kindness in interpersonal relationships; however, this is not driven by a desire to dominate others. Analyses conducted within the group of offenders showed that juveniles who commit brutal crimes and display distrust and aggression toward others tend to use a defense mechanism in the form of devaluation of the victim. This mechanism allows them to distance themselves from responsibility, which they tend to attribute to their environment, including the characteristics of the murdered individual. The results highlight the importance of diagnosing the area of interpersonal functioning in the context of designing appropriate resocialization or therapeutic interventions.

Keywords: Juvenile homicide offenders, Interpersonal functioning, Homicide.

Introduction

According to statistical data presented by the General Police Headquarters, the number of homicides between the years 1999 (1,048 cases) and 2023 (559 cases) has decreased by nearly half. An analysis of these statistics in absolute numbers justifies such a conclusion; however, an analysis of crime and its potential increase or decrease requires a more in-depth examination, including at least a reference to the methodology of data collection and presentation, or the number of crimes in relation to the general population. Interestingly, a frequently raised argument in the description of contemporary crime is the increase in acts committed with the use of violence (despite the general decline in the number of criminal offenses).

Research on crime, including that committed by juvenile offenders, encounters difficulties related to the precise identification of the causes of criminal behavior. It is assumed that a constellation of various subjective characteristics of the perpetrator, as well as circumstances, contributes to the commission of a specific act to a greater or lesser extent. The clinical tradition of describing human functioning distinguishes three levels: interpersonal, affective, and behavioral.

The Crime of Homicide—Characteristics of the Act

Homicide is an act that evokes unequivocally negative judgments, as evidenced by its recognition as the most serious of crimes, which is reflected in the severity of the penalty for its commission. At the most general level, homicide is defined as the unlawful killing of a human being, regardless of the person's sex, whether female or male (Grzyb, 2024). The manner in which death is caused, the instrument used, and the motives of the perpetrator are not relevant for the basic type of homicide (Article 148 of the Penal Code); however, they have been taken into account in the creation of the qualified types of homicide (Article 148 §§ 2 and 3). Thus, in paragraphs 2 and 3 of the aforementioned provision, the legislator, guided by various criteria, has established as many as six qualified types of homicide, namely: 1) with particular cruelty, 2) in connection with taking a hostage, rape, or robbery, 3) motivated by reasons deserving special condemnation, 4) with the use of explosives, 5) killing more than one person with a single act, 6) killing a public official committed during or in connection with the performance of duties related to the protection of human safety or the protection of public safety or order (Frąckowiak, 2011). Meanwhile, in paragraph 5, the legislator states that: Anyone who makes preparations to commit an offense referred to in § 1, 2, or 3 is subject to imprisonment from 2 to 15 years.

The commission of the crime of homicide is generally attributed to adults, but as indicated by both Polish and foreign subject literature, such acts are also committed by juveniles or minors. In the analysis of homicides committed by young individuals, it is common to encounter the classification of age under the term “young adult offenders” (młodociani). According to the Penal Code, a young adult offender is a person who, at the time of committing the prohibited act, had not yet reached the age of 21, and at the time of adjudication in the first instance, had not yet reached the age of 24 (Article 115 § 10 of the Penal Code). As noted by A. Mazur (2012), minors and young adults represent an age group in which personality, as well as psychological and social maturity, are still in the process of formation. This requires a specific approach both in sentencing and in the execution of the penalty.

The age of the perpetrator also bears significance for the scope of their criminal liability, as expressed in Article 10 of the Penal Code. Thus, criminal liability for committing a prohibited act applies to a person who has reached the age of 17 (par. 1). At the same time, paragraph 2 lists the types of offenses for which minors who have reached the age of 15 may be held criminally liable. Among these offenses is Article 148—*homicide*—§ 1, 2, or 3. It is also stipulated that such a minor may be held criminally liable under the rules specified in the Penal Code if the circumstances of the case, as well as the offender’s level of development, characteristics, and personal conditions, justify it, and in particular, if previously applied educational or corrective measures have proven ineffective. Additionally, paragraph 2a provides that a minor who, after reaching the age of 14 but before the age of 15, commits a prohibited act specified in Article 148—*homicide*—§ 2 or 3, may be held criminally liable under the rules specified in this code, if the circumstances of the case, the level of development of the perpetrator, their characteristics, and personal conditions justify it, and if there is a reasonable presumption that the application of educational or corrective measures will not be sufficient to ensure the rehabilitation of the minor. As can be seen, the context of age plays a significant role in assigning guilt to the perpetrator for the act committed, as well as in the assessment of factors influencing their liability for the act. The development of criminal behavior is analyzed within specific time frames, taking into account the age at which the act was committed from a legal-criminal perspective, but also in the context of analyzing the factors contributing to the development of the offender’s criminal career, its duration, the age at which it declines, and the transformations of criminal behavior. Taking these constructs into account refers to the double dichotomy used in research on various phenomena and processes in developmental psychology, consisting of continuity–discontinuity and stability–instability. Loeber (1982) analyses antisocial behavior, especially aggression, in these terms.

Homicides committed by juveniles are generally perceived by society as something “shocking” and a source of fear, threat, uncertainty, and critical judgment

of socio-cultural development (Ostrowska, 1981; Urban, 2000; Majchrzyk, 2001). At the same time, a shift in the image of juvenile homicide perpetrators is being pointed out. Whereas, in the literature on the subject, juvenile offenders were once predominantly portrayed as individuals from large families with a negative upbringing environment, where contact with both parents was dysfunctional, or one or both parents abused alcohol (Sitarczyk, 2004), from the 1980s onward, a change in this image began to be observed more frequently (Błachut, Czapka and Widacki, 1997). It has been noted that more and more often, juveniles who commit homicides come from families whose situation is described as good or very good. They are usually only children or have two siblings, and as a developmental risk factor, parental overprotectiveness or inconsistency is often indicated (Sitarczyk, 2004). Also striking is the indifference and clear lack of remorse for the harm done, which is reflected, among other things, in their behaviour after the act: they go about various activities that were more or less planned, such as going to the cinema, attending different kinds of events, or spending time in cafés.

Juvenile Homicide Offenders – Psychological Profile of the Offenders

Contemporary criminology and psychology seek to determine whether, and what kind of, factors influence individuals to commit crimes, including homicide. However, the literature on the subject contains relatively little data about juveniles who commit such offenses. Nonetheless, efforts have been made to identify factors or mechanisms that allow for describing the behavior of juveniles in the context of the crime they have committed. One of the most commonly explored areas involves personality correlates. This is particularly relevant in the case of juveniles, whose personalities are not yet fully developed. A review of studies on personality predictors of criminal behavior in youth demonstrates that this group more frequently exhibits characteristics such as emotional and social immaturity, inability to form positive emotional relationships, distorted self-esteem, poor self-control, and a predominance of emotional processes over cognitive ones (Drwal, 1981; Ostrowska, 1981; Wójcik, 1984; Sitarczyk, 2004).

For this reason, researchers continue to search for predictors of aggressive or impulsive behaviors that might help explain juvenile offenders' actions. Bandura (1968) equated aggressive behavior with criminal behavior. He believed that both forms of behavior result from what a child or adult observes, sees, and is shown by others. As a result of such exposure, individuals internalize not only isolated forms of behavior but also specific behavioral patterns and the emotions that accompany them. The importance of emotional regulation in human development is also emphasized—specifically, whether an individual learns not to respond to negative

experiences with emotional outbursts such as irritation, anger, or rage, or conversely, whether such reactions become a fixed pattern of behavior (Kofta, 1979). Thus, as Z. Majchrzyk (2000) points out, the emergence of reactive-emotogenic aggressive behavior is not so much a sign of the development of aggressive tendencies in ontogeny as it is a manifestation of a deficit (or defect) in emotional self-regulation. Analysis of research on the socialization-related determinants of reactive-emotogenic aggression points to two primary factors: emotional rejection and overprotectiveness (Majchrzyk, 2001; Pastwa-Wojciechowska, 2004, 2020). Interestingly, both of these behaviors are regarded as forms of violence and as types of trauma experienced by the child. This line of research particularly focuses on the connection between trauma and the etiology and development of personality disorders, as well as their relationship with criminal behavior (Pastwa-Wojciechowska, 2023). Several longitudinal studies have demonstrated strong correlations between trauma exposure and personality disorders (Rosen et al., 2021). Estimates suggest that the co-occurrence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and personality disorders is approximately 35% (Friborg et al., 2013), indicating a significant overlap between these conditions. These findings suggest that higher exposure to traumatic experiences is associated with an increased likelihood of developing other forms of psychopathology (e.g., generalized anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, social phobia) (Karam et al., 2014). It is possible that continued exposure to traumatic events throughout life—rather than a single childhood trauma—contributes to the reinforcement of pathological personality traits, leading to significantly elevated levels of such traits later in life (Stone, Hurd and Segal, 2023). Among personality disorders, special attention is given to Cluster B disorders, particularly antisocial personality disorder and psychopathy. Research shows that individuals with psychopathic traits tend to commit more crimes, and their offenses are often characterized by a high degree of brutality. In other words, the behavior of psychopaths is marked not only by a greater tendency toward violence but also by the use of various forms of violence, including sadistic behaviors associated with cruelty. The motivation behind the violence committed by psychopaths is instrumental in nature and stems from the impulsivity of their actions. Therefore, when characterizing the violence committed by individuals with psychopathic traits, it is noted that: a) they are more prone to using violence, and their actions tend to be more brutal in nature, b) the violence is motivated by easily identifiable goals, c) it is instrumental in character, d) it is carried out in a cold, calculated manner, devoid of emotional context (Pastwa-Wojciechowska, 2023). T. Bulenda, J. Klimczak, and D. Woźniakowska-Fajst (2017) conducted a study based on an analysis of court case files involving a group of 50 convicted individuals who had committed murder before turning 21 years old and had been sentenced to life imprisonment. In analyzing the profiles of these offenders, the authors highlighted the presence of behavioral disorders at a very young age, origins in dysfunctional families, and deep social maladaptation that in many cases spanned

the individuals' entire lives. Most young offenders sentenced to life imprisonment had been raised in two-parent households (nearly 60%), and an additional 10% had lived in restructured (blended) families. Almost all of the offenders had been raised in their biological family homes; only one had been raised by grandparents, and one had grown up in foster care. A total of 32 out of 50 offenders (63%) were raised in large families; only 3 were only children, and 15 had one sibling. The factors identified as contributing to family dysfunction included: poverty—(18 individuals) 40%, alcohol problems in the family—(22 individuals) 43%, domestic violence—(16 individuals) 32%, criminal history (mainly of fathers)—(13 individuals) 25%. Other problems affecting family functioning included: serious illness or disability of a parent—(7 individuals) 14%, drug problems in the family—(4 individuals) 8%, parental suicide—(3 individuals) 6%, parental mental illness—(2 individuals) 4%. Most offenders, 53% (27 individuals), had only completed primary education (i.e., 8 grades before 2000 or 6 grades after 2000), and 8 offenders (16%) had completed a 3-year lower secondary school (gimnazjum). In total, as many as 35 offenders (70%) had completed only 8 or 9 years of schooling. Nine offenders had completed vocational school, and three had attained secondary education. Due to their low level of education, most of the offenders did not have any learned profession. Only 17 offenders had documented vocational training, including trades such as locksmith, lathe operator, roofer, baker, or plumber. Out of 45 offenders, nearly half (24 offenders, i.e., 47%) had never taken up any form of employment, not even temporary or seasonal work. As can be seen from the presented considerations and research, the social context in which an individual is raised—and how it influences their functioning—plays a significant role not only in shaping self-perception but also in shaping perceptions of others, thereby determining one's interpersonal functioning.

Interpersonal Functioning

Difficulties in interpersonal relationships may stem from various causes—either subjective or related to objective social functioning mechanisms (e.g., conflicts of interest, inevitable phases in relationship dynamics, the trap of stereotypes and prejudice). Developmental factors may act as mediators (intervening variables) or moderators (disturbing or accompanying variables) (Herberger and Kozłowska, 2017). Particular importance in explaining the formation of either healthy or dysfunctional potential for future interpersonal relationships is attributed to the attachment theory developed by Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby (Bowlby, 2007; Pilarczyk and Włodarczyk, 2019). The interactions between a caregiver and an infant lead to the formation of specific patterns of interaction between the individual and the caregiver. The above-mentioned authors distinguished three attachment styles: secure, anxious-ambivalent, and anxious-avoidant (Bowlby, 2007;

Józefik, Iniewicz, 2014). Later M. Main and J. Solomon (1986; Taylor, 2022, 2023) identified a fourth style—disorganized attachment—which occurs in dysfunctional families. According to numerous studies, including those by Everett Waters (as cited in: Wojciszke, 2003, pp. 294–297), in the majority of 21-year-olds, the attachment style formed in childhood remains unchanged. The greatest difficulties in relationships are associated with the disorganized attachment style, as such individuals tend to become controlling, aggressive, and incapable of coping with emotional tension in socially acceptable ways (Żechowski and Namysłowska, 2008).

Interpersonal characteristics play a significant role in the modern understanding and explanation of human functioning disorders. This is because disturbances in the interpersonal sphere are considered predictors of behavioral and personality disorders. Therefore, researchers studying the self, identity, and personality recognize the need to analyze human interpersonal functioning in order to explain behavior, including dysfunctional behavior, since isolating the pure “self” from its interpersonal context is practically impossible (Turopolski, 1999). As the studies we present are based on the concept developed by T. Leary, we will now refer to it. Leary assumed that individuals in direct contact with one another do not behave based solely on mutual reactions; rather, their behavior is purposeful. In other words, interpersonal behavior results from a person’s self-assessment, knowledge of the other individual, and awareness of how they are perceived by the other party. This knowledge may or may not be accurate, which can lead to either behavior consistent with mutual expectations or behavior that is incongruent—disrupting or disturbing the interaction (Stanik, 1994). Based on factor analysis, Leary identified two dimensions that can be used to describe various styles of interpersonal functioning: the dominance–submission dimension (control dimension) and the love–hostility dimension (emotional attitude dimension). Thus, in interpersonal relations, the control dimension ranges from dominance to submission, with autonomy lying in between. The tendency toward autonomy, dominance, or submission becomes ingrained during an individual’s development and ultimately forms a stable personality trait. The dominance–submission dimension alone does not determine a specific interpersonal functioning style of an individual. Only when combined with the emotional attitude dimension does it enable the development of a particular style of interpersonal functioning (Stanik, 1994). At its extremes, the emotional attitude dimension is defined by hostility and submission, while the middle positions describe various states such as indifference or ambivalence. An individual’s emotional attitude toward others is shaped through the process of socialization, forming a relatively stable foundation for their approach to other people, as well as certain expectations regarding their behavior (Stanik, 1994).

Methodology of Own Research

Objective of the Study

The aim of the present study was to describe the interpersonal functioning of juvenile homicide offenders. To this end, the following research questions were posed:

1. Are there differences in interpersonal functioning between juvenile homicide offenders and youth who do not violate legal norms?
2. Do behaviors accompanying criminal acts differentiate juvenile homicide offenders in terms of their interpersonal functioning?

The results obtained were referenced to the theory and practice of juvenile rehabilitation. This approach aimed to identify the practical aspects of our findings that may be applied in the rehabilitation of juveniles who commit criminal offenses.

Characteristics of the Study Group

A total of 78 individuals participated in the study, divided into two groups: a control group (N = 52) and a study group (N = 26). The small size of the study group was due to limited access to participants—juvenile individuals convicted of homicide constitute a significantly smaller population compared to adults who have committed this crime. The study group consisted of juveniles aged 15 to 19 who had committed the crime of homicide under Article 148 of the Polish Penal Code. The participants in the study group were recruited from closed juvenile correctional facilities. The control group comprised adolescents attending middle and vocational secondary schools who had no conflicts with the law. The selection of participants in the control group was matched to the demographic structure of the study group. This was to minimize potential differences between the groups in terms of educational level. All participants were informed about the anonymity of the study, their right to withdraw at any stage, and consent for participation in the research was obtained from each of them.

Research Instruments Used

The traits of interest were measured using the following tools: the Interpersonal Attitudes Scale (IAS) by J.M. Stanik, the Empathic Sensitivity Scale (ESS) by M. Kaźmierczak, M. Plopa, and S. Retowski, the “Circle” Perception Style Questionnaire by B. Shalit, and a self-developed survey designed for the purpose of this study.

To assess the interpersonal functioning of juvenile homicide offenders, the Interpersonal Attitudes Scale (IAS) adapted by J. M. Stanik was used. This instrument is based on the theory of interpersonal personality functioning developed by

H.S. Sullivan and his student T. Leary (Stanik, 1994, pp. 41–42). Based on the two dimensions outlined in the personality model—dominance vs. submission and hostility vs. affiliation—eight primary scales were identified. Subsequently, four additional scales were constructed, together forming a cohesive set within the framework of the questionnaire. They examine the following styles of social functioning: 1. Directive—authoritative, 2. Supportive, excessively caring, 3. Cooperative—friendly, 4. Submissive—dependent, 5. Withdrawn—masochistic, 6. Rebellious—suspicious, 7. Aggressive—sadistic, 8. Competitive—narcissistic, as well as additional traits introduced: 9. Self-acceptance, level of satisfaction, 10. Deception, 11. Resourcefulness, realism, relative autonomy, 12. Pessimism, helplessness, “cry for help.” Analysis of these scales allows for the identification of a style of functioning in interpersonal relationships, dependent not only on the individual’s self-assessment but also on their knowledge of the other person and awareness of how they are perceived by that person. This tool is reliable and has been psychometrically validated.

The next instrument we used was the Empathic Sensitivity Scale (ESS), adapted by M. Kaźmierczak, M. Plopa, and S. Retowski based on M. H. Davis’s Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Kaźmierczak, Plopa and Retowski, 2007). It is a multidimensional measure of empathic skills, based on the assumption that empathy consists of several mutually related emotional and cognitive constructs. It includes four seven-item subscales addressing different aspects of empathy: 1. Perspective Taking Scale (PT), 2. Empathic Concern Scale (EC), 3. Personal Distress Scale (PD), 4. Fantasy Scale (FS). In the Polish adaptation, however, the Fantasy Scale was excluded due to difficulties in operationalizing the constructs it represents. This tool meets the criteria for a reliable tool (Cronbach’s alpha ranging from 0.74 to 0.78).

The “Circle” tool by B. Shalit, on the other hand, was adapted to Polish conditions by J. Czapiński (1985) in the form of the Perception Style Questionnaire. Its purpose is to provide a quantitative estimate of the degree of structuring in the way a person perceives an object or aspect of reality, as well as a qualitative analysis of the content of perceptions related to a given area or aspect of reality. The “Circle” itself takes the form of an open-ended question, which can be modified depending on research needs. In the first stage, the respondent is asked to list all the factors they consider important in the context of the given question. Then, the respondent is instructed to rank the listed factors from the most to the least significant in the given area of reality. In our study, we used the following question: “How do you evaluate the victim? What kind of person were they? If you did not know them, what kind of person do you think they were?” This approach to the tool, through qualitative content analysis, made it possible to obtain an image of the victim as perceived by the perpetrator, which was then analyzed in relation to interpersonal functioning.

The final research tool used was a custom-designed questionnaire, in which educators and psychologists employed at the juvenile correctional facilities housing

the study group participants were asked to provide the following information about their wards: whether the juvenile committed the act under the influence of alcohol or intoxicating substances; the manner in which the act was committed; the family structure from which the offender came; whether the juvenile had a prior history of conflict with the law before the alleged act; and whether the juvenile admits to committing the alleged act and, if so, whether they have done so from the outset. The results obtained were then analyzed in relation to cognitive and interpersonal functioning.

Results

Between-Group Comparisons

Due to the fact that the variables studied in the groups did not show distributions meeting the assumptions of normality, non-parametric methods were used in the analysis, namely the Mann–Whitney–Wilcoxon test (Mann–Whitney U test).

Statistically significant between-group differences in terms of social functioning styles were found in two areas: the cooperative–friendly style and the competitive–narcissistic style. In both of the aforementioned scales, lower scores were obtained by the perpetrators of homicides (Table 1). This means that individuals scoring low on the cooperative–friendly style scale are characterized by a negative attitude toward others and a lack of readiness to compromise in situations involving conflict or disagreement. Meanwhile, the results on the scale describing the competitive–narcissistic style indicate that these individuals tend to devalue the worth of others, treating them as a backdrop that allows them to display superiority and a tendency to “come out on top.” Such individuals strive to maintain high status and to induce submission and compliance in others. They also show a tendency to treat others instrumentally (Stanik, 1994a, 1994b).

Table 1. Between-group differences in social functioning styles

Group	N	Mdn	IQR	Min	Max	Q1	Q3	M	SD	U	p
Cooperative—friendly style											
Researched	26	4.00	3.25	1.00	10.00	2.75	6.00	4.50	2.30	480.50	0.037
Control group	52	6.00	6.00	0.00	12.00	3.00	9.00	6.00	3.23		
Competitive–narcissistic style											
Researched	26	14.00	5.25	4.00	27.00	12.00	17.25	14.65	5.76	485.00	0.042
Control group	52	18.00	6.50	5.00	25.00	13.25	19.75	16.79	4.49		

Annotation: U = Value of the Mann–Whitney U test; IQR = Interquartile range value.

Results Obtained in the Group of Juvenile Homicide Offenders

The next part of the analysis aimed to identify differences among individuals in the study group in terms of interpersonal functioning. Considering differences between the study groups, the analysis also included variables such as the perception of the victim, committing the prohibited act under the influence of alcohol, and prior legal conflicts. To this end, the Interpersonal Attitudes Scale (IAS), the Empathic Sensitivity Scale (ESS), the perception of the victim by the perpetrator using Shalit's "Circle" tool, and behaviors reported by educators and psychologists were used.

Within the group of homicide perpetrators, two subgroups were distinguished based on the perception of the victim: a group with a negative assessment of the victim ($n = 18$) and a group with a positive assessment ($n = 8$). A comparison of these two subgroups revealed statistically significant differences in social functioning styles. It appears that the directive–authoritative style of functioning is more characteristic of the group that can also recognize positive traits in their victim, rather than merely devaluing them. These individuals demonstrate leadership tendencies, a desire to “be on top,” and a sense of competence in cooperating with others. In other words, by recognizing positive traits in others, they show the ability to control their environment within limits they set themselves. In contrast, individuals who perceive the victim negatively exhibit to a greater extent social functioning traits typical of the following styles: withdrawn–masochistic, rebellious–suspicious, aggressive–sadistic, and competitive–narcissistic. The behavior of these individuals is marked by hostility, distrust, emotional coldness toward others, and a tendency toward aggression. Detailed statistical data are presented in Table 2.

In the study, an attempt was also made to differentiate the group of juvenile perpetrators of the crime of homicide in terms of their empathetic abilities. Statistically significant differences were obtained in the area of the perspective-taking scale, which the participants showed to a greater extent when they had not previously entered into conflict with the law before committing the homicide (Table 3). The aforementioned scale reflects the ability and tendency to spontaneously take another person's point of view in everyday life situations. It measures the ability to “go beyond one's own self” when communicating with others (Kaźmierczak, Plopa and Retowski, 2007). This means that these individuals have a greater orientation towards cooperating with others and taking others into account in their actions.

It was also shown that juvenile perpetrators of homicide who committed the act under the influence of alcohol were more likely to exhibit empathic concern compared to those who did not consume alcohol at the time (Table 4). In other words, these individuals are more oriented toward others, showing tendencies toward compassion and shared feelings toward people who experience failure (Kaźmierczak, Plopa and Retowski, 2007).

Table 2. Differences in the victim's assessment and social functioning style

Social Functioning Style	Assessment of the victim by the perpetrator	Mdn	IQR	Min	Max	Q1	Q3	M	SD	U	P
Directive-authoritative	Negative or unspecified	4.00	5.00	0.00	8.00	2.00	7.00	4.28	2.67	35.50	0.039
	Positive	7.50	2.00	2.00	8.00	6.00	8.00	6.62	2.07		
Withdrawn-masochistic	Negative or unspecified	13.50	8.50	9.00	26.00	10.75	19.25	15.28	5.20	106.50	0.027
	Positive	11.00	3.75	5.00	19.00	9.00	12.75	11.12	4.02		
Rebellious-suspicious	Negative or unspecified	17.00	9.00	12.00	30.00	14.00	23.00	18.67	5.48	112.50	0.024
	Positive	13.00	8.50	8.00	19.00	8.25	16.75	12.88	4.26		
Aggressive-sadistic	Negative or unspecified	16.50	6.00	12.00	30.00	14.75	20.75	18.17	5.32	101.50	0.050
	Positive	14.00	4.50	11.00	21.00	12.25	16.75	14.75	3.24		
Competitive-narcissistic	Negative or unspecified	15.00	16.75	6.00	27.00	12.00	28.75	16.11	5.55	104.00	0.037
	Positive	12.50	8.75	4.00	19.00	6.00	14.75	11.38	5.10		

Annotation: U = Value of the Mann-Whitney U test; IQR = Interquartile range value.

Table 3. Conflict with the law before committing the homicide and empathetic abilities in the area of perspective-taking (PP)

Conflict with the law	N	Mdn	IQR	Min	Max	Q1	Q3	M	SD
Occurred	11	35.00	8.00	21.00	41.00	28.00	36.00	32.64	5.75
None	15	39.00	13.00	28.00	46.00	31.00	44.00	38.07	6.30

Annotation: Statistically significant differences were obtained (Mann-Whitney U test, $U = 43.50$, $p < 0.043$).

Table 4. Committing the act of homicide under the influence of alcohol and empathic abilities in the domain of empathic concern (EC)

Alcohol	N	Mdn	IQR	Min	Max	Q1	Q3	M	SD
Did not occur	13	23.00	6.00	17.00	33.00	21.50	27.50	24.08	4.55
Occurred	13	27.00	9.00	19.00	36.00	23.50	32.50	27.62	5.56

Annotation: Statistically significant differences were obtained (Mann–Whitney U test, $U = 52.00$, $p < 0.047$).

Discussion of the Results

The purpose of conducting the study was to describe the interpersonal functioning of juvenile homicide offenders. To highlight certain dysfunctions in this area of functioning among juvenile offenders, it was decided to include a control group in the study as well. A detailed analysis showed that among juveniles who committed homicide, two interpersonal functioning styles predominated: the cooperative–friendly style and the competitive–narcissistic style. It should be assumed that juvenile offenders display hostility and a lack of benevolence in interpersonal relationships, although this is not necessarily motivated by a need to dominate others. An explanation for these findings may lie in deficits in interpersonal conflict resolution skills, which is confirmed, among others, by the results of qualitative studies by Wach (2016). The subject literature also highlights the connection between social immaturity, difficulties in coping with intense emotions, and weaknesses in executive functions (Rodway et al., 2011; Erbay and Buker, 2021).

Interpersonal deficits in individuals who violate legal norms are most often analyzed in the literature as the result of developmental abnormalities, reflected in the way they form social relationships. Much less frequently is the focus placed on how such individuals perceive their victims (Pastwa-Wojciechowska, 2004; Averdijk, Van Gelder, Eisner et al., 2016). An interesting observation emerging from our research is that perpetrators who exhibit a greater intensity of the withdrawn–masochistic, rebellious–suspicious, aggressive–sadistic, and competitive–narcissistic interpersonal styles tend to perceive their victims as “inferior.” Juvenile perpetrators of violent crimes who are distrustful and aggressive toward others appear to use a defense mechanism in the form of victim devaluation, allowing them to shift responsibility away from themselves and instead locate it in the environment, including in the characteristics of the murdered individual. Similar results were obtained by B. Pastwa-Wojciechowska (2004) in a study of adult offenders diagnosed with psychopathic personality disorders. The literature also suggests that violence and the lack of an appropriate and supportive environment negatively affect a child’s emotional health and development, which in turn can lead to future difficulties in cognitive processing, manifesting in an aggressive pattern of perceiving and interpreting oneself and others (Majchrzyk, 2001; Pastwa-Wojciechowska, 2004).

The findings concerning the empathic abilities of the examined individuals are also noteworthy. It turns out that individuals with a criminal record prior to committing homicide display limited abilities in perspective-taking, a result confirmed in other studies (Jagers et al., 2007; Pastwa-Wojciechowska and Kaźmierczak, 2018). Perspective-taking may be a key factor in preventing violence in one's behavior. It seems logical, therefore, that more frequent conflicts with the law could stem from the underdevelopment of this capacity. Committing homicide under the influence of alcohol occurred more often in participants who were characterized by greater empathic concern. This result may suggest that alcohol, when used during the commission of homicide, not only impairs cognitive control but also diminishes empathic abilities. It likely facilitates the perpetration of such acts, which may not have occurred if the individual had not become intoxicated. In summary, based on the presented findings and existing literature, it can be stated that juvenile homicide offenders demonstrate disturbances in the development of the self-structure in terms of its core properties, namely:

- a) content-related—where one observes the presence of a non-objective “real self” and “ideal self” with an unrealistic (wishful) view of the world;
- b) functional—i.e., weak sense of identity, disturbed self-esteem, impaired self-control, and a poor sense of control over the environment (Jakubik, 1997 and thereafter). Disturbances in the self-structure in offenders result in difficulties maintaining a sense of control over themselves and their surroundings.

Consequently, in an attempt to retain control, a specific type of adaptive mechanism is formed, namely aggression (Pastwa-Wojciechowska, 2004). According to M. Kofta's (1977) concept, psychological control over the environment consists of three components: behavioral control, cognitive control, and the sense of control. The most important element of control over the environment is the sense of control, which includes two fundamental components: a sense of security and a sense of power. Referring to the research results in the context of differences between individuals who violate and do not violate legal norms, it must be noted that individuals who come into conflict with the law tend to believe that events in their environment are unpredictable and uncontrollable, and that there is no link between their behavior and the outcomes of situations. These results are consistent with the findings of, among others, I. Klonowska and M. Walancik (2024), Z. Majchrzyk (2001), and G. Ociczek (2017).

In conclusion, it should be stated that interpersonal functioning is a crucial factor in the analysis of individual self-regulation. It develops based on self-worth—that is, the belief in the autonomous value of one's own person and the expectation that this value will be affirmed by others and by oneself. Self-worth increases the individual's demand for information confirming their value and simultaneously reduces tolerance for its absence or for informational discrepancies. Usually, the affirmation and enhancement of self-worth occurs through gaining social acceptance, expanding one's possessions, power, and competencies via

achievement. In cases of deficits in self-structure, the increase in self-worth happens through the satisfaction of an excessive need for social approval or through the devaluation of others, as well as indirectly by increasing the level of control over the external environment—for example, through aggressive behavior. Therefore, diagnosing the area of interpersonal functioning is essential not only for understanding deficits in personality development and formation but also for implementing appropriate rehabilitative or therapeutic interventions.

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