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Association between Callous/Unemotional Traits, Empathy and Moral Disengagement
Mechanisms in Juvenile Offenders

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Abstract

This doctoral study explores how callous–unemotional traits, empathy, and moral disengagement affect the behavior of adolescents in Albania.

The research included 300 young people aged 13–17, half of them in conflict with the law and half without such experiences. Data were collected through psychological questionnaires and analyzed with statistical comparisons and regression models.

The results show clear differences between the two groups: adolescents in conflict with the law had higher levels of CU traits and moral disengagement, while their peers showed stronger empathy.

Empathy appeared as a protective factor, even though it did not reduce the direct link between CU traits and disengagement.

Gender and context also played a role. Boys scored higher on CU traits and moral disengagement, while girls showed greater empathy. Adolescents living in urban areas displayed a stronger protective effect of empathy compared to those from rural settings. Parental education did not show a significant effect, possibly due to the low variability in the sample.

This study is valuable because it fills a gap in the Albanian context, where little research has examined these psychological factors systematically.

It provides new insights into risk and protective factors in adolescent behavior and suggests prevention programs that focus on empathy training, moral reasoning, and family support to reduce delinquency and promote positive youth development.

Abstract

Questo studio di dottorato esamina come i tratti callosi–insensibili, l’empatia e il disimpegno morale influenzano il comportamento degli adolescenti in Albania.

La ricerca ha coinvolto 300 ragazzi tra i 13 e i 17 anni, metà in conflitto con la legge e metà senza esperienze simili. I dati sono stati raccolti tramite questionari psicologici e analizzati con confronti statistici e modelli di regressione.

I risultati mostrano differenze evidenti tra i due gruppi: gli adolescenti in conflitto con la legge riportano livelli più alti di tratti CU e disimpegno morale, mentre i coetanei dimostrano maggiore empatia. L’empatia è emersa come fattore protettivo, anche se non ha ridotto direttamente il legame tra tratti CU e disimpegno.

Il genere e il contesto hanno avuto anch’essi un ruolo. I ragazzi hanno ottenuto punteggi più alti nei tratti callosi–non emotivi e nel disimpegno morale, mentre le ragazze hanno mostrato una maggiore empatia. Gli adolescenti che vivono in aree urbane hanno evidenziato un effetto protettivo più forte dell’empatia rispetto a quelli provenienti da contesti rurali. Il livello di istruzione dei genitori non ha mostrato un effetto significativo, probabilmente a causa della scarsa variabilità del campione.

Lo studio ha valore perché colma un vuoto nel contesto albanese, dove pochi lavori hanno esaminato in modo sistematico questi fattori psicologici.

Offre nuove conoscenze sui fattori di rischio e di protezione nel comportamento adolescenziale e suggerisce programmi di prevenzione basati sull’empatia, sul ragionamento morale e sul sostegno familiare per ridurre la devianza e favorire uno sviluppo positivo.

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Introduction

Juvenile delinquency has long attracted the attention of researchers and policymakers, not only because of the individual behaviors it represents, but also due to the wider social, cultural, and institutional issues it reflects.

Across the world, the involvement of adolescents in deviant or criminal activities has generated ongoing debate about the root causes of such behaviors and the most effective ways to respond (Steinberg, 2014; Frick & White, 2008).

Rather than being a marginal phenomenon, delinquent behavior during adolescence highlights the vulnerability of this developmental stage. It calls for a deeper understanding of both the psychological mechanisms and the social forces that influence young people's lives.

Adolescence is widely recognized as a crucial transitional period where biological maturation, cognitive growth, and social pressures intersect.

During this stage, the brain is still developing, particularly in areas linked to impulse control, decision-making, and long-term planning (Shulman, Harden, Chein, & Steinberg, 2016; Crone & Steinbeis, 2017).

This developmental imbalance often leaves adolescents more prone to impulsivity and risk-taking, which can, in some cases, manifest as delinquent behavior.

At the same time, adolescence is marked by the search for identity, independence, and belonging—processes that heighten sensitivity to peer influence and the need for social acceptance (Erikson, 1968; Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

Peer relationships are among the most decisive factors shaping adolescent behavior. For many young people, acceptance and recognition within their peer group can weigh more heavily than parental advice or institutional authority.

In this context, delinquent or deviant actions are often not simply acts of rebellion, but strategies to secure belonging and status within the group (Brechtwald & Prinstein, 2011; van Hoorn, Fuligni, Crone, & Galván, 2016).

Seen from this perspective, delinquency should not be understood as an isolated personal decision. Instead, it becomes a social practice that acquires meaning within the culture of adolescent peer groups.

This highlights how strongly the need for group identity can drive behavior, sometimes even overriding established moral or legal norms.

Family circumstances and broader socio-economic conditions play a central role in shaping developmental pathways. Poverty, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence are consistently identified as powerful risk factors linked to juvenile delinquency (Howell & Egley, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2018).

Early exposure to trauma—whether physical, emotional, or psychological—can leave lasting marks on an adolescent’s ability to regulate emotions and develop a stable sense of self. These vulnerabilities often increase the likelihood of antisocial behavior.

In many cases, delinquency arises less from deliberate choices and more from coping mechanisms developed as survival strategies in challenging environments (Agnew, 2006; Dodge, Lansford, Burks, et al., 2003).

The Albanian case provides a unique lens for examining juvenile delinquency. Since the early 1990s, Albania has undergone profound political, social, and economic transformations, shifting from a centralized regime to a democratic system.

These rapid transitions have often created institutional instability, weakened mechanisms of social control, and disrupted traditional patterns of socialization.

For adolescents, such an environment has meant growing up in conditions where norms are fluid and authority structures are often contested (Sulstarova, 2016; Elbasani, 2009).

Migration has also left a strong imprint on the lives of Albanian youth. Both internal and international migration have caused long-term family separations, as parents leave for employment abroad.

As a result, many adolescents grow up without consistent parental guidance or stable role models. In some cases, grandparents or extended relatives assume caregiving responsibilities, but

the absence of parents frequently generates feelings of neglect and emotional insecurity (UNICEF, 2014; King & Vullnetari, 2003).

This fragmentation of family structures creates additional vulnerabilities that can increase the risk of delinquent pathways.

Economic inequality further intensifies the risks faced by adolescents. In rural areas, access to quality education, extracurricular activities, and youth support services is often limited.

This lack of opportunities leaves many young people with few constructive outlets for engagement and development.

By contrast, urban centers, though richer in resources and opportunities, confront adolescents with a different set of challenges. Young people in cities are more frequently exposed to organized crime, drugs, and peer groups engaged in delinquent activities (Civici, 2018).

These pressures can push vulnerable adolescents toward risky behaviors, even when opportunities for positive development exist.

The contrast between rural and urban settings illustrates how structural inequality interacts with individual development, shaping the conditions under which delinquent behavior may emerge.

Institutions responsible for addressing juvenile delinquency, particularly the justice system and schools, face significant challenges in Albania.

Although the legal framework for juvenile justice is aligned with international conventions, in practice it struggles with limited resources, inadequate training, and a shortage of effective rehabilitation programs (UNDP, 2019; Council of Europe, 2020).

The education system, which should play a central role in socialization, has also been criticized for lacking inclusive and preventive strategies to deal with behavioral difficulties among students. Instead of being supported, many adolescents at risk are excluded from opportunities that might otherwise help redirect their development in positive ways.

While social and cultural influences are essential for understanding delinquency, cognitive development offers equally important insights into why some adolescents are more likely than others to engage in antisocial behavior.

Adolescence is a period marked by major changes in attention, decision-making, and moral reasoning. These changes shape how young people interpret situations and justify their actions (Steinberg, 2014; Crone & Dahl, 2012).

Because executive functions are still maturing, adolescents often show heightened emotional reactivity and impulsivity, which reduce their ability to fully consider the long-term consequences of their choices.

Empathy stands at the center of this discussion, as it includes both emotional and cognitive components.

On the one hand, empathy involves the affective ability to share another person's feelings; on the other, it requires the cognitive skill of perspective-taking—understanding the mental and emotional states of others.

Adolescents with stronger empathic skills are better equipped to recognize the harm their actions may cause and are therefore less likely to engage in delinquent behavior (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Morris, 2014).

In contrast, deficits in empathy—whether emotional or cognitive—lower the internal barriers that usually prevent harmful or antisocial acts (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004).

Callous-unemotional (CU) traits provide further insight into the cognitive–affective processes that underlie delinquent behavior.

Adolescents who score high on CU traits often show marked difficulties in processing emotional signals such as fear or sadness.

This reduced sensitivity makes it harder for them to appreciate the impact of their actions on others (Waller et al., 2020; Lozier et al., 2014).

These deficits are not only emotional but also cognitive, as they reveal challenges in integrating emotional information into moral decision-making. As a result, individuals with high CU traits are more likely to disregard the emotional consequences of their actions.

Research has consistently linked CU traits to persistent patterns of antisocial behavior across developmental stages, suggesting that these traits play a central role in explaining why certain adolescents follow more chronic delinquent pathways (Viding & McCrory, 2012).

Another key cognitive mechanism associated with delinquency is moral disengagement. As Bandura (1999) explains, individuals often rely on rationalizations that allow them to suspend self-sanctions and justify harmful behavior.

By reframing their actions, they can avoid feelings of guilt or shame.

This process operates through several mechanisms, including shifting responsibility onto others, minimizing the harm caused, or dehumanizing the victim. Such strategies enable adolescents to reinterpret antisocial acts in ways that make them appear less morally troubling.

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that moral disengagement predicts aggressive and delinquent behaviors. The effect is even stronger when adolescents are surrounded by peer groups that endorse deviance, since social support amplifies these justifications (Luo et al., 2023; Francisco et al., 2024).

Taken together, these cognitive mechanisms—empathy, CU traits, and moral disengagement—highlight the complexity of adolescent development. Deficiencies in the ability to integrate emotional and cognitive processes increase the likelihood of deviant behavior.

It is also important to emphasize that these mechanisms do not operate in isolation. They are strongly shaped by the wider social context in which adolescents grow up.

In environments marked by instability, inequality, and weak institutional support—such as Albania—young people may be especially vulnerable to adopting cognitive strategies that normalize or legitimize delinquent actions.

From this perspective, juvenile delinquency emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon. Biological immaturity, cognitive vulnerabilities, family instability, peer dynamics, and broader structural conditions interact in shaping developmental trajectories.

This interconnection underscores the importance of adopting an integrative approach that considers both psychological-cognitive mechanisms and the social and institutional context (Frick & Viding, 2009; Moffitt, 2018).

Albania offers a particularly valuable context for examining the interplay of social and cognitive factors in youth delinquency. As a society still navigating the challenges of transition, Albania exposes adolescents to conditions of uncertainty, inequality, and institutional fragility.

At the same time, traditional cultural norms intersect with global influences, making the process of identity formation especially complex for young people.

This unique combination of circumstances creates a setting where the interaction between cognitive processes—such as empathy, callous-unemotional traits, and moral disengagement—and broader socio-cultural factors can be observed in depth. Studying these dynamics not only contributes to a better local understanding of delinquency but also adds to international debates on youth development and deviant behavior (UNICEF, 2021; Council of Europe, 2020).

The significance of this research lies in its potential to advance an integrated understanding of juvenile delinquency. By focusing on the interplay between empathy, CU traits, and moral disengagement, the study seeks to shed light on the psychological and cognitive processes that influence antisocial behavior during adolescence.

Rather than simply describing behavioral patterns, the aim is to explain the mechanisms that either increase or reduce the likelihood of delinquent outcomes.

This perspective has important implications for both prevention and rehabilitation. By identifying how emotional and cognitive factors interact with social environments, the findings can inform interventions that are better tailored to adolescents' developmental needs.

In contexts like Albania, where institutional resources are limited, evidence-based strategies that address both the individual and the environment are essential. Such strategies can help design interventions that are not only effective but also practical and culturally appropriate.

Although international research on empathy, CU traits, and moral disengagement has expanded in recent years, systematic studies in the Albanian context remain scarce.

This lack of evidence makes it difficult to design interventions that are grounded in the specific social and cultural realities of the country.

By situating the analysis within Albania, this study provides an original contribution to the scientific understanding of adolescent development and delinquency.

At the same time, it offers practical insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners working on prevention and rehabilitation programs.

To establish this foundation, the following chapter presents a comprehensive review of the literature, examining both theoretical and empirical approaches to empathy, CU traits, and moral disengagement, as well as their relationship with juvenile delinquency across different contexts.

Literature Review

Chapter 1: Development during adolescence

Adolescence is often described as a critical phase in human development, filled with unique challenges and opportunities. The word *adolescence* derives from the Latin *adolescere*—"to grow up." encapsulates the essence of this phase: a process of becoming.

Adolescent development is the comprehensive process of growth and maturation that bridges the gap between childhood dependence and adult independence. It is as if nature is guiding teenagers, step by step, to prepare their minds and bodies for the responsibilities and opportunities that come with adulthood.

In addition to biological transformations, adolescence is also considered a "second window of opportunity" for human development, comparable only to early childhood. During this period, the brain and body are highly sensitive to environmental influences, meaning that both positive and negative experiences can leave long-lasting imprints on health, cognition, and behavior (Sawyer et al., 2018).

This makes adolescence a stage where interventions—whether in education, healthcare, or family support—can have particularly strong and enduring effects.

This period, typically defined as occurring between the ages of 10 and 19, is marked by profound changes that encompass not only physical growth but also emotional, cognitive, and social transformations (Sawyer et al., 2018).

All societies recognize that there is a distinction between being a child and becoming an adult. However, how this transition is understood, defined, and recognized differs greatly across cultures and historical periods. In some traditional societies, the shift from childhood to adulthood has been relatively rapid, while in many modern contexts this period has become increasingly prolonged, extending into the early twenties (Patton et al., 2016).

Adolescence begins with puberty, a biological milestone that on average now occurs earlier than in the past, largely due to improvements in nutrition and health conditions worldwide (Boddy et al., 2020).

Although no clear boundaries exist, many researchers identify the ages of 11–12 as the lower threshold of adolescence (WHO, 2021).

1.1 Physical Development

During adolescence, a rapid physical growth takes place, beginning in early adolescence. Puberty marks the start of this transformation, bringing increases in height, hormonal changes, and the development of sexual characteristics.

Girls often experience these changes earlier—such as breast development, the onset of menstruation, and body shaping. In boys, changes include voice deepening, the growth of facial and body hair, and muscle enlargement. This rapid pace of growth often makes adolescents feel insecure about their bodies, going through a phase where they may feel like “strangers” in their own skin.

Researchers indicate that the years between 12 and 16 are the most critical for gains in strength and endurance, with changes slowing down toward late adolescence, around ages 18–20 (Tingelstad et al., 2023).

Earlier in development, it is difficult to notice significant strength differences between the two genders. However, after puberty, boys generally become stronger than girls. This is linked to boys’ muscle development and their ability to generate more force per gram of muscle cell. Yet, this process is not the same for everyone: for some, it occurs earlier, while for others it is delayed.

During this stage, the skeleton and muscles also develop, providing the body with greater stability. At first, the arms and legs grow rapidly, followed by other body parts such as the chest, shoulders, and torso.

Boys typically broaden more at the shoulders, while girls tend to develop more around the hips. However, rapid growth is often associated with issues such as idiopathic scoliosis, which is more common among girls and linked to biological and hormonal factors (Zheng et al., 2024).

What makes this stage particularly sensitive is not only the biological transformation, but also how young people interpret and live through these changes. Many adolescents compare themselves to peers and media ideals, which can generate dissatisfaction with body image and even disordered eating behaviors (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2021).

For example, while a boy might feel pressured to build muscularity, a girl might feel pressured to maintain thinness, showing how social and cultural standards shape the way physical development is perceived.

Lifestyle also plays an important role. Regular physical activity not only strengthens the body but also helps prevent back pain and musculoskeletal problems. On the other hand, prolonged sitting or excessive use of technology is associated with long-term negative consequences for the body (Aartun et al., 2024).

In addition, physical development interacts strongly with sleep patterns. Adolescents often experience a shift in circadian rhythms, tending to fall asleep later at night and wake up later in the morning. However, school schedules rarely adapt to this biological change, leading to chronic sleep deprivation.

This lack of sleep affects not only physical growth and immune function but also cognitive performance and emotional regulation (Beattie et al., 2015; Lo et al., 2016).

Therefore, physical development during adolescence is not just a biological process. It is influenced by genetics, hormones, the environment in which the adolescent grows up, and the support received from family and society.

When these elements interact positively, adolescents experience this stage as a time of growth, strength, and discovery. When the interaction is negative—through poor nutrition, lack of support, or harmful social comparisons—it can become a source of vulnerability, shaping health trajectories well into adulthood (Sawyer et al., 2012).

1.2 Cognitive Development

Adolescence is a period where the mind and body undergo profound transformations. It is a time when young people begin to see the world differently, think more deeply, and make more complex decisions. But it is also a stage where emotions and the desire for new experiences often outweigh the ability to exercise self-control.

The most significant changes occur in the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for impulse control, planning, and judgment. This area continues to develop throughout adolescence, giving young people the opportunity to improve skills such as attention, memory, problem-solving, and self-reflection (Luciano & Collins, 2012).

However, self-regulation is often fragile—especially when adolescents face stress or emotionally charged situations.

Researchers describe two types of executive functions: “*cool*”, linked to logic and calm reasoning, and “*hot*”, associated with emotions and decision-making in social situations (Zelazo & Carlson, 2012).

The problem is that “hot” functions develop more slowly. This means that an adolescent may know what is “right,” but still choose to do the opposite when emotions or peer influence are at play (Bjorklund & Causey, 2018).

A striking characteristic of this stage is the increased ability for abstract reasoning. Adolescents move beyond concrete thought and begin to manipulate symbols, concepts, and hypothetical ideas (Piaget, 1972).

This allows them to imagine future scenarios, reflect on moral dilemmas, and question established norms. Such cognitive flexibility is at the core of identity exploration, as teenagers ask themselves not only “who am I?” but also “who could I become?”

One of the most remarkable developments at this age is the emergence of metacognition—the ability to think about one’s own thinking.

Adolescents begin to understand more complex relationships, anticipate the consequences of their actions, and question established rules. This often fosters the development of critical thinking: the ability to analyze information sources, ask “why,” debate, and form original ideas (Hitomi dos Santos Kawata et al., 2021).

Metacognition also influences how adolescents perceive social evaluation. Research shows that teenagers often overestimate how much others are paying attention to them, a phenomenon known as the “imaginary audience” (Elkind, 1967).

This heightened self-consciousness may lead to embarrassment and social anxiety but also motivates adolescents to refine their social presentation and self-image.

Another important step is the development of relativistic thinking—where young people realize that not everything is absolute. Rules that once seemed unbreakable now appear dependent on culture, family, or context.

This can make adolescents more critical of authority but also more independent in their way of thinking (Albert & Steinberg, 2011).

The adolescent brain can be compared to a garden under maintenance. During this stage, a process called synaptic pruning takes place, where unnecessary neural connections are “cut away,” leaving space for stronger and more efficient pathways.

At the same time, myelination speeds up communication between neurons. This process makes the brain sharper and more efficient, but also more sensitive to environmental influences and experiences (Blakemore, 2008).

Cognitive development is also strongly influenced by digital environments. Studies indicate that moderate use of technology can foster problem-solving and multitasking skills, but excessive exposure to fast-paced media may reduce attention span and working memory capacity (Wilmer et al., 2017).

The constant stimulation of screens may reinforce a preference for immediate rewards, intensifying the natural imbalance between the reward system and self-control mechanisms.

One of the clearest explanations for adolescents’ risky behavior relates to dopamine, the brain chemical that creates feelings of pleasure.

The brain’s reward system matures earlier than the control system, creating an imbalance: young people feel strongly drawn to new experiences and immediate rewards, even when these may have negative consequences (Steinberg, 2008). Laurence Steinberg has compared this process to “revving a powerful engine without having brakes in place.”

This is not only about dopamine but also about the strong need for social acceptance. Studies show that the adolescent brain is more sensitive to social rewards than to long-term consequences (Crone & Dahl, 2012). This explains why a teenager may take risks just to gain their friends’ approval.

Finally, stress and trauma can deeply affect cognitive development.

Chronic stress has been shown to impair working memory and decision-making, while supportive family and school environments can buffer these effects and foster resilience (Romeo, 2013; Tottenham, 2020).

This highlights that adolescent cognition is not only a product of biology, but also of the social and emotional contexts in which young people grow.

During this stage, young people not only face major bodily transformations, but also significant behavioral and psychological changes that increasingly resemble the realities of adulthood. This period is marked by stronger self-awareness, heightened sensitivity to peer influence, and a continuous search for personal identity (Steinberg, 2014). Friendships offer emotional warmth and provide a foundation for testing new behaviors and values.

At the same time, adolescence is a period when physical, psychological, and social differences become more visible.

1.3 Social and emotional development

Factors such as family dynamics, peer relationships, socio-economic background, and access to education have a direct impact on how adolescents develop and adapt to challenges (Viner et al., 2012).

Peers are often seen as a source of support in coping with physical, emotional, and social changes, as they share similar experiences. Adolescents learn a great deal from each other about social roles and which behaviors are rewarded or discouraged in society.

This interplay between biology and social context turns adolescence into a decisive phase that shapes not only physical and psychological well-being, but also academic achievement and the ability to participate actively in society in the future.

Emotionally, this age is often characterized by strong mood swings, inner tension, and greater sensitivity to others' evaluations. Social comparison plays a crucial role, helping adolescents to form a sense of personal identity and evaluate the traits of others.

Based on these comparisons, they decide which groups to belong to. At the same time, while family ties can become more strained, friendships — including those with the opposite sex — become increasingly important.

Adolescents begin to learn how to recognize, process, and express their emotions, a process that helps them cope with challenges and adapt to new situations.

Recent studies show that the development of emotional regulation skills is essential for long-term well-being and reduces the risk of problematic behaviors (Ahmed et al., 2023).

A central aspect of this stage is also the exploration of identity. Young people start questioning the rules, norms, and values inherited from their families or immediate environment. This often leads to self-reflection and the creation of a more stable identity, which is necessary for mental health and preparation for adult life (Schwartz et al., 2021).

In this way, adolescents process the messages they receive, consolidate their identity, and develop a stronger sense of self.

Social relationships play a vital role during this time. While family bonds remain important, peer influence takes priority.

Friend groups provide emotional security, a space for experimenting with different social roles, and a training ground for essential life skills such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution.

However, peer pressure can also lead to risky behaviors, particularly when peer approval is valued more highly than long-term consequences (Brown & Larson, 2009; Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011).

Another important factor is the impact of media and social networks. In the past decade, adolescents have spent an increasing amount of time in digital spaces, which shape how they see themselves and the world around them.

While social media can foster a sense of belonging, excessive use is often linked to anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation (Riehm et al., 2019).

This makes it all the more important to set healthy boundaries and to develop skills for managing digital influences.

From the perspective of researchers, social and emotional development during adolescence is a complex process where biology, environment, relationships, and experience are deeply intertwined.

When these factors interact positively, adolescents are more capable of building a stable identity, forming healthy relationships, and facing the challenges of the future.

Biological and cognitive changes experienced during adolescence create the foundation for a profound transformation in the way young people perceive themselves and the world around them. Yet, beyond intellectual development, this period is also marked by heightened emotional sensitivity, a stronger need for peer acceptance, and the ongoing search for personal identity.

These elements make adolescence a critical phase where mental health, social relationships, and risky behaviors intersect in powerful ways (Steinberg, 2014).

From this point onward, adolescents face not only bodily and hormonal changes but also psychological and social transformations that increasingly resemble adult life. Greater self-awareness, heightened sensitivity to social judgment, and the desire for autonomy often push them toward experimentation.

While family influence remains important, peer relationships take on greater significance, becoming the main source of emotional security and social identity formation (Viner et al., 2012).

Equally important is the quality of friendships: research shows that adolescents who maintain supportive, trust-based friendships demonstrate higher resilience in the face of stress and lower levels of depression and anxiety (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011).

Thus, social development in adolescence cannot be understood only in terms of risks, but also in terms of protective factors that promote positive growth.

Finally, researchers emphasize that social development during adolescence is highly dynamic, influenced by cultural expectations, gender roles, and the broader social environment. In societies with strong communal ties, adolescents may feel a greater sense of shared responsibility, while in more individualistic contexts they may focus more on personal autonomy and achievement (Chen & Farruggia, 2002).

These cultural nuances shape how young people build identity, form relationships, and negotiate their place in society.

Social experience during this period is crucial: peer groups provide belonging, emotional safety, and opportunities to test new roles and behaviors. At the same time, peer pressure can also foster risky choices, especially when peer approval is valued more than long-term consequences.

Recent studies show that adolescents who experience peer rejection display higher levels of deviant behavior and are at greater risk of delinquency (Ahmed et al., 2023).

This highlights the strong link between emotional regulation, identity exploration, and the pathways that can lead either toward resilience or toward antisocial behaviors.

Deficits in social-emotional development do not only affect immediate peer interactions, but can also have long-term consequences. Adolescents who fail to acquire emotional regulation skills are at greater risk of developing persistent internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety, as well as externalizing problems including aggression and antisocial conduct in adulthood (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Trentacosta & Fine, 2010).

These difficulties show that the inability to process and manage emotions during adolescence may create a developmental vulnerability, which later interacts with mechanisms such as moral disengagement and callous-unemotional traits. In this sense, social-emotional development is not just a protective factor for prosocial behavior, but also a foundation for the moral and cognitive systems that either restrain or permit delinquent pathways.

Chapter 2. Juvenile Delinquency and Legal Perspectives

2.1 Definitions and Typologies of Juvenile Delinquency

It is within this context that the concept of juveniles in conflict with the law becomes particularly relevant. This term refers to individuals under the age of majority who engage in acts that violate legal or social norms. International literature often uses notions such as juvenile delinquency, juvenile offenders, or youth transgressors, while in the Albanian legal framework the most common designation is "*i mitur në konflikt me ligjin*".

Importantly, this is not a mere legal label but a reflection of a complex phenomenon shaped by biological, emotional, family, and socio-economic factors.

Delinquent behaviors in adolescence span a wide spectrum. They often begin with acts of defiance such as repeated truancy, breaking curfews, resisting parental or school authority, and experimenting with alcohol or other substances.

While sometimes interpreted as transient acts of rebellion, when persistent they represent a higher risk for escalation into more serious forms of delinquency (Moffitt, 2018).

A further step involves property-related offenses such as theft, petty robbery, vandalism, or deliberate damage to public and private property.

These acts are frequently carried out in groups, reinforcing peer bonds and being perceived as a means to gain respect or status. For many adolescents, stealing or vandalism is seen less as a legal violation and more as a test of courage.

More troubling are offenses against persons, including physical violence, recurring fights, bullying, sexual harassment, or other forms of aggression.

Numerous studies have highlighted the strong link between experiences of childhood abuse and the emergence of violent behaviors in adolescence, showing that for many of these youth, aggression becomes a survival mechanism and a normalized way of interacting with the world (Hodgdon, 2009; Gajos et al., 2022).

In the most severe cases, juveniles become involved in serious crimes such as drug distribution, weapon use, or participation in organized criminal groups. Gang culture, particularly in

marginalized urban areas, often presents criminality as a legitimate path to belonging and recognition, making it particularly attractive for those excluded from mainstream society (Piquero, 2008).

Juvenile delinquency cannot be understood in isolation from the broader social and economic context. Poverty, lack of education, unemployment, and social exclusion significantly increase the likelihood of deviant behavior.

Marginalized youth, deprived of opportunities and perspectives, may turn to illegal acts as an alternative path to survival, belonging, or identity construction (, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003, Piquero, 2008).

Another crucial dimension relates to emotional regulation and impulse control. Adolescents who lack strong coping mechanisms often make decisions that prioritize immediate rewards over long-term consequences. This vulnerability is particularly pronounced among those raised in violent or unstable family environments, where aggression is normalized as the only viable response to challenges (Gómez & Durán, 2021).

In this way, the spectrum of behaviors associated with juveniles in conflict with the law is broad, ranging from seemingly minor acts of defiance to serious crimes that place them in direct opposition to legal systems.

This spectrum reflects the dynamic interplay of adolescent biological and emotional development, the powerful influence of the social environment, and structural challenges tied to inequality and exclusion.

2.2 Societal Approaches and Moral Development in Juvenile Delinquency

In comparative perspective, definitions and responses to juvenile delinquency vary widely across countries. For instance, in Scandinavian nations, the justice system emphasizes prevention, social support, and reintegration, treating delinquency as a social rather than purely criminal issue (Junger-Tas, 2009).

In contrast, in the United States, a more punitive approach has historically prevailed, with higher rates of incarceration for juveniles, although recent reforms seek to incorporate rehabilitative programs (Cullen & Jonson, 2017).

Meanwhile, restorative justice practices in countries such as New Zealand or Canada provide a model where dialogue between offenders, victims, and communities promotes accountability and healing.

In Albania and other Balkan states, the terminology "minor in conflict with the law" reflects a hybrid approach, acknowledging both legal responsibility and the need for protection and social reintegration.

Cross-national research also shows that cultural expectations and economic systems strongly influence how societies interpret juvenile offenses.

In collectivist cultures, delinquency is often perceived as a failure of community or family, while in individualistic cultures it is framed more as a matter of personal responsibility (Triandis, 1995).

These differences shape policies, public attitudes, and the availability of alternatives to punishment, such as restorative justice or diversion programs.

Moreover, scholars highlight the importance of adopting a human-centered approach when addressing juvenile delinquency. Rather than seeing young offenders only through the lens of their crimes, it is crucial to recognize their potential for growth, resilience, and reintegration into society (Abrams et al., 2020).

This shift in perspective helps avoid stigmatization and promotes supportive environments that foster personal development, education, and social inclusion.

Understanding these processes not only sheds light on why young people may engage in deviant or criminal behaviors but also underlines the importance of supportive environments, preventive strategies, and rehabilitative approaches that foster resilience and reintegration rather than exclusion.

Moral development is closely intertwined with cognitive and social-emotional growth. Failures in perspective-taking or emotion regulation can delay the acquisition of moral reasoning, leaving adolescents more prone to justify harmful behaviors. Kohlberg's stages of moral development (1984) suggest that many adolescents operate at a conventional level, where behavior is guided by conformity and social approval.

However, when empathy and emotional awareness are underdeveloped, or when peer norms support aggression, adolescents may regress to pre-conventional reasoning, where the avoidance of punishment outweighs moral responsibility. This theoretical framework creates a natural link between developmental vulnerabilities and the use of moral disengagement mechanisms in adolescence.

2.3 Risk and protective factors in adolescent development

Adolescents do not develop in a vacuum. Their likelihood of engaging in antisocial behavior is shaped by the balance between risk and protective factors operating at multiple levels. Risk factors include individual vulnerabilities such as impulsivity, callous-unemotional traits, or poor emotional regulation, as well as environmental influences like harsh parenting, exposure to family conflict, association with deviant peers, and experiences of poverty or social exclusion (Farrington, 2005; Lösel & Farrington, 2012).

These factors increase the probability of moral disengagement and delinquent pathways.

By contrast, protective factors can buffer these risks and foster resilience. Warm and supportive parent–child relationships, consistent discipline, positive peer connections, and academic engagement serve as strong protective mechanisms.

At the structural level, access to educational opportunities, inclusive social policies, and rehabilitative rather than punitive juvenile justice approaches also play a crucial role in promoting prosocial development (Masten & Reed, 2002; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Taken together, the interaction between risk and protective factors underscores that delinquency is not predetermined. Even adolescents exposed to multiple risks can thrive when protective systems are strong, highlighting the importance of prevention and intervention strategies that strengthen resilience and social integration.

2.4 Theoretical perspectives on juvenile delinquency

A comprehensive understanding of adolescent delinquency requires not only empirical findings but also solid theoretical frameworks. Over the past decades, several major theories have shaped the way researchers and practitioners interpret why young people engage in antisocial and

criminal behaviors. Each framework highlights different mechanisms, ranging from cognitive and social influences to broader structural and cultural dynamics.

One of the most influential frameworks is Social Learning Theory, which posits that behavior is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977).

Within this perspective, adolescents exposed to aggressive models—whether parents, peers, or media figures—are more likely to internalize and reproduce such behaviors. Reinforcement from peers, such as status or recognition, can sustain these patterns, while lack of punishment or weak parental monitoring further normalizes delinquency. This theory also clarifies how young people adopt moral disengagement strategies that justify harmful acts.

Another relevant explanation comes from Strain Theory, which suggests that delinquency arises when adolescents face a disjunction between socially valued goals and the limited means available to achieve them (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 1992).

Experiences of failure, exclusion, or inequality generate frustration and strain, which may push young people toward deviant coping strategies such as theft, vandalism, or aggression. This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts of poverty and marginalization, where structural barriers amplify the risk of delinquent pathways.

Control Theory provides a different explanation, emphasizing why most adolescents do not engage in crime despite opportunities (Hirschi, 1969).

According to this theory, strong bonds to family, school, and community act as protective factors that tie individuals to prosocial norms. When these bonds are weak—due to neglect, school failure, or disrupted communities—the restraints on delinquent behavior loosen, increasing the likelihood of law-violating actions. This resonates with the protective factors already discussed, highlighting the central role of attachment and social capital.

Developmental and Life-Course Theory adds a temporal dimension to delinquency (Moffitt, 1993). This approach distinguishes between adolescence-limited delinquency, which is relatively normative and situational, and life-course-persistent delinquency, which emerges early and is associated with neuropsychological deficits, harsh environments, and callous-unemotional traits. This model provides a framework for understanding why some adolescents age out of crime while others follow chronic antisocial trajectories.

Taken together, these theories offer complementary insights: learning processes explain how antisocial patterns are acquired, strain theory situates behavior within structural inequalities, control theory highlights the role of social bonds, and developmental models capture heterogeneity across time. Integrating these frameworks allows for a more nuanced understanding of juveniles in conflict with the law, and points to multi-level interventions that address individual, family, peer, and structural domains.

2.5 Restorative justice and rehabilitation approaches

Beyond theoretical explanations of delinquent behavior, it is equally important to examine how societies respond to juveniles in conflict with the law. In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition that punitive measures, such as incarceration, often fail to address the root causes of delinquency and may even exacerbate antisocial tendencies. Instead, restorative justice and rehabilitative approaches have gained traction as more effective alternatives.

Restorative justice emphasizes repairing harm through dialogue, accountability, and reintegration rather than punishment. In this model, offenders, victims, and community members engage in a process of negotiation that acknowledges wrongdoing, promotes empathy, and seeks practical solutions for repairing relationships (Zehr, 2002).

Studies have shown that restorative practices reduce recidivism rates, improve victim satisfaction, and strengthen the offender's sense of responsibility (Latimer, Dowden, & Muise, 2005). Importantly, these processes align with adolescents' developmental needs by offering opportunities to build social bonds, practice empathy, and learn prosocial behaviors.

Rehabilitation programs, often implemented in educational or community settings, focus on addressing the psychological and social factors that contribute to delinquency. Interventions may include cognitive-behavioral therapy, anger management, family therapy, mentoring, or vocational training (Lipsey, 2009).

Evidence suggests that programs emphasizing skills development and positive peer relations are particularly effective in reducing delinquent behavior (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Guckenburg, 2010).

Moreover, supportive family involvement has been identified as a key factor in successful rehabilitation, underscoring the importance of strengthening parent–child relationships and providing consistent guidance (Henggeler & Schoenwald, 2011).

Internationally, many juvenile justice systems are shifting toward diversion programs, which redirect young offenders away from formal judicial processes into community-based or educational interventions. For example, countries such as New Zealand and Canada have pioneered family group conferencing models, which embody restorative justice principles by involving families and communities in decision-making (Maxwell & Morris, 2006).

Similarly, in several European contexts, rehabilitation is prioritized over punishment, reflecting a developmental understanding of adolescence as a phase of growth and change (McAra & McVie, 2010).

Taken together, restorative justice and rehabilitation approaches highlight that young offenders should not be defined solely by their transgressions but recognized for their potential to reform and reintegrate. By prioritizing accountability, empathy, and personal growth, these approaches align with developmental psychology and emphasize the importance of prevention and resilience, paving the way for more sustainable outcomes than purely punitive responses.

2.6 Cognitive, neuropsychological and social – cognitive perspectives on juvenile delinquency

A comprehensive understanding of juvenile delinquency requires going beyond broad developmental changes to examine how specific neurocognitive vulnerabilities and social-cognitive processes contribute to antisocial outcomes. These perspectives emphasize that delinquency is not only a matter of opportunity or strain but also a function of how young people think, process information, and interpret social realities.

Neurocognitive Deficits and Executive Dysfunction

Empirical research has consistently shown that delinquent youth display impairments in executive functions such as inhibitory control, sustained attention, planning, and working memory (Fairchild et al., 2009). These functions are crucial for regulating behavior, anticipating consequences, and resolving conflicts adaptively. When they are compromised, adolescents are

more likely to act impulsively, overvalue immediate rewards, and fail to foresee the negative repercussions of their actions (Rubia, 2011).

Neuroimaging evidence provides biological support for these findings. Functional MRI studies reveal hypoactivation in the prefrontal cortex (PFC)—especially the dorsolateral and ventromedial regions—among adolescents with conduct disorder, while hyperactivity is observed in subcortical regions like the striatum and amygdala (Sterzer & Stadler, 2009).

This neural imbalance suggests that reward-seeking and emotional reactivity often outweigh top-down cognitive control.

Blair (2013) further notes that adolescents with callous-unemotional traits exhibit atypical responses in brain areas responsible for processing others' distress, which may reduce empathy and moral concern.

Decision-making tasks also reveal distinctive patterns. Studies using the Iowa Gambling Task or the Columbia Card Task find that delinquent adolescents are more likely to choose high-risk, high-reward options despite consistent losses, reflecting deficits in learning from punishment and heightened sensitivity to immediate incentives (Figner et al., 2009).

These patterns imply that interventions should target not only self-control but also risk evaluation and emotional regulation.

Hot vs. Cool Cognition in Risk Contexts

An important distinction in neurocognitive research is between “cool” cognition—abstract, decontextualized reasoning—and “hot” cognition, which occurs under emotional arousal or peer influence. Delinquent adolescents show particular difficulties in hot cognition contexts, where their decisions are more impulsive and less reflective (Rubia, 2011).

This explains why many adolescents who appear capable of rational decision-making in structured environments still engage in reckless behaviors in emotionally charged or peer-dominated settings. The relevance of this distinction is crucial for real-world contexts such as group violence, substance abuse, or gang involvement.

Social-Cognitive Learning and Peer Influence

While neurocognitive deficits provide one side of the explanation, social-cognitive approaches highlight how delinquent behaviors are learned, justified, and reinforced in social contexts. Bandura's Social Learning Theory emphasizes observational learning, imitation, and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977).

Adolescents exposed to aggressive models—whether parents, peers, or media—internalize antisocial scripts that shape their future behavior. Peer groups often serve as powerful reinforcers, providing approval and status for deviance, thereby maintaining delinquent trajectories (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011).

Deindividuation processes further reduce accountability, especially in group contexts where anonymity allows individuals to disinhibit their behavior (Zimbardo, 2007). Adolescents in gangs or delinquent groups often feel shielded from individual responsibility, enabling more extreme forms of violence. Peer contagion effects amplify this dynamic, with longitudinal studies showing that association with deviant peers is one of the strongest predictors of persistent delinquency (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008).

Moral Cognition and Justification

A social-cognitive perspective also considers how young people justify their actions. Barriga et al. (2001) found that delinquent adolescents rely on self-serving cognitive distortions, such as minimizing harm, blaming victims, or framing aggression as a legitimate response to provocation. These patterns provide the conceptual foundation for moral disengagement theory, which describes the mechanisms through which individuals neutralize guilt and maintain a positive self-concept despite antisocial behavior. By linking moral reasoning with learned norms, the social-cognitive framework shows how delinquency becomes not just tolerated but rationalized.

Integrating Neurocognitive and Social-Cognitive Perspectives

Although often studied separately, neurocognitive and social-cognitive perspectives are mutually reinforcing. Weak executive functioning makes adolescents more vulnerable to the influence of deviant peers, while social environments that normalize violence exacerbate cognitive distortions and moral disengagement. Conversely, prosocial environments may buffer neurocognitive vulnerabilities, helping adolescents develop alternative coping strategies.

This integrative approach emphasizes that interventions should be multi-level. On the neurocognitive side, programs that strengthen executive control, emotion regulation, and risk evaluation are essential. On the social-cognitive side, reshaping peer norms, fostering empathy, and providing positive role models can reduce the reinforcement of antisocial scripts. Together, these interventions acknowledge that delinquency is not predetermined but shaped by the interaction between biological vulnerabilities and social environments.

In summary, cognitive, neuropsychological, and social-cognitive perspectives highlight that juvenile delinquency arises not only from structural opportunities or developmental immaturity but also from deficits in executive functioning and socially learned distortions. Yet, understanding these vulnerabilities is not sufficient on its own. A critical question remains: how do young people reconcile harmful actions with their moral self-image? This question directs attention to the mechanisms of moral disengagement, which explain how adolescents justify, neutralize, and sustain delinquent behaviors while maintaining a sense of self-consistency.

Chapter 3: Moral Disengagement, Callous-Unemotional Traits, and Empathy

3.1 Moral Disengagement and Cognitive Processes in Antisocial Behavior

Moral disengagement is a psychological and cognitive mechanism that explains how individuals manage to distance themselves from their ethical principles and engage in deviant or harmful behaviors without experiencing guilt or moral anxiety.

At its core, individuals possess an internal self-regulatory moral system that functions as a compass, orienting behavior in accordance with social norms and expectations.

This system is activated through conscience, feelings of guilt, shame, and self-monitoring mechanisms (Bandura, 1990).

However, this process is not immutable: it can be temporarily deactivated, becoming ineffective, through specific cognitive strategies that alter a person's perception of their behavior, its consequences, and the role of the victim. This very "moral deactivation" lies at the heart of the concept of moral disengagement. Recent studies confirm that these deactivation strategies are closely associated with various forms of adolescent misconduct, from school bullying to more serious offending behaviors (Rico et al., 2024).

These findings are also consistent with more recent research, which has shown that mechanisms of moral disengagement are closely tied to antisocial tendencies and difficulties in the development of moral awareness (Facci et al., 2023; Corbelli et al., 2024).

Building on this framework, Albert Bandura was among the first to clearly formulate the theory, integrating it within the broader context of social cognitive theory.

He identified four primary mechanisms of moral disengagement.

The first is the reconstruction of behavior, where individuals justify their actions by presenting them as righteous, harmless, or comparable to something worse. For example, bullying may be perceived as mere "joking" rather than violence (Bandura, 1991).

The second mechanism is the minimization of personal responsibility, where the individual attributes their actions to peer pressure or external orders (Pelton et al., 2004).

The third is the distortion of consequences, where the harm is perceived as minimal or insignificant, a phenomenon often observed in aggressive youth (Petrucelli et al., 2017).

Finally, there is dehumanization and blaming the victim, where the victim is viewed as undeserving of fair treatment or as responsible for what happened (Gini, 2006).

These are not simply excuses that follow the act, but mechanisms that precede and facilitate the commission of antisocial behavior.

For example, an adolescent who bullies a peer on social media may interpret their behavior as “fun” rather than violence; someone who engages in physical aggression may claim they were “pushed by the group” or had “no other choice”; others may completely deny the consequences by saying, “it wasn’t a big deal”; while in more serious cases, the victim is seen as “worthless” or “to blame for what happened.”

Decades of research have shown that these mechanisms of moral disengagement are not only present in adults but emerge powerfully during adolescence. This is a period when the brain, especially the prefrontal cortex, is still developing, and impulse-control mechanisms are not fully matured. As a result, young people are more inclined to use cognitive justifications to avoid feelings of guilt.

A large study of European adolescents found that those who frequently used mechanisms of moral disengagement were significantly more involved in aggressive behaviors and online bullying, making justification of behavior a “bridge” between cognitive development and violent manifestations (Thornberg et al., 2015).

This demonstrates that cognitive processes alone are insufficient to explain adolescent behavior without considering the strategies they employ to minimize or justify the consequences of their actions.

More recent studies have reinforced this theoretical framework, adding new dimensions. For example, moral disengagement has been found to be closely linked to moral identity: adolescents with a weaker moral self-concept are more prone to using disengagement mechanisms to justify antisocial behaviors (Pozzoli et al., 2012).

Similarly, moral self-efficacy – the belief in one’s ability to act according to moral principles even under challenging circumstances – has been shown to play a protective role, limiting the use of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 2001).

These findings suggest that the phenomenon is not inevitable but is influenced by personal characteristics and the social environment in which adolescents grow up.

Another dimension that has recently gained attention is the neuropsychological aspect. Neuroimaging analyses have shown that moral disengagement is associated with lower levels of activity in the prefrontal cortex, the brain region involved in predicting consequences and impulse control (Paciello et al., 2020).

This helps explain why adolescents are more vulnerable to using justificatory mechanisms and why they often choose immediate gratification over long-term consequences.

Research in recent years has also emphasized that moral disengagement is one of the strongest predictors of the repetition of delinquent and criminal behaviors at a young age (Kara, 2023).

It is not only related to the frequency of deviant acts but also to how these acts become integrated into the adolescent’s identity.

For instance, in some youth groups, vandalism or violent behavior is not perceived as wrongdoing but as a means of gaining respect and building social status (Gómez & Durán, 2021).

In this sense, moral disengagement is not merely an individual psychological mechanism but a process strongly influenced by group norms and cultural context.

In the domain of bullying, and especially cyberbullying, it has been shown that the use of moral justifications is directly linked to the intensity of involvement in such behaviors (Wang et al., 2022).

For many young people, targeting a peer in the digital space is not perceived as “real violence” but as “play” or “entertainment.” This softened perspective is a typical form of moral disengagement, which minimizes harm and shifts responsibility.

Taken together, these findings reveal that moral disengagement is a complex mechanism that interweaves biological brain development, cognitive processes, and social influences.

It explains not only why adolescents are more prone to engage in antisocial behaviors but also why some individuals, despite being exposed to the same conditions, choose to uphold moral integrity while others surpass it.

In addition, cultural and social contexts play a decisive role. Research has found that in societies where violence and aggression are normalized, adolescents are more prone to dehumanize victims or minimize consequences, compared to cultures where prosocial norms are strongly reinforced (Gómez & Durán, 2021; Wang et al., 2022).

This indicates that moral disengagement is not merely an individual psychological phenomenon but also a reflection of broader societal dynamics.

3.1.1 Gender Differences in Moral Disengagement

An important aspect of the literature on moral disengagement concerns gender, as most traditional studies have focused on boys and their more visible antisocial behaviors, while the impact on girls has been less explored (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012).

This discrepancy stems from two main reasons: first, because boys are more often involved in acts of overt violence, bullying, or vandalism; and second, because girls tend to adopt other moral coping strategies, grounded in empathy and reflection, which makes it more difficult for them to justify harmful behavior (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012).

However, this does not mean that girls are immune to moral disengagement. On the contrary, justifying mechanisms often appear in subtler forms, strongly tied to social relationships.

Girls are more prone to engage in relational aggression—such as social exclusion, spreading rumors, or online bullying—and frequently perceive these behaviors as less harmful, using euphemistic labels like “games” or “fun” (Paciello et al., 2020).

In this way, even if the level of physical violence is lower, the use of moral disengagement mechanisms remains present, though expressed differently.

Recent cross-national studies have revealed that gendered expectations amplify these tendencies: boys are encouraged to show toughness and dominance, while girls often navigate social hierarchies through manipulation of relationships.

This means that disengagement strategies become gendered tools for adapting to social pressures (Runions & Bak, 2015).

Another important difference highlighted by research is the role of empathy. Among girls, the connection between low empathy and moral disengagement appears stronger: when the ability to empathize with others decreases, moral barriers weaken, and justifying harmful acts becomes easier (Wang et al., 2022).

Boys, on the other hand, tend to rely more on abstract justice reasoning—comparing their actions to “worse” situations or shifting responsibility—which often facilitates the normalization of aggressive behaviors (Thornberg et al., 2015).

A large study on online bullying has shown that although both boys and girls are involved, boys are more likely to justify their actions through moral disengagement mechanisms, while girls often express more ambivalence or feelings of guilt (Wang et al., 2022).

This difference suggests that the use of these mechanisms is not universal but shaped by gendered expectations and by how moral identity is constructed.

Moreover, researchers suggest that in contexts of social exclusion or emotional insecurity, girls may even surpass boys in their reliance on moral disengagement, using it as a defense mechanism to protect their self-image and maintain a sense of belonging (Gómez & Durán, 2021).

This points to the adaptive—though problematic—function of disengagement as a survival strategy in hostile peer environments.

A particularly interesting insight from recent research is that girls may exhibit higher levels of moral disengagement in situations where they feel emotionally threatened or excluded from the social group.

In such cases, justification does not merely serve to reduce guilt but also functions as a protective mechanism to maintain self-image and a sense of belonging (Gómez & Durán, 2021).

Beyond gender itself, culture plays a decisive role in shaping how moral disengagement is expressed. In Western, individualistic societies, boys often justify aggression through appeals to personal freedom, competition, or peer recognition, while girls use relational strategies such as exclusion or gossip to maintain social status (Abrams & Killen, 2014).

In contrast, in collectivist cultures where group harmony is highly valued, both boys and girls may rationalize harmful behaviors as being “for the good of the group” rather than individual gain (Obermann, 2011).

Studies comparing adolescents from Europe and Asia have shown that moral disengagement among girls is more often tied to maintaining social relationships, while for boys it is linked to defending honor or group reputation (Teng et al., 2020).

This highlights that gender differences cannot be understood in isolation but must be considered within the broader cultural context.

Interestingly, some research suggests that in cultures with strong patriarchal norms, boys are socialized to perceive physical aggression as acceptable or even necessary, making moral disengagement more frequent and explicit (Li et al., 2014).

On the other hand, girls in these settings may resort to covert forms of aggression, often masked as playful interaction, which are equally sustained by disengagement strategies.

This shows that moral disengagement is not only a cognitive process but also a social tool, employed differently by boys and girls depending on the context.

In conclusion, gender differences in moral disengagement should not be seen merely as differences in the prevalence of antisocial behavior but as distinct ways in which boys and girls justify and reconcile their actions with social norms.

Boys often use these mechanisms to legitimize overt aggression, while girls employ them in subtler, relational forms tied to social dynamics.

This makes it clear that prevention and intervention strategies must consider not only the degree of involvement but also the ways in which gender shapes the use of moral disengagement.

3.1.2 Moral Disengagement in the Digital Age

In recent years, digital environments have become a central arena for adolescent interaction, bringing new dimensions to moral disengagement. Online platforms often reduce social accountability through anonymity, invisibility, and physical distance, making it easier for young people to justify harmful actions. This phenomenon, sometimes described as “online disinhibition”

(Suler, 2004), weakens the natural emotional cues—such as facial expressions or tone of voice—that normally activate empathy and moral self-regulation. As a result, acts of aggression or exclusion may feel less serious in digital contexts, reinforcing cognitive justifications like “it was just a joke” or “it’s not real.”

Research has shown that adolescents engaged in cyberbullying frequently use disengagement mechanisms such as minimization of consequences (“they can just log off”), diffusion of responsibility (“everyone was sharing it”), or blaming the victim (“they deserved it for posting that”) (Barlett, 2015; Wang et al., 2022).

These strategies mirror traditional forms of disengagement but are amplified by the unique features of the online world. Importantly, digital moral disengagement does not only affect bullying behaviors but also extends to hate speech, online harassment, and the normalization of violence in gaming or social media contexts (Jones & Mitchell, 2016).

At the same time, the digital context offers opportunities for intervention. Programs that promote “digital empathy” and online citizenship education have been shown to reduce aggressive online behaviors by reminding adolescents of the real impact of virtual actions (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016). This suggests that while technology can facilitate disengagement, it can also be leveraged to strengthen empathy and moral responsibility.

Moreover, digital contexts may intensify the effects of callous-unemotional (CU) traits. Adolescents with limited empathy or reduced sensitivity to others’ emotions often find online environments particularly reinforcing, since the absence of direct emotional feedback makes it easier to ignore the suffering of victims.

For these individuals, moral disengagement and CU traits work hand in hand: disengagement provides the cognitive justifications, while CU traits reduce the emotional barriers. This interaction explains why some young people not only participate in cyberbullying but also persist in it despite awareness of its harm. Such patterns underline the importance of integrating digital literacy, empathy training, and parental monitoring into prevention efforts, in order to address both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of antisocial behavior online.

3.1.3 Family and Peer Influences on Moral Disengagement

While moral disengagement has strong cognitive and individual components, it is also shaped by the social contexts in which adolescents grow. Family and peer environments represent two of the most powerful forces influencing whether young people adopt justifying strategies for harmful behavior.

Parenting practices play a decisive role. Harsh discipline, inconsistent rules, and lack of emotional warmth have been consistently linked to higher levels of moral disengagement (Hyde et al., 2021). Adolescents raised in families where aggression is modeled or tolerated are more likely to internalize justifications that minimize responsibility or blame others.

By contrast, warm and supportive parenting, characterized by clear expectations and consistent monitoring, reduces the likelihood of adolescents adopting disengagement mechanisms (Waller et al., 2020). In this way, parenting not only shapes behavior directly but also influences the moral reasoning processes that guide how young people evaluate their actions.

Peers represent another critical context. Adolescents spend increasing amounts of time with peer groups, and group norms strongly affect how behavior is interpreted. In peer cultures that normalize bullying or delinquent acts, moral disengagement becomes a collective tool for excusing aggression (“everyone was doing it,” “it’s just fun”).

Research has shown that peer approval can sustain disengagement even when individuals are aware of the harm caused (Pelton et al., 2004; Thornberg et al., 2015).

Conversely, affiliation with prosocial peers reduces reliance on disengagement by reinforcing empathy, accountability, and respect for others (Pozzoli et al., 2012).

School and community contexts further contribute to these dynamics. Environments that tolerate aggression or fail to sanction harmful behavior create fertile ground for disengagement to flourish. On the other hand, inclusive and respectful climates reduce the appeal of justifying harm, providing adolescents with social frameworks that encourage responsibility.

Taken together, these findings highlight that moral disengagement does not emerge in isolation but is nurtured—or constrained—by the quality of family bonds, peer influences, and broader social environments.

Understanding these relational contexts is crucial before moving on to the study of callous-unemotional traits, which further illuminate how individual dispositions interact with social factors in shaping antisocial outcomes.

3.2 Callous-Unemotional Traits in Adolescence

A significant body of research has demonstrated that moral disengagement plays a crucial role in the development of antisocial behavior, particularly during adolescence. Individuals who frequently rely on moral disengagement strategies often show a reduced capacity for guilt or empathy, making them more vulnerable to delinquent and aggressive behavior (Gini, 2006; Pelton et al., 2004; Shulman et al., 2011).

This process becomes even more concerning when combined with callous-unemotional (CU) traits, which represent one of the strongest psychological predictors of persistent antisocial outcomes.

CU traits—such as a lack of guilt, limited emotional expression, and diminished empathy—interact with cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement to reinforce patterns of harmful behavior.

Studies show that adolescents who display high CU traits are more prone to aggression and bullying, often because they do not emotionally register the suffering of others (Paciello et al., 2020).

More recent longitudinal studies have likewise emphasized that CU traits predict not only aggression but also broader forms of antisocial behavior and deficits in academic functioning (Goulter et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2023). Moreover, these traits seem to be linked to ongoing difficulties in emotional control and social relationships, which can further increase the risk of antisocial outcomes over time.

Extending beyond aggression and delinquency, emerging research indicates that moral disengagement and CU traits may also be associated with difficulties in prosocial development.

For example, Pardini and Byrd (2012) highlight that adolescents high in CU traits often fail to engage in helping behaviors, cooperation, or restorative actions, even in situations where such responses are socially rewarded.

This absence of prosociality demonstrates not only an active tendency toward harm but also a passive failure to contribute positively to social bonds.

Another emerging line of inquiry concerns the relationship between CU traits and academic functioning. Adolescents with elevated CU traits have been shown to exhibit lower school engagement and weaker motivation to comply with academic norms (Horan et al., 2016).

Moral disengagement processes appear to facilitate this disconnection by allowing students to rationalize truancy, cheating, or disruptive classroom behavior as harmless. This underscores the educational implications of these traits, highlighting the need for school-based interventions. A meta-analysis of 13 empirical studies confirmed the strong link between CU traits and moral disengagement, suggesting that individuals who lack remorse are more likely to justify and persist in deviant behavior.

Longitudinal evidence further indicates that adolescents with CU traits often develop enduring deficits in moral conscience, leading to disregard for social norms and a higher likelihood of criminal involvement over time (Shulman et al., 2011).

Importantly, this conclusion has been reinforced by very recent findings showing that early interventions may reduce the reciprocal reinforcement between these two constructs (Schmitt et al., 2024).

More recent evidence has emphasized that CU traits are not fixed but can interact with environmental contexts.

For example, Waller et al. (2020) found that children exposed to positive parenting practices, such as warmth and consistent discipline, showed lower levels of CU traits and reduced reliance on moral disengagement strategies.

This suggests that supportive caregiving may act as a protective buffer against the consolidation of antisocial tendencies.

Similarly, cross-cultural research has indicated that the relationship between CU traits and moral disengagement is evident across different societies, though the forms of expression may vary. In East Asian contexts, for instance, relational aggression has been more strongly linked to CU traits, whereas in Western samples overt physical aggression is more common (Hyde et al., 2021; Muñoz & Frick, 2017).

These findings underline the importance of considering cultural factors when studying the developmental pathways of antisocial behavior.

Overall, recent research highlights that callous–unemotional traits play a central role in adolescent antisocial behavior and are closely linked to moral disengagement. Because of this strong association, contemporary studies have increasingly focused on understanding how CU traits develop and why they do not manifest in the same way across all adolescents. Rather than being fixed personality characteristics, CU traits are now viewed as developmentally shaped patterns that emerge through the interaction between individual predispositions and life experiences (Waller & Hyde, 2018, Blair, 2022).

In this context, recent literature has placed particular emphasis on the distinction between primary and secondary callous–unemotional traits. Primary CU traits are generally associated with early-emerging temperamental characteristics, such as low fearfulness, reduced emotional sensitivity, and diminished responsiveness to punishment.

Adolescents with primary CU traits often show relatively low levels of anxiety and emotional reactivity, suggesting a stronger biological and neurodevelopmental basis. In contrast, secondary CU traits are thought to develop as a response to adverse environmental conditions, including trauma, maltreatment, chronic stress, or inconsistent caregiving. These adolescents may display callous features alongside heightened emotional dysregulation, anxiety, and difficulties in stress management, indicating a more environmentally driven pathway (Gill & Stickle, Craig et al., 2020).

Longitudinal evidence further suggests that these two variants may follow different developmental trajectories. While primary CU traits tend to show greater stability over time, secondary CU traits appear to be more sensitive to changes in the social environment and may decrease when adolescents are exposed to supportive caregiving, structured interventions, and positive peer relationships (Waller et al., 2020).

Recent findings also indicate that both primary and secondary CU traits are associated with increased use of moral disengagement mechanisms, although through partially different pathways, facilitating the cognitive justification of harmful behavior in the absence of emotional or moral constraint (Wilke et al., 2024).

3.2.1 Callous-Unemotional Traits and Their Cognitive Mechanisms in Severe Behavioral and Delinquent Problems

Callous-unemotional traits encompass a set of psychological characteristics including lack of guilt, shallow affect, limited empathy, and poor emotional regulation. These traits are strongly associated with antisocial behavior, impulsivity, and aggression, often resulting in harm both for the individuals themselves and for those around them.

Each trait is linked to the way individuals perceive emotions and social interactions, shaping their moral reasoning and behavioral control.

One of the most significant aspects of CU traits is the absence of empathy—a capacity crucial for recognizing and sharing the emotions of others.

Adolescents with CU traits fail to emotionally respond to distress cues such as anxious or pained facial expressions, showing reduced activation in the amygdala, a brain region essential for processing emotional salience (Frick et al., 2005; Cheng et al., 2012).

This emotional detachment contributes to their tendency to ignore the suffering of others and to engage in aggressive behavior without remorse.

Another central feature of CU traits is the lack of guilt and accountability for one's actions, which is closely linked to decision-making processes and behavioral control. The prefrontal cortex (PFC), a crucial brain region responsible for considering consequences and reflective decision-making, has been found to show reduced activity in individuals with CU traits.

Dysfunction in this region contributes to impulsive actions and poor long-term planning (Fisher & Chamberlain, 2000).

In addition to brain-based mechanisms, socialization processes play an equally important role. Waller et al. (2017) argue that harsh parenting practices, inconsistent discipline, and exposure to family conflict significantly amplify CU traits by weakening the child's capacity for emotional regulation.

Conversely, parental warmth and secure attachment have been shown to buffer against CU development, suggesting that these traits are not exclusively biologically determined.

There is also evidence that peer dynamics reinforce CU-related behaviors. Adolescents with CU traits often gravitate toward deviant peer groups, where moral disengagement is normalized and even rewarded (Kimonis et al., 2016).

Such environments provide a context in which antisocial behavior is not only tolerated but becomes a central component of group identity, making rehabilitation more complex.

A further area of investigation is gender. While much of the literature focuses on boys, recent studies show that girls with CU traits may display relational aggression (e.g., gossip, exclusion, online harassment) rather than overt violence (Fontaine et al., 2011).

These subtler manifestations are equally damaging but often overlooked by parents, teachers, and justice systems. This calls for gender-sensitive approaches to identifying and addressing CU traits.

This aligns with evidence showing that youth with CU traits often disregard the broader social impact of their actions, prioritizing immediate gratification.

This lack of behavioral control is also associated with dysfunction in the cingulate cortex, which plays an important role in attention to social cues. Reduced activity in this region makes it harder for CU individuals to perceive and respond to signs of distress in others, contributing to moral disengagement strategies that justify harmful acts (Paciello et al., 2020).

More recent neurodevelopmental research highlights that the striatum, a brain structure involved in reward processing, is hyperactive in youth with CU traits.

This heightened sensitivity to immediate rewards explains their attraction to risky and antisocial activities, such as substance use or delinquent peer involvement, despite potential long-term costs (Blair, 2022).

In addition, longitudinal studies indicate that CU traits in adolescence predict persistent antisocial behavior into adulthood, including higher rates of criminal offending and lower responsiveness to traditional rehabilitation programs (Frick, Ray, Thornton, & Kahn, 2014).

This emphasizes the urgent need for specialized interventions tailored to the cognitive and emotional profiles of individuals with CU traits.

Importantly, there is growing evidence that interventions targeting emotional processing—such as empathy training, mindfulness, and prosocial role modeling—can reduce the impact of CU traits over time (Hawes et al., 2022).

These findings provide hope that even youths at high risk of moral disengagement and antisocial outcomes can benefit from targeted psychosocial approaches.

3.3 Empathy and the Role of Cognitive Processes in Modifying Moral Disengagement and Callous-Unemotional Traits

Empathy is commonly defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and share the emotions of others, encompassing both an affective component (feeling with others) and a cognitive component (understanding others' perspectives) (Davis, 1983; Decety & Jackson, 2004).

It is a key factor in promoting prosocial behaviors such as helping, compassion, and support (Eisenberg et al., 1991).

From a neuropsychological perspective, empathy involves the activation of specific brain regions, including the anterior insula, anterior cingulate cortex, and mirror neuron systems, which allow individuals to “mirror” the emotions of others and generate appropriate emotional responses (Decety, 2011; Shamay-Tsoory, 2011).

These neural systems undergo significant development during adolescence, making this stage both vulnerable to empathy deficits and highly receptive to interventions that strengthen empathic skills.

It is also important to distinguish between affective and cognitive empathy. Affective empathy refers to the capacity to emotionally share the feelings of others, while cognitive empathy involves perspective-taking and understanding another's mental state (Decety & Jackson, 2004).

Deficits in affective empathy are particularly linked to callous-unemotional traits, as individuals fail to ‘feel with’ others' suffering. Deficits in cognitive empathy, on the other hand, may allow for more sophisticated forms of moral disengagement, where harmful actions are justified through distorted reasoning.

This differentiation helps explain why some adolescents may intellectually recognize others' emotions without being emotionally motivated to act prosocially, thereby reinforcing the risk of antisocial outcomes (Vachon & Lynam, 2016)

Empathy plays an essential role in the moderation of callous-unemotional (CU) traits and their connection to moral disengagement. When empathy is present, it can reduce the negative effects of

CU traits, which are often linked to aggressive, antisocial, and harmful behaviors (Fang et al., 2020).

The moderating influence of empathy suggests that individuals with low empathy are more likely to engage in cognitive mechanisms that allow for harmful behaviors, without considering the emotional consequences for others.

Moral disengagement, the cognitive process by which individuals justify immoral or harmful actions, is significantly related to CU traits. Individuals who exhibit high CU traits tend to have lower levels of empathy, which in turn facilitates moral disengagement. This disengagement helps them justify behaviors such as aggression or manipulation (Wang et al., 2017; Zych & Llorent, 2018).

Thus, empathy can be seen as a protective mechanism that interrupts the link between cognitive justifications and harmful actions.

Research indicates that higher empathy can reduce the negative impact of CU traits on antisocial behavior, acting as a protective factor (Gómez Tabares et al., 2025). This suggests that helping young people develop empathy could lower their risk of moral disengagement and encourage more positive social behavior.

In adolescents, low empathy is linked to a diminished ability to respond emotionally to others' suffering, which is essential for developing moral reasoning and engaging in prosocial actions. Deficits in empathy contribute to CU traits and moral disengagement, encouraging the persistence of aggression (Milone et al., 2019).

These patterns are driven by the brain's regulation of emotional responses, where dysfunction in areas such as the prefrontal cortex (responsible for decision-making and emotional regulation) may contribute to a reduced capacity for empathy and moral awareness. Furthermore, the amygdala, which processes emotional stimuli and threat-related responses, may show altered activity in individuals with CU traits, potentially reinforcing antisocial tendencies. This highlights that empathy is not static, but dynamically shaped by both brain maturation and social contexts.

In practice, empathy often acts like a “moral brake”: when a young person can feel and understand another's distress, it becomes harder to morally disengage and easier to choose a

prosocial response. This inhibition of harm is especially important in adolescence, when social rewards are powerful and self-control systems are still maturing (Decety & Cowell, 2014).

Gender differences in CU traits and moral disengagement have been observed, with males typically exhibiting higher levels of CU traits and engaging in more aggressive and antisocial behaviors compared to females. Females, in contrast, tend to show higher levels of empathy and engage in more prosocial behaviors (Gómez & Durán, 2020; Longobardi et al., 2019; Mestre et al., 2009).

These differences may be partly explained by distinct ways in which males and females process emotional stimuli and regulate their behaviors.

Further studies have shown that empathy's influence on moral disengagement can differ between genders. For example, low empathy was found to be associated with violent bullying in males and indirect bullying in females (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006).

This suggests that interventions need to be gender-sensitive, accounting for the different ways aggression is expressed and justified.

School-based social and emotional learning (SEL) that explicitly teaches perspective-taking and emotion regulation reduces conduct problems and increases prosocial behavior into follow-up (Durlak et al., 2011).

Brief mindset-of-personality interventions that frame people as capable of change also lower hostile attributions and aggression in adolescents, suggesting a cognitive route to soften disengagement (Yeager et al., 2014).

In addition to structured programs, the broader process of social-emotional development is crucial. Adolescents who struggle with empathy often face difficulties not only in regulating aggression but also in building stable identities and relationships. Social-emotional competencies, such as emotion recognition and perspective-taking, serve as foundations for moral responsibility; without them, moral disengagement becomes an easier path.

The context matters, too. Online environments can amplify moral disengagement via “online disinhibition”—anonymity and distance make harm feel less real.

Digital-citizenship programs that build “digital empathy” help adolescents re-humanize targets and reduce cyberaggression (Suler, 2004; Jones & Mitchell, 2016; Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016).

Peer influence also plays a decisive role: adolescents immersed in prosocial peer groups are more likely to reinforce empathic responses, whereas deviant peer contexts tend to normalize and reward disengagement strategies. This highlights that empathy is not only an individual trait but also a social process shaped by group dynamics.

Recent research has also highlighted the protective role of emotional intelligence in counteracting the effects of CU traits and moral disengagement. Adolescents with higher levels of emotional awareness and regulation show greater resilience against engaging in antisocial behaviors, even when CU tendencies are present (Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015).

Emotional intelligence fosters not only empathy but also self-reflection, which reduces the reliance on cognitive justifications for harmful actions.

Moreover, cultural factors play an important role. Cross-national studies suggest that in collectivist societies, where empathy and interdependence are highly valued, the relationship between CU traits and moral disengagement is weaker compared to individualistic societies (Hofmann et al., 2018).

This indicates that cultural norms can either buffer or amplify the way empathy functions as a moderator in the link between personality traits and antisocial conduct.

Finally, longitudinal evidence shows that interventions aimed at enhancing empathy, such as perspective-taking training or mindfulness-based programs, can effectively reduce both CU traits and moral disengagement in adolescence (Rizkalla et al., 2023).

Importantly, empathy deficits during adolescence are strong predictors of long-term maladaptive outcomes, including chronic offending, relational difficulties, and reduced capacity for social integration in adulthood (Frick et al., 2014; Shulman et al., 2011).

This reinforces the need to view empathy-building not just as a short-term corrective measure, but as an investment in long-term social development.

Beyond programs, everyday relationships are powerful. Warm, consistent parenting and mentoring relationships model empathic reasoning and provide the “scaffolding” young people need to pause, consider consequences, and resist the pull of justifying harm (Waller et al., 2020; Pardini & Byrd, 2012).

Building these micro-contexts of care is often what turns empathic insight into lasting prosocial habits.

Ultimately, empathy is not only a protective factor against delinquency but also the cornerstone of moral responsibility. For this reason, policies and school systems that institutionalize social-emotional learning are essential for ensuring that adolescents do not merely avoid harm, but also develop the capacity to act as responsible and caring members of society.

3.4 The Albanian Cultural and Social Context: Implications for Empathy, CU Traits, and Moral Disengagement

The study of adolescence in Albania requires close attention to the cultural and social context, since psychological traits such as empathy, callous-unemotional (CU) traits, and moral disengagement develop in constant interaction with the environment.

The profound social and economic changes that the country has experienced since the 1990s have transformed the way families, schools, and communities function. These transformations directly influence how young people construct their identity, how they perceive emotions, and how they make decisions about their everyday behavior (Kotorri, 2017).

3.4.1 The Role of Family and Albanian Society

The family remains the central institution in Albanian culture, traditionally serving as the primary source of emotional support, education, and social control. Parent–child relationships have historically been close, based on strong bonds and parental authority (Qirjazi, 2015).

However, economic hardship, high rates of migration, and rapid urbanization have weakened the family’s capacity to provide stable emotional support and consistent supervision. In many cases, parents working abroad leave behind an emotional vacuum that may contribute to emotional coldness and a reduced sense of guilt in adolescents (Frick et al., 2014).

On the other hand, when families manage to preserve warmth, communication, and supportive relationships, these serve as powerful protective factors against antisocial behaviors (Waller et al., 2020).

3.4.2 Socio-Economic Factors and Education

Albania is marked by visible social and economic inequalities. These inequalities shape how adolescents perceive fairness, justice, and opportunity. Poverty and unequal access to educational services can lead to feelings of frustration and injustice, which favor the emergence of moral disengagement strategies (Bandura, 1999). For instance, an adolescent who experiences discrimination or lack of access to quality education may justify deviant behaviors as unavoidable or as a means of gaining respect and recognition (Flanagan, Auty, & Farrington, 2019).

Schools, which could serve as compensatory environments, often fail to provide sufficient support, leaving young people more exposed to deviant peer influence.

3.4.3 The Digital Environment and the Role of Migration

Beyond family and school, the digital environment plays an increasingly significant role. Social media has become the primary space where adolescents seek identity and peer acceptance. However, online anonymity and blurred boundaries create fertile ground for aggressive behaviors and for the use of moral disengagement mechanisms to justify them (Suler, 2004; Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016).

In Albania, this reality often intersects with migration: many children grow up with parents working abroad, being raised instead by grandparents or relatives. Feelings of abandonment and isolation that result from this situation can weaken empathy and make it easier to justify harmful behaviors. UNICEF (2019) has emphasized that this condition affects not only emotional development but also the ability of young people to build secure and trusting relationships.

3.5 Implications for Research and Practice

From this perspective, it is clear that empathy, CU traits, and moral disengagement do not develop in isolation but are shaped by the structure of Albanian society. For this reason, prevention and intervention programs need to be tailored to the local context.

This means building approaches that reinforce family values, address the emotional consequences of migration, and respond to the challenges of digital life.

Only by considering these factors in their entirety can effective models be developed that reduce the risk of antisocial behavior and strengthen adolescents' capacity to form healthier, more empathic relationships.

Methodology

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between callous–unemotional (CU) traits, empathy, and moral disengagement among adolescents in Albania.

The study places particular emphasis on comparing adolescents in conflict with the law to their non-offending peers, with the broader goal of understanding how these psychological constructs interact and contribute to patterns of antisocial behavior during adolescence.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify differences in CU traits, empathy, and moral disengagement between adolescents in conflict with the law and those who are not.
- To examine the potential protective role of empathy in reducing the likelihood of antisocial behavior.
- To explore gender differences in the levels of CU traits, empathy, and moral disengagement.
- To investigate whether empathy moderates the association between CU traits and moral disengagement.
- To analyze how social and cultural influences interact with cognitive processes (empathy and moral reasoning) in shaping adolescent behavior.

The following hypotheses were formulated based on the theoretical framework and empirical evidence reviewed in the literature, with particular reference to studies examining callous–unemotional traits, empathy, and moral disengagement during adolescence.

Hypotheses of the Study

1. Adolescents in conflict with the law will exhibit higher levels of callous–unemotional (CU) traits and moral disengagement mechanisms compared to their peers who are not in conflict with the law.
2. Adolescents who are not in conflict with the law will demonstrate higher levels of empathy, which functions as a protective factor against engagement in antisocial behavior.

3. There are gender differences in the expression of CU traits, empathy, and moral disengagement, with boys expected to display more direct and aggressive behaviors, while girls are more likely to show indirect forms such as relational aggression.
4. Empathy will moderate the relationship between CU traits and moral disengagement, reducing their influence on antisocial behaviors.
5. Social and cultural factors interact with cognitive processes (empathy, moral justification), influencing the differences observed between groups of adolescents.

Study Design

This research was carried out as a quantitative study with a comparative design, aiming to explore how three important psychological dimensions are related: callous–unemotional (CU) traits, empathy, and moral disengagement mechanisms among Albanian adolescents.

To achieve this goal, the study focused on two distinct groups:

- adolescents who had been involved in conflict with the law, and
- their peers who had no such involvement.

The comparison between these two groups makes it possible to understand both the differences and similarities in how they express empathy, display CU traits, and use different mechanisms to justify antisocial behavior.

This design was chosen because it allows not only a statistical description of the groups but also the possibility to draw conclusions about the protective or risk-related role of psychological factors. By applying a comparative framework, the study addresses a gap in the Albanian context, where little empirical work has examined these constructs systematically. Such a design is also aligned with international approaches to studying antisocial behavior in youth populations (Frick & White, 2008).

In this way, the study provides a framework for examining:

- whether low levels of empathy are linked to higher antisocial tendencies,
- whether CU traits reinforce the use of moral disengagement, and
- how these patterns differ between adolescents with and without legal conflict.

Thus, the study design is not limited to reporting numbers but seeks to explain why such differences occur and how they might inform prevention strategies for reducing antisocial behavior among youth.

Sample

The study sample consisted of 300 adolescents aged 14 to 17 years, divided equally into two groups: 150 adolescents who had been or were currently in conflict with the law and 150 peers with

no such history. This balanced division allowed for direct comparison between the two groups and clearer conclusions about their differences and similarities.

In addition to legal status, the sample reflected a **broad demographic distribution**. The majority were male (63.3%), while females represented 36.7%.

The largest age group was 16 years old (42.7%), followed by 17-year-olds (27%) and 15-year-olds (24.3%), whereas 14-year-olds formed the smallest subgroup (6%).

Most participants lived in urban areas (72.7%), compared to rural areas (27.3%). Regarding parental education, the largest share had parents with secondary education (35.7%), followed by primary education (28%), while smaller proportions reported parents with university (18.3%) or doctoral education (18%).

This demographic structure is comparable to patterns found in other European studies of adolescent delinquency (e.g., Pardini et al., 2006), strengthening the external validity of the results.

However, the predominance of urban participants may reflect socio-environmental influences specific to city contexts, which should be considered in interpreting the findings. Adolescents with severe psychiatric conditions or cognitive impairments that could interfere with questionnaire completion were excluded from the study.

In order to ensure comparability between groups, the comparison group was selected to match the offending group in terms of age, gender, and urban–rural background, thereby reducing the potential influence of confounding factors.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected during the period from April to August in the city of Vlora. The process was designed to respect ethical research standards and to ensure balanced representation of the two groups of adolescents.

Adolescents in conflict with the law were identified through my professional role as a psychologist, assisting with cases involving minors. Their inclusion in the study was limited to situations where participation was appropriate and feasible, and always with parental consent. This process does not bias the sample, since the aim was not to categorize individuals but to represent a specific social group for comparative purposes.

In contrast, adolescents with no legal history were recruited through family and community networks, which included social acquaintances, extended family, and other community contacts. This approach ensured diversity in the comparison group without requiring formal institutional procedures.

Parents were informed in writing about the purpose and nature of the study, the procedures for administering the instruments, and the guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. Written parental consent was obtained, while adolescents gave their verbal assent to participate.

The questionnaires were administered in safe and quiet settings appropriate for adolescents. For participants in conflict with the law, the administration took place in community spaces or psychological offices, always in the presence of their parents.

For those without a legal history, administration was carried out in psychological offices, school environments, or at home, ensuring quiet conditions and parental support.

Since the questionnaires were only research instruments and did not involve institutional data, no formal approval from schools was required.

Each participant completed the questionnaire individually, in calm conditions and without pressure. On average, the completion time ranged from 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the adolescent's pace and level of concentration.

This timeframe was not only adequate for maintaining adolescents' concentration, but it also matched the administration times reported in previous validation studies of the ICU (Frick, 2004), the IRI (Davis, 1983), and the MDS (Bandura et al., 1996).

All participants and their parents were assured that the data would be treated anonymously and confidentially, that participation was entirely voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Instruments

For the purposes of this study, internationally recognized psychological scales were selected to measure callous-unemotional traits, empathy, and moral disengagement in adolescents. Since the instruments were originally in English, a careful process of translation and cultural adaptation was necessary before their use with Albanian participants.

The translation was carried out by a bilingual researcher with expertise in psychological terminology, and then reviewed by a second bilingual psychologist. This two-step approach ensured both linguistic accuracy and conceptual clarity.

The goal was not only to translate the words but to make sure that the items reflected the same meaning and were understandable to Albanian adolescents in their everyday context.

Before beginning the main data collection, a pilot phase was conducted with a small group of adolescents who were not part of the final sample. The pilot helped verify whether the items were clear, age-appropriate, and easy to follow.

Feedback from the adolescents was taken into account, and minor adjustments were made to improve the final version.

The pilot also confirmed that the average time needed to complete the questionnaires was between 15 and 30 minutes, which aligned well with the conditions of the main study.

Finally, formal permission to use the selected instruments was obtained directly from their original authors: Dr. Paul J. Frick for the *Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU)*, Dr. Mark H. Davis for the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)*, and Professor Gian Vittorio Caprara for the *Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS)*.

While the MDS was initially used based on its status as a published and freely accessible academic measure, formal written authorization from Professor Caprara was later obtained, further confirming the ethical compliance of the study. All permissions were granted through email correspondence, ensuring full respect for intellectual property rights and international research ethics standards.

The use of validated, standardized measures not only ensures reliability but also allows for cross-cultural comparisons with international research, positioning this study within a broader scientific discourse.

To assess the main constructs of interest, three standardized psychological measures were employed: the Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU), the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), and the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS). All instruments were translated and adapted into Albanian and tested in a pilot study prior to their use in the main research. The psychometric properties of all instruments used in this study were evaluated based on well-established evidence of

reliability and validity reported in the international literature. All three instruments—the Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU), the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), and the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS)—have been widely used in adolescent samples and have demonstrated stable psychometric properties across different cultural contexts.

1. Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU)

The Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU; Frick, 2004) is an internationally recognized instrument designed to assess callous–unemotional traits in children and adolescents. It consists of 24 self-report items, each rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (“not at all true”) to 3 (“definitely true”). Higher scores indicate a greater presence of CU traits.

Several items in the ICU **are** reverse scored, meaning that higher raw scores indicate lower levels of the construct being measured. These items were recoded prior to analysis, following the scoring guidelines provided by Frick (2004). This procedure ensured consistency in the directionality of all items before computing subscale and total scores.

Beyond its psychometric robustness, the ICU has been consistently validated across different cultural contexts (e.g., Kimonis et al., 2008), making it particularly suitable for adaptation in the Albanian adolescent population. Previous research highlights its predictive value for antisocial and delinquent behaviors, which aligns with the aims of this study (Frick & White, 2008).

The instrument is divided into three subscales, each reflecting a specific dimension of this construct.

Callousness refers to a lack of empathy and guilt. Items in this subscale measure the individual’s ability to experience remorse or moral responsibility.

An illustrative item is *“I do not feel guilty when I do something wrong.”*

Uncaring measures indifference toward performance and everyday responsibilities. This dimension is reflected in items such as *“I do not care if I do well in school.”*

Unemotional focuses on restrictions in emotional expression, meaning the tendency not to display one’s feelings openly. A representative item is *“I hide my feelings from others.”*

The overall Cronbach's α for the full scale was 0.86, indicating high internal consistency and reliability in assessing CU traits among this group. The subscale α values ranged from .62 to .70, demonstrating acceptable internal consistency across the individual dimensions of the measure

The ICU was chosen for this study for several reasons. First, it is one of the most widely used instruments for evaluating CU traits in young populations and has demonstrated robust results across numerous studies.

Beyond providing a total score, its three-dimensional structure helps to better understand how these traits manifest in different aspects of personality.

The ICU is also regarded in the literature as an early marker of risk for antisocial behavior, making it particularly well suited to the goals of this research.

2. Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983) is one of the most widely used instruments for measuring empathy in both adolescents and adults. It consists of 28 self-report items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("does not describe me well") to 5 ("describes me very well"). As recommended by Davis (1983), several items in the IRI are **reverse scored** to control for response bias. These include, for instance, items 3, 4, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18 and 19 (depending on the subscale structure). All reverse-coded items were recoded prior to computing subscale and total empathy scores.

The IRI captures empathy as a multidimensional construct, divided into four subscales that assess both cognitive and affective components.

Perspective Taking measures the individual's tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological viewpoint of others. An illustrative item is "*I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.*"

Fantasy reflects the tendency to identify with characters in books, movies, or plays, by becoming affectively involved in fictional situations. A representative item is "*I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel.*"

Empathic Concern assesses feelings of sympathy and compassion for others who are experiencing difficult situations. An example item is *“I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.”*

Personal Distress measures self-oriented feelings of anxiety and discomfort in response to others’ distress. A typical item is *“Being in a tense emotional situation scares me.”*

In this study, reliability analyses confirmed that the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) demonstrated excellent internal consistency. The corrected item–total correlations ranged from .54 to .63, indicating that all items contributed adequately to the overall construct.

The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the full scale was .85, reflecting high internal consistency. Among the subscales, Empathic Concern showed the highest reliability, while Personal Distress had the lowest, yet remained within acceptable limits.

The IRI was selected for this study because of its ability to provide a nuanced understanding of empathy as both a cognitive and affective process. Unlike instruments that focus solely on emotional responsiveness, the IRI distinguishes between perspective-taking, emotional involvement, and self-oriented distress, allowing for a more comprehensive assessment.

This is particularly important in the context of adolescents, where empathy plays a crucial role in social relationships, moral development, and the regulation of antisocial tendencies. By including the IRI, this study was able to capture not only how adolescents feel for others, but also how they cognitively engage with different perspectives, offering a richer analysis of empathy within this population.

3. Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS)

The Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS; Bandura et al., 1996) is a widely recognized instrument used to measure the cognitive mechanisms through which individuals justify antisocial or harmful behavior and reduce feelings of guilt. In this study, the shortened 26-item version was employed, adapted from the original 32-item version for reasons of practicality.

The shorter form has been shown to preserve solid psychometric qualities while being more appropriate for large adolescent samples.

Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Higher scores indicate a greater tendency to morally disengage, whereas lower scores suggest reduced reliance on such cognitive strategies.

The scale captures the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement proposed by Bandura, each illustrated by statements that reveal how adolescents may rationalize harmful actions.

For instance, moral justification is reflected in items that reframe wrongdoing as serving a higher purpose, such as justifying harmful behavior if it helps to achieve an important goal.

Euphemistic labeling appears in items that soften or sanitize harmful behavior through language, making it seem less severe.

Advantageous comparison is expressed through statements that minimize wrongdoing by contrasting it with more serious offenses, for example describing lying as acceptable because it is “better” than stealing.

Other mechanisms emphasize the shifting of responsibility. Displacement of responsibility is reflected in items where the blame is attributed to authority figures, suggesting that if a harmful act was committed under orders, the individual is not truly at fault.

Similarly, diffusion of responsibility is illustrated in statements where blame is shared across a group, such as implying that when everyone engages in a certain behavior, no one can be held fully accountable.

Minimization or distortion of consequences is captured through items that downplay the actual harm caused, for instance suggesting that hurting someone “a little” is not really that serious.

The final two mechanisms deal with perceptions of others. Dehumanization of victims emerges in strong statements such as “*Some people deserve to be treated badly because they behave like beasts*”, stripping victims of their humanity and making mistreatment easier to justify.

Attribution of blame to victims is reflected in items that suggest retaliation is acceptable, for example “*It is alright to insult someone who insulted you*”. In this way, the responsibility for harmful behavior is shifted onto the victim rather than the perpetrator.

In this study, the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS) demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's α of .89. The corrected item–total correlations ranged from .44 to .69, indicating that most items contributed adequately to the construct. Only one subscale, **Displacement of Responsibility**, showed a comparatively lower correlation, while all other subscales exhibited acceptable internal consistency.

The MDS was chosen for this study because it allows for a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes adolescents use to legitimize or excuse antisocial behavior. By revealing how moral reasoning can be disengaged through mechanisms like justification, minimization of harm, or dehumanization, the instrument provides crucial insights into the ways in which young people may normalize behaviors that violate social and moral norms. Its strong validation in international research and the excellent psychometric performance observed in this sample support its use as a reliable tool for assessing moral disengagement in the Albanian context.

Data Analysis

Following the administration of the instruments described above, the collected data were entered and processed using SPSS version 28, which was employed for all statistical analyses in this study. The data analysis proceeded in several stages, moving from descriptive statistics to more advanced inferential techniques, in order to ensure a comprehensive and reliable interpretation of the findings.

In the first stage, descriptive analyses were conducted to summarize the main characteristics of the sample and the distribution of scores across each instrument. Indicators such as means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values were reported, providing an initial overview of callous–unemotional traits, empathy, and moral disengagement among the adolescents.

For the Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU), both total and subscale scores (Callousness, Uncaring, and Unemotional) were calculated. Descriptive statistics were reported for each subscale, and internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's α . Group comparisons (e.g., by gender and legal status) were performed through *t*-tests and ANOVA to determine whether significant differences emerged in the manifestation of CU traits.

For the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), descriptive analyses were carried out for the four subscales (Perspective Taking, Fantasy, Empathic Concern, and Personal Distress). Internal consistency was examined through Cronbach's α for both the total scale and each subscale.

Comparative analyses, including independent-samples *t*-tests and ANOVA, were used to explore differences in empathy levels between groups, while Pearson correlations examined the associations between empathy, CU traits, and moral disengagement.

For the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS), analyses included the calculation of total scores as well as the contribution of items to each of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. Cronbach's α was used to evaluate internal consistency, and correlations were run to assess the relationships between disengagement mechanisms, CU traits, and empathy. Group comparisons (by gender and legal status) were again conducted using *t*-tests and ANOVA, supported by post-hoc tests where appropriate.

Beyond descriptive and comparative statistics, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine linear relationships among the three key constructs of the study: callous–unemotional traits, empathy, and moral disengagement. These analyses were essential for identifying both the strength and direction of the associations.

Finally, linear regression models were developed to test the study's core hypotheses. These models assessed whether CU traits predicted the use of moral disengagement mechanisms, and whether empathy functioned as a protective factor in this relationship. Interaction effects were also tested to explore whether the predictive power of CU traits on moral disengagement varied depending on levels of empathy.

Overall, the combination of descriptive statistics, group comparisons, correlation analyses, and regression modeling provided a rigorous and comprehensive framework for testing the research hypotheses and addressing the objectives of the study.

Ethical Considerations

This study was carried out in line with the basic ethical principles of scientific research and with international guidelines for the protection of participants. Since adolescents were involved, special measures were taken to safeguard their rights and well-being. Before completing the questionnaires, participants were clearly informed about the purpose and nature of the study.

Where required, parents or legal guardians were also notified. Informed consent was obtained voluntarily, and every participant had the right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences.

Confidentiality was fully guaranteed: the data contained no names or identifying information, and each participant was assigned only an anonymous code. All data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

The ethical procedures followed are consistent with the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013), ensuring the integrity of the research and the protection of vulnerable participants such as minors.

Methodological Limitations

Although the study was carefully designed, some limitations should be acknowledged. One limitation is the use of self-report questionnaires, which can sometimes be influenced by participants' tendency to give socially desirable answers or by difficulties in recalling experiences accurately. Another limitation is the cross-sectional design of the study, which makes it possible to identify relationships between variables but not to draw firm conclusions about cause and effect.

The sample was also limited and does not represent the wider population. Nevertheless, this research carries particular importance because it is among the first studies to explore callous–unemotional traits, empathy, and moral disengagement in this context.

Despite these limitations, the use of standardized instruments, the inclusion of two well-matched groups, and the rigorous statistical analyses enhance the validity of the findings and provide a strong foundation for future research in Albania.

Even though it was not conducted in Albania, the findings make a valuable contribution to the scientific literature and can serve as a first step for similar studies in the Albanian setting. In this way, the study is not only useful for understanding these constructs in the examined sample but also acts as a foundation for future research in the country.

In conclusion, the methodology of this study involved a clear research design, careful sample selection, the use of standardized instruments, and appropriate statistical analyses, ensuring both reliability and validity in measuring the main constructs.

Ethical standards were respected, and methodological limitations were acknowledged, strengthening the transparency and integrity of the research process. The following chapter presents the main results of the study, shedding light on the relationships between callous–unemotional traits, empathy, and moral disengagement among adolescents.

Results

The presentation of results begins with an overview of the participants, in order to provide a clearer picture of the sample included in this research. Descriptive findings of the main study variables are then reported, offering insight into the levels of empathy, callous–unemotional traits, and moral disengagement among adolescents.

These preliminary results set the ground for the subsequent testing of the study hypotheses, where the relationships between the variables are examined in detail.

Before turning to the study hypotheses, it is important to first provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1 displays the key background characteristics of the participants.

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	190	63.3%
	Female	110	36.7%
Legal status	In conflict with law	150	50%
	Not in conflict with law	150	50%
Type of offense	Theft	32	10.7%
	Violence	37	12.3%
	Drug-related	30	10%
	Property damage	23	7.7%
	Driving without a license	28	9.3%
Age	14 years old	18	6%
	15 years old	73	24.3%
	16 years old	128	42.7%
	17 years old	81	27%
Residence	City	218	72.7%
	Village	82	27.3%
Parentaleducation	Primary	84	28%
	Secondary	107	35.7%
	University	55	18.3%

Doctorate	54	18%
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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

In this study, a total of 300 adolescents were included, the majority of whom were male (63.3%), while female participants constituted 36.7%.

With respect to age, the largest group was 16 years old (42.7%), followed by those aged 17 (27%) and 15 (24.3%), while 14-year-olds represented the smallest proportion of the sample (6%). This distribution indicates that most participants were in mid-to-late adolescence, a developmental stage often associated with heightened risk-taking and rule-breaking behaviors.

Regarding legal status, half of the participants (50%) were in conflict with the law, while the other half (50%) were not, creating a balanced distribution that allows direct comparisons between these groups.

In terms of the type of offense, violent acts (12.3%) and theft (10.7%) were the most frequently reported, followed by drug-related offenses (10%), driving without a license (9.3%), and property damage (7.7%). These findings suggest that antisocial behaviors in the sample were predominantly linked to aggression and acts directly affecting others or their property.

With respect to residence, most adolescents came from urban areas (72.7%), while a smaller proportion were from rural areas (27.3%).

Regarding parental education, the largest group had parents with a secondary education (35.7%), followed by those with primary education (28%), university education (18.3%), and doctorate degrees (18%).

This distribution indicates that while a considerable number of parents had lower levels of education, there was also a notable proportion with higher education, reflecting a diverse socioeconomic background among the participants.

The demographic data provided a clear understanding of the sample composition in terms of age, gender, legal status, residence, and parental education, offering an overall picture of the participants' characteristics.

These data form the basis upon which the subsequent psychometric results are interpreted. In the following section, the results of the three instruments used – the Interpersonal Reactivity Index

(IRI), the Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU), and the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS) – are presented.

Subscale	No. of items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Perspective Taking	7	2	26	14	5.29
Fantasy	7	1	27	13.99	5.49
Empathic Concern	7	1	28	13.86	5.57
Personal Distress	7	0	27	13.98	5.14
Empathy	28	11	98	55.85	18.02
Cronbach'sα					0.85

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and reliability for Empathy

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983) was used to assess empathy in adolescents, encompassing both cognitive and affective dimensions.

The Perspective Taking (PT) subscale recorded a mean of $M = 14.00$, $SD = 5.29$ (range 2–26), suggesting a moderate tendency among participants to consider and understand other people's viewpoints.

The Fantasy (FS) subscale showed a mean of $M = 13.99$, $SD = 5.49$ (range 1–27), indicating that adolescents moderately identified with fictional characters and emotionally engaged in imagined situations.

The Empathic Concern (EC) subscale had a mean of $M = 13.86$, $SD = 5.57$ (range 1–28), reflecting an average level of compassion and concern for others experiencing difficulties.

Meanwhile, the *Personal Distress (PD)* subscale resulted in $M = 13.98$, $SD = 5.14$ (range 0–27), showing that adolescents reported a comparable level of self-oriented discomfort when witnessing others' distress.

The total empathy score ranged from 11 to 98, with an average of $M = 55.85$, $SD = 18.02$, indicating moderate and balanced empathy levels among participants. The internal consistency of the total scale was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$), confirming that the instrument was reliable within this sample.

Overall, adolescents in this study demonstrated moderate and well-balanced empathy, showing both the ability to understand others' perspectives and to share their emotional experiences.

Given these results, it becomes important to examine the extent to which the absence of empathy manifests through callous–unemotional traits, as shown in Table 3.

Subscale	No.of items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Callousness	11	2	31	16.63	6.14
Uncaring	8	6	26	14.51	3.95
Unemotional	5	0	15	7.53	3.50
Callous-unemotional traits	24	5	69	36.23	13.11
Cronbach's α (total)					0.86

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and reliability for ICU

The Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU; Frick, 2004) was used to assess callous–unemotional characteristics in adolescents.

The Callousness subscale recorded a mean of $M = 16.63$, $SD = 6.14$ (range 2–31), indicating a moderate tendency among participants to display a lack of guilt or empathy toward others.

The Uncaring subscale showed a mean of $M = 14.51$, $SD = 3.95$ (range 6–26), suggesting that adolescents moderately tended to disregard the quality of their performance or the feelings of others.

The Unemotional subscale resulted in a mean of $M = 7.53$, $SD = 3.50$ (range 0–15), reflecting a relatively low level of emotional expression among participants.

The total score for callous–unemotional traits ranged from 5 to 69, with an average of $M = 36.23$, $SD = 13.11$, indicating moderate levels of CU traits across the sample. The overall Cronbach's α for the full scale was 0.86, confirming high internal consistency and reliability for assessing CU traits in this group.

Subscale α values ranged from 0.62 to 0.70, demonstrating acceptable internal consistency across the individual dimensions of the measure.

To better understand the cognitive mechanisms that may justify or rationalize such behaviors, the analysis proceeds with Table 4, which examines moral disengagement.

Subscale	No.of items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Moral Justification	3	3	15	8.84	2.99
Euphemistic Labeling	3	0	12	5.93	2.88
Advantageous Comparison	3	3	15	8.9	2.94
Displacement of Responsibility	3	3	15	8.92	3
Diffusion of Responsibility	3	3	15	8.87	2.94
Distortion of Consequences	3	3	15	8.91	3.04
Dehumanization	3	3	15	8.81	3.07
Attribution of Blame	5	5	24	13.99	4.51
MDS Total	26	36	127	76.16	19.30
Cronbach's α					0.89

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and reliability for MDS

Results from the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS) showed that adolescents occasionally used different cognitive mechanisms to excuse or justify their behavior. Overall, the levels of moral disengagement were moderate within this group.

For the *Moral Justification* subscale, the mean score was $M = 8.84$, $SD = 2.99$ (range 3–15), suggesting that some participants tended to view certain harmful actions as acceptable if they believed those actions served a greater or beneficial purpose.

In *Euphemistic Labeling* ($M = 5.93$, $SD = 2.88$, range 0–12), adolescents occasionally used milder or less negative language to describe behaviors that could otherwise be perceived as wrong.

The *Advantageous Comparison* subscale ($M = 8.90$, $SD = 2.94$, range 3–15) indicated that participants sometimes minimized their actions by comparing them with those of others perceived as worse.

The *Displacement of Responsibility* subscale ($M = 8.92$, $SD = 3.00$, range 3–15) showed that some adolescents tended to shift responsibility for their actions onto authority figures or situational pressures.

Regarding *Diffusion of Responsibility* ($M = 8.87$, $SD = 2.94$, range 3–15), results suggested that adolescents sometimes shared blame within a group, thereby reducing their own sense of accountability.

The *Distortion of Consequences* subscale ($M = 8.91$, $SD = 3.04$, range 3–15) revealed a tendency among some participants to minimize or overlook the negative impact of their actions.

Scores on the *Dehumanization* subscale ($M = 8.81$, $SD = 3.07$, range 3–15) were slightly lower compared to other mechanisms, suggesting that most adolescents did not strongly perceive others as less human or less deserving of respect.

Finally, the *Attribution of Blame* subscale ($M = 13.99$, $SD = 4.51$, range 5–24) indicated that some adolescents tended to externalize responsibility by attributing their behavior to the actions of others.

The total MDS score ranged from 36 to 127 ($M = 76.16$, $SD = 19.30$), showing an overall moderate level of moral disengagement among participants. The reliability of the scale was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$).

These findings suggest that adolescents sometimes employ moral disengagement strategies—such as justifying harmful acts, minimizing consequences, or shifting blame—to rationalize antisocial behavior. This pattern is consistent with the levels of empathy and callous–unemotional traits observed in the sample.

Before proceeding to hypothesis testing, we examined the bivariate relationships between the three main constructs—empathy (IRI), callous–unemotional traits (ICU), and moral disengagement (MDS)—as well as their respective subscales.

The correlation matrix provides a comprehensive overview of how these psychological dimensions interrelate within the sample.

Variables	1	2	3
1. Empathy	1	–.620**	–.644**

2. Callous–Unemotional Traits	1	.673**
3. Moral Disengagement		1

r = Pearson's correlation coefficient.
p < .01 (2-tailed).

Table 5 : Pearson correlations among total scores of empathy (IRI), callous–unemotional traits (ICU), and moral disengagement (MDS)

To explore how the three main constructs—empathy, callous–unemotional traits, and moral disengagement—relate to each other, a Pearson product–moment correlation analysis was conducted. This method was chosen to examine the strength and direction of linear relationships among the continuous variables.

The results showed a strong negative relationship between empathy and both callous–unemotional traits ($r = -.620$, $p < .001$) and moral disengagement ($r = -.644$, $p < .001$). In other words, adolescents with lower empathy tended to exhibit higher levels of callous–unemotional characteristics and were more likely to justify or excuse antisocial behavior through mechanisms of moral disengagement.

Additionally, callous–unemotional traits were strongly and positively correlated with moral disengagement ($r = .673$, $p < .001$), indicating that adolescents who displayed greater emotional coldness or lack of empathy were also more inclined to use cognitive justifications that reduce guilt or personal responsibility.

Taken together, these findings reveal a clear and consistent pattern: as empathy decreases, both callous–unemotional traits and moral disengagement increase. This suggests that emotional understanding and moral awareness play a crucial role in buffering against antisocial or harmful behaviors among adolescents.

To test Hypothesis 1—that adolescents in conflict with the law would score higher on callous–unemotional (ICU) traits and moral disengagement (MDS) than their non-offending peers—we followed a standard, three-step analytic sequence used in empirical studies. First, we present descriptive statistics to contextualize the group means.

Second, we assess distributional assumptions via normality tests to justify the choice of parametric inference. Third, we report independent-samples t-tests, including effect sizes and confidence intervals, to evaluate the magnitude and significance of the group differences.

After describing the central tendency and variability in each group, we proceed to test distributional assumptions to ensure that subsequent inferential tests are appropriate.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	Min–Max
Moral Disengagement	Non-offender	150	70.64	18.94	36-117
Moral Disengagement	Offender	150	81.68	18.10	41-127
Callous-unemotional traits	Non-offender	150	32.99	12.60	5-64
Callous-unemotional traits	Offender	150	39.47	12.86	8–69

Table 6: Descriptive statistics for MDS_TOT and ICU_TOT by legal status

The comparison between offenders and non-offenders revealed clear and meaningful group differences on both measures.

For moral disengagement, the average score of offenders ($M = 81.68$, $SD = 18.10$) was notably higher than that of non-offenders ($M = 70.64$, $SD = 18.94$), representing a mean gap of about 11 points.

Similarly, offenders reported higher callous–unemotional traits ($M = 39.47$, $SD = 12.86$) compared with non-offenders ($M = 32.99$, $SD = 12.60$), with a mean gap of approximately 6.5 points.

These observed differences in group means suggested substantial disparities that warranted formal statistical testing. Given these pronounced mean differences, the next step was to examine whether the data met the assumption of normality, which determines the suitability of parametric tests.

Variable	Group	K–S (Sig.)	Shapiro–Wilk (Sig.)
Moral Disengagement	Non-offender	.013	.002
Moral Disengagement	Offender	.200	.366

Callous-unemotional traits	Non-offender	.200	.547
Callous-unemotional traits	Offender	.200	.400

Table 7 : Tests of normality

Tests of normality showed that moral disengagement was approximately normal in the offender group ($p > .05$) but slightly deviated from normality among non-offenders ($p = .002$). Callous–unemotional traits were normally distributed across both groups ($p > .05$). Despite this minor deviation, the large sample size ($N = 150$ per group) ensured robustness of the results under the central Limit Theorem

Following this verification, it was appropriate to conduct independent-samples t -tests to determine whether the observed mean differences were statistically significant.

Variable	Levene's F	Levene's Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	SE Difference
Moral Disengagement	.253	.615	-5.16	298	< .001	-11.04	2.14
Callous-unemotional	.181	.671	-4.40	298	< .001	-6.47	1.47

Table 8: Independent-samples t -tests comparing offenders and non-offenders

Independent-samples t -tests confirmed that the differences between offenders and non-offenders were statistically significant. For moral disengagement, offenders scored higher by an average of 11.04 points, $t(298) = -5.16$, $p < .001$, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -15.25 to -6.83 . For callous–unemotional traits, the mean difference was 6.47 points, $t(298) = -4.40$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-9.37, -3.58]$

Effect size analyses indicated that the magnitude of these differences was medium to large, with Cohen's $d = 0.60$ for moral disengagement and $d = 0.51$ for callous–unemotional traits. These findings demonstrate that the differences are not only statistically significant but also of practical importance

Taken together, the results strongly support Hypothesis 1, confirming that adolescents in conflict with the law exhibit higher levels of both moral disengagement and callous–unemotional traits than their non-offending peers.

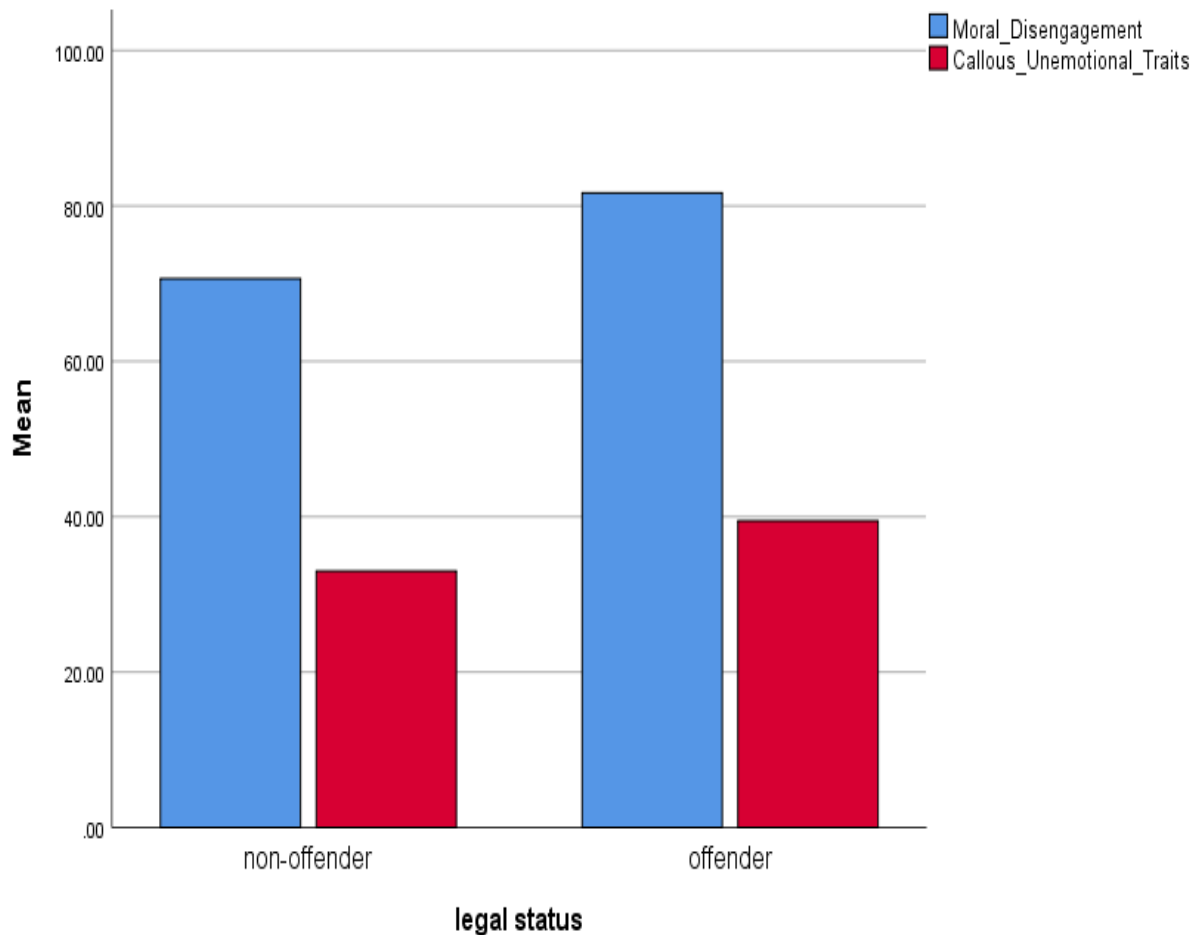


Figure 1. Mean scores of Moral Disengagement (MDS_TOT) and Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU_TOT) by legal status

The bar chart shows that offenders scored higher than non-offenders on both moral disengagement and callous–unemotional traits.

This indicates that adolescents in conflict with the law tend to use more moral disengagement mechanisms and display higher levels of callous–unemotional characteristics. The difference between the two groups is clear, visually supporting the first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 stated that *adolescents who are not in conflict with the law would display higher levels of empathy, which serves as a protective factor against engagement in antisocial behaviors.*

To examine this, the analysis proceeded in two stages.

First, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare empathy scores (Empathy) between offenders and non-offenders.

Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	95% CI (Lower–Upper)	t (df)	p
Non-offender	150	62.03	17.83				
Offender	150	49.67	16.04				
Difference				12.35	8.50 – 16.21	6.31(298)	<.001

Table 9 : Independent Samples t-test for Empathy (IRI_TOT) by Legal Status

Adolescents who were not in conflict with the law reported higher empathy ($M = 62.03$, $SD = 17.83$) than those who were offenders ($M=49.67$, $SD=16.04$). This difference of 12.35 points was statistically significant, $t(298) = 6.31$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [8.50, 16.21].

Second, in order to test whether empathy functions as a protective factor against antisocial tendencies, a multivariate analysis (MANOVA) was performed with callous–unemotional traits and moral disengagement as dependent variables, and empathy as a covariate.

Test	Value	F	Hyp df	Error df	Sig.
Wilks' Lambda	0.576	113.17	2	296	<.001
Pillai's Trace	0.433	113.17	2	296	<.001

Table 10 : Multivariate Tests (MANOVA) for the Effect of Empathy on Antisocial Traits

The MANCOVA results revealed a strong multivariate effect of empathy on the combined dependent variables, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.567$, $F(2, 296) = 113.17$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .43$. This means that empathy accounted for roughly 43 percent of the variance in callous–unemotional traits and moral disengagement together a remarkably strong influence. By contrast, the overall effect of legal status was not significant ($\Lambda = 0.992$, $F(2, 296) = 1.24$, $p = .29$)

Once empathy was taken into account, the difference between offenders and non-offenders essentially disappeared. This pattern suggests that empathy itself — not simply whether someone has offended or not plays the key role in explaining antisocial tendencies.

To further explore these effects, separate univariate tests were examined to identify how empathy and legal status independently predicted each dependent variable.

Source	Dependent Variable	F	Sig.	Partial η^2
Empathy	Callous–Unemotional Traits	156.63	< .001	.35
Empathy	Moral Disengagement	173.11	< .001	.37
Legal Status	Callous–Unemotional Traits	0.65	.42	.00
Legal Status	Moral Disengagement	2.47	.12	.01

Table 11. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Empathy and Legal Status

At the individual level, empathy significantly predicted both outcomes.

Adolescents with higher empathy showed lower callous–unemotional traits ($F(1, 297) = 156.63, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .35$) and lower moral disengagement ($F(1, 297) = 173.11, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .37$)

The effect sizes were large, indicating that empathy had a substantial and reliable influence across both emotional and moral dimensions . In contrast, legal status did not reach significance once empathy was controlled, reinforcing the view that empathy is the true protective factor.

To better understand the specific direction of these effects, parameter estimates were examined. These values show how changes in empathy are directly related to variations in callous–unemotional traits and moral disengagement.

In other words, they help clarify how increases in empathy correspond to decreases in antisocial tendencies among adolescents.

Dependent Variable	B	SE	t	p	95% CI (Lower–Upper)
Callous–Unemotional Traits	–0.498	0.018	–27.00	< .001	–0.534 – –0.462

Moral Disengagement	-0.632	0.016	-40.43	< .001	-0.663 – -0.602
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Table 12. Parameter estimates for Callous–Unemotional Traits and Moral Disengagement predicted by Empathy

The parameter estimates confirmed a clear and consistent negative relationship between empathy and both antisocial constructs. Higher empathy scores were strongly linked to **lower** callous–unemotional traits ($B = -0.498$, $p < 0.01$) and lower moral disengagement ($B = -0.632$, $p < .001$). These results underline empathy’s role as a psychological buffer, helping to reduce emotional coldness and moral detachment among adolescents.

To evaluate **Hypothesis 3**, which stated that gender differences would emerge in the expression of callous–unemotional traits, empathy, and moral disengagement, the analysis was carried out in several stages.

The analysis began with descriptive statistics to observe general gender patterns across empathy, callous–unemotional traits, and moral disengagement.

Variable	Gender	Mean	SD	N
Empathy	Female	61.38	17.13	110
	Male	52.65	17.80	190
Callous–Unemotional Traits	Female	34.97	12.33	110
	Male	36.96	13.53	190
Moral Disengagement	Female	74.71	19.64	110
	Male	77.00	19.11	190

Table 13. Descriptive Statistics by Gender

On average, girls scored higher on empathy, while boys showed slightly higher levels of callous–unemotional traits and moral disengagement. These differences suggest a general pattern where females show greater emotional and moral sensitivity, though statistical tests were needed to confirm whether these differences were significant.

To examine whether these differences were statistically significant, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted with gender as the independent variable and empathy, callous–unemotional traits, and moral disengagement as dependent variables.

Effect	Test	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	p	Partial η^2
Gender	Pillai's Trace	.071	7.57	3	296	.001	.071

Table 14: Multivariate Test of Gender Effect

The MANOVA indicated a significant overall effect of gender, $F(3, 296) = 7.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .071$, meaning that gender explained around 7% of the variance across the three variables combined.

This confirms that, when considered together, boys and girls differed in their emotional and moral characteristics.

Given this significant overall effect, we proceeded with univariate analyses (ANOVAs) to determine how gender specifically influenced each dependent variable.

Variable	F(1,298)	p	Partial η^2
Empathy	17.25	< .001	.055
Callous–Unemotional Traits	1.60	.207	.005
Moral Disengagement	0.98	.323	.003

Table 15: Univariate Tests of Gender Differences (ANOVA)

Follow-up univariate tests showed that gender had a significant effect only on empathy, $F(1, 298) = 17.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .055$.

Girls scored higher on empathy compared to boys, explaining about 5.5% of the variance. No significant gender differences were found for callous–unemotional traits or moral disengagement.

Overall, the results partially supported Hypothesis 3. Girls showed higher levels of empathy, while boys scored slightly higher on callous–unemotional traits and moral disengagement, though these differences were not significant.

This suggests that gender mainly affects emotional responsiveness rather than antisocial behavior during adolescence.

Hypothesis 4 stated that empathy would moderate the relationship between callous–unemotional traits and moral disengagement, with the expectation that higher empathy would weaken this link.

To examine this, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. In the baseline model, CU traits and empathy were entered as predictors of moral disengagement .

An extended model was then tested by adding the interaction term (CUxEmpathy) to assess whether moderation effects were present.

Model	R	R ²	ΔR ²	F Change	Sig. F Change
1	.732	.536	—	171.85	< .001
2	.734	.539	.002	1.48	.224

Table 16: Model Summary of Hierarchical Regression for Hypothesis 4

The first model explained 53.6% of the variance in moral disengagement ($p < .001$), meaning CU traits and empathy together strongly predicted moral disengagement.

When the interaction term (CU×Empathy) was added, the improvement in explained variance was very small ($\Delta R^2=.002$) and not significant ($p=.224$) This means empathy did not significantly moderate the relationship between CU traits and moral disengagement.

To provide further detail, the following table presents the regression coefficients for each predictor across the two models.

Model	Predictor	B	β	t	p
1	(Constant)	74.61	—	14.40	.000
	Empathy	-.396	-.370	-7.34	.000
	CU Traits	.653	.444	8.81	.000
2	(Constant)	66.65	—	7.99	.000
	Empathy	-.260	-.242	-2.09	.037
	CU Traits	.851	.578	4.76	.000
	CU×Empathy	-.004	-.124	-1.22	.224

Table 17 : Coefficients of Hierarchical Regression for Hypothesis 4

In Model 2, which included the interaction term (CU×Empathy), both CU traits ($B = 0.851, p < .001$) and empathy ($B = -0.260, p = .037$) remained significant predictors. However, the interaction effect was not significant ($B = -0.004, t = -1.22, p = .224^*$).

This suggests that empathy continues to act as a strong direct protective factor, but it does not moderate the relationship between CU traits and moral disengagement.

Simply put, adolescents with higher empathy tend to show less moral disengagement overall, regardless of how high or low their CU traits are.

To visually represent the relationship identified in the regression analysis, Figure 2 displays a scatterplot illustrating the association between empathy and moral disengagement

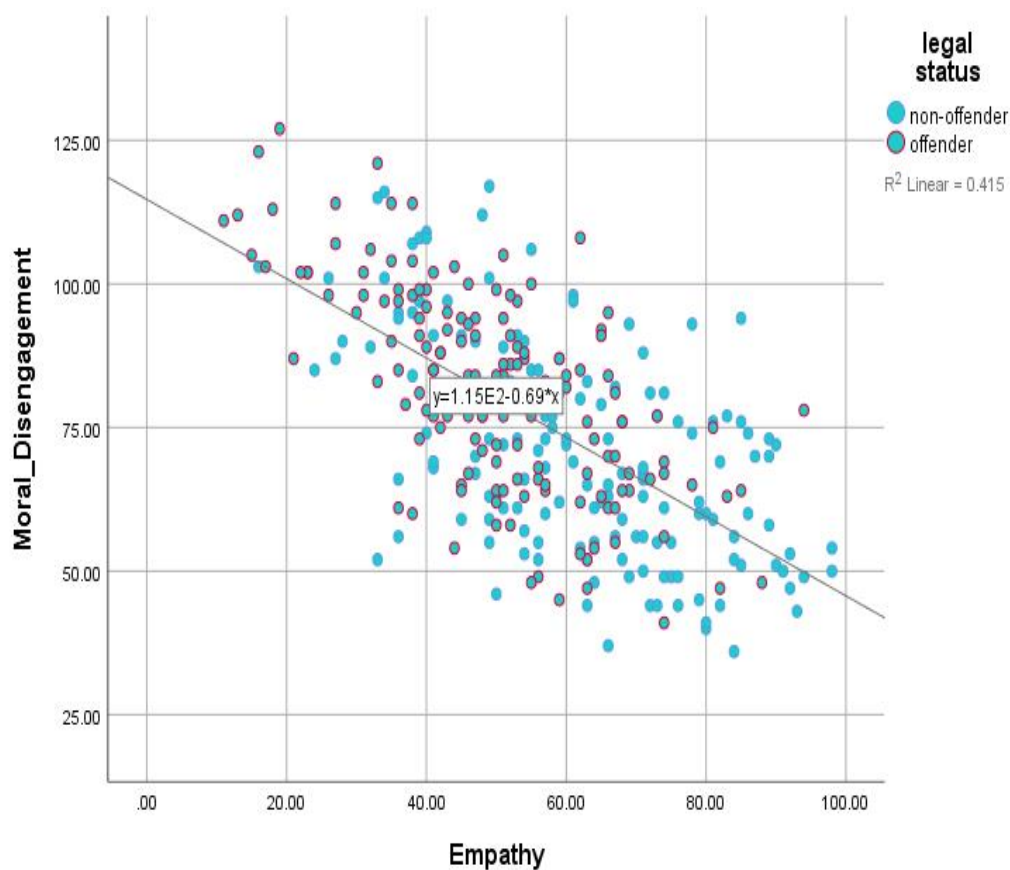


Figure 2: Scatterplot illustrating the negative relationship between empathy and moral disengagement with linear regression line

Figure 2 illustrates the negative relationship between empathy and moral disengagement. As empathy increases, moral disengagement decreases, showing that adolescents with greater empathy are less likely to justify or engage in antisocial behaviors.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that social and cultural factors interact with cognitive processes (empathy, moral justification), influencing the manifestation of differences among groups of adolescents.

Interaction	Dependent Variable	F	p	Interpretation
Residence × Empathy	Moral Disengagement	5.91	.016	Significant — Empathy stronger in urban adolescents
Residence × Moral Justification	Moral Disengagement	3.66	.057	Near significance (trend)
Parental Education × Moral Justification	Moral Disengagement	2.31	.076	Marginal effect

Table 19. Key Between-Subjects Effects for Hypothesis 5

The results showed that only the interaction between residence and empathy had a significant effect on moral disengagement ($p = .016$). This means that empathy works differently depending on where adolescents live — it seems to protect better those living in cities, helping them show less moral disengagement compared to those in rural areas.

A second interaction, residence and moral justification, was close to significance ($p = .057$), which suggests that where a person lives might also slightly affect how they reason about moral issues, although this effect was small.

No important effects were found for parental education or age. It's possible that this happened because most parents in the sample had low levels of education, which reduces differences between groups and makes it harder to see clear effects.

In short, Hypothesis 5 was partly confirmed: the social environment — especially living in a rural or urban area — seems to shape how empathy influences moral behavior, while age and parents' education did not show strong effects.

These differences are also reflected graphically.

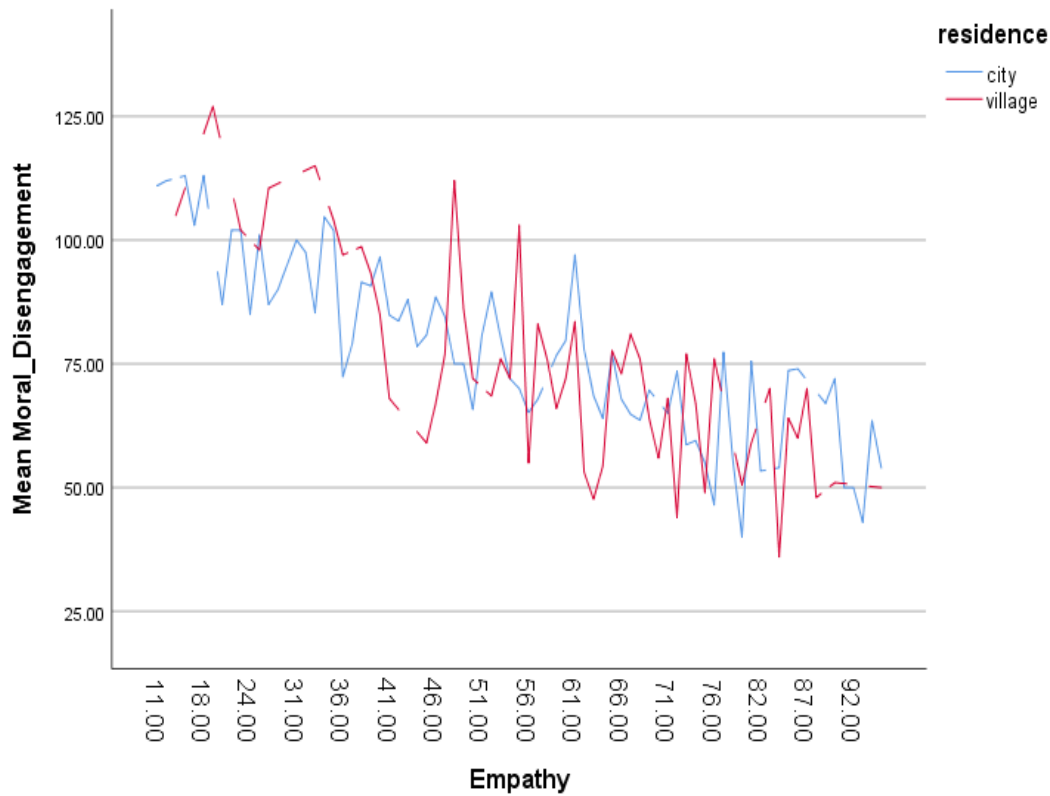


Figure 3: Relationship Between Empathy and Moral Disengagement by Residence

From the figure, it is clear that adolescents living in cities tend to show slightly higher levels of moral disengagement compared to those living in villages. However, in both groups, as empathy increases, moral disengagement decreases noticeably, suggesting that empathy plays a strong protective role regardless of the living environment.

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between empathy, callous–unemotional (CU) traits, and mechanisms of moral disengagement among adolescents, by comparing those in conflict with the law with their non-offending peers.

The findings clearly demonstrated that adolescents in conflict with the law exhibited significantly higher levels of CU traits and moral disengagement, as well as markedly lower levels of empathy.

The analyses confirmed that empathy acts as a strong protective factor against antisocial tendencies, showing a significant negative association with both callous–unemotional (CU) traits and moral disengagement. In contrast, CU traits were positively related to moral disengagement, indicating that adolescents with higher levels of emotional coldness or lack of guilt are more likely to use cognitive justifications that minimize the wrongfulness of their behavior.

Gender differences were significant for empathy, with females scoring higher than males, whereas no significant gender differences emerged for CU traits or moral disengagement.

The expected moderating effect of empathy on the relationship between CU traits and moral disengagement was not supported, suggesting that empathy works primarily as a direct protective factor rather than a buffer between these variables. Importantly, residence showed a significant interaction with empathy: the protective role of empathy against moral disengagement was stronger among adolescents living in urban areas, whereas this effect was weaker in rural contexts .

This may reflect differences in exposure to social norms, peer influences, and access to prosocial experiences that encourage moral reflection.

By contrast, age and parental education were not significant predictors, suggesting that their influence is less pronounced compared to the impact of residence and individual empathy.

Overall, the findings highlight the combined effect of personal cognitive mechanisms (empathy and CU traits) and socio–contextual conditions (residential environment) in shaping the development of moral disengagement and the potential for antisocial behavior among adolescents.

Hypothesis 1: Adolescents in conflict with the law exhibit higher CU traits and moral disengagement

The findings supported the first hypothesis, showing that adolescents in conflict with the law scored higher on both callous–unemotional (CU) traits and moral disengagement than their non-offending peers.

For moral disengagement, offenders had an average score of 81.68 (SD = 18.10), while non-offenders scored 70.64 (SD=18.94). For CU traits, offenders scored 39.47 (SD = 12.86), compared to 32.99 (SD = 12.60) in the non-offending group.

These differences show that both traits play an important role in explaining why some adolescents are more likely to engage in antisocial behavior.

Previous studies have shown that CU traits are linked to serious and repeated antisocial behavior, often accompanied by a lack of guilt and empathy (Frick & White, 2008). Adolescents who score high on these traits are more likely to be aggressive and to break rules repeatedly (Parrdini & Fite, 2010).

Recent work also shows that CU traits are related to proactive aggression and lower levels of empathy, even when general antisocial behavior is taken into account (Goulter et al., 2022; Corbelli et al., 2014). This suggests that CU traits represent a specific emotional style rather than just a more extreme form of antisocial behavior.

Moral disengagement refers to the ways people justify or excuse harmful actions so that they don't feel dully about them.

As Bandura (1999) explained, when moral control is turned off, people can harm others without remorse. Young offenders often use strategies like blaming others, minimizing the harm done, or comparing their actions with worse behaviors (Pelton et al., 2004; Hyde et al., 2010).

Research shows that adolescents who commit crimes score higher on moral disengagement than those who only break school or social rules, making it one of the strongest predictors of antisocial behavior (Rico et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2023).

When moral disengagement is combined with low self-control, it explains a large part of deviant behavior (Schmitt et al., 2024). This means these thought patterns are not just consequences of antisocial acts but help sustain them.

When high CU traits and moral disengagement appear together, they create a strong risk factor.

CU traits reduce empathy and emotional concern, while moral disengagement provides a way to justify harmful acts.

Together, they make antisocial behavior more likely to continue and become a stable pattern over time. These findings show that prevention and intervention should target both emotional and cognitive aspects.

Programs that help adolescents build empathy and emotional understanding, along with activities that challenge their justifications and promote responsibility, are likely to be more effective. Working on both areas together can reduce reoffending and support lasting positive change.

Hypothesis 2: Empathy as a Protective Factor Against Antisocial Behavior

Hypothesis 2 predicted that adolescents who were not in conflict with the law would show higher levels of empathy, acting as a protective factor against antisocial behavior. The results supported this prediction. Non-offenders showed clearly higher empathy levels (around 62 points) compared to offenders (about 50 points), confirming that empathy plays an important role in reducing antisocial tendencies.

An important finding was that, once empathy was considered, the difference between offenders and non-offenders was no longer significant. This means that empathy itself—not legal status—is the key factor to explain antisocial behavior.

Adolescents with higher empathy were less emotionally detached and less likely to justify harmful actions, showing more awareness of others and stronger moral control.

Empathy had a strong overall influence, explaining a large part of the variation in emotional and moral traits. This shows that its protective power extends across different areas, helping young people manage emotions and think more responsibly.

These results are consistent with theories that see empathy as a foundation of moral development and a natural barrier against antisocial behavior (Bandura, 1999; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004).

Low empathy has been linked to callous–unemotional traits and moral disengagement (Frick & White, 2008; Shulman et al., 2011), while a lack of emotional sensitivity makes it easier to justify aggression or ignore others’ suffering (Pardini & Byrd, 2012; Paciello et al., 2020).

Recent studies confirm that both affective and cognitive empathy are essential, with affective empathy playing a special role in reducing emotional coldness and promoting prosocial understanding (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Milone et al., 2019).

Overall, empathy proved to be a strong protective factor that reduces emotional distance and moral disengagement, helping to prevent the development of stable antisocial behavior. Programs that focus on empathy training and emotional understanding can therefore be powerful tools for prevention and rehabilitation.

Hypothesis 3: Gender Differences in CU Traits, Empathy, and Moral Disengagement

Hypothesis 3 predicted that gender differences would appear in the expression of callous–unemotional traits, empathy and moral disengagement.

The results partially supported this idea. Girls showed higher levels of empathy than boys, while boys scored slightly higher on callous–unemotional traits and moral disengagement. However, only the difference in empathy was statistically significant, showing that gender mainly affects emotional sensitivity rather than antisocial behavior.

The overall multivariate analysis confirmed that gender had a significant effect, explaining about 7% of the variation across the three variables together.

When each variable was examined separately, the difference emerged only for empathy, where girls reported higher scores (around 61) compared to boys (around 53) .

No significant gender differences were found for CU traits or moral disengagement, suggesting that these tendencies may be influenced more by individual or contextual factors than by gender alone.

These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that girls tend to display greater emotional awareness and social sensitivity (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004).

Boys, on the other hand, often show slightly higher emotional detachment and a greater tendency to use moral disengagement strategies, such as minimizing the seriousness of harmful actions or blaming others (Caravita et al., 2012; Hyde et al., 2010).

Still, the lack of strong gender effects for CU traits and moral disengagement suggests that these characteristics are not exclusively male or female traits, but part of broader psychological patterns that can appear in both groups.

From a practical perspective, these results highlight the importance of gender-sensitive prevention and intervention approaches.

For boys, it may be helpful to focus on developing emotional responsiveness and reducing cognitive justifications that allow aggression or indifference to seem acceptable.

For girls, interventions can build on their natural empathic strengths while addressing subtle forms of relational aggression, such as exclusion or rumor-spreading, which may also rely on moral disengagement mechanisms.

In short, gender shapes how emotional and cognitive processes interact with antisocial behavior, but empathy remains the clearest area of difference.

Recognizing these distinctions can help tailor educational and psychological programs more effectively, promoting empathy and emotional understanding across both genders.

Hypothesis 4: The Role of Empathy as a Moderator

Hypothesis 4 proposed that empathy would moderate the relationship between callous-unemotional (CU) traits and moral disengagement, with the expectation that higher empathy would weaken this link.

However, the results did not support this prediction. Empathy had a strong direct effect on reducing moral disengagement but did not significantly change the strength of the relationship between CU traits and moral disengagement.

The regression analysis showed that CU traits and empathy together explained more than half of the variance in moral disengagement, confirming that both variables play an important role. Empathy remained a significant negative predictor, meaning that higher empathy was consistently linked to lower moral disengagement.

CU traits, on the other hand, were positively related to moral disengagement, indicating that adolescents who are more emotionally detached are more likely to justify harmful actions. However, the interaction between CU traits and empathy was not significant, suggesting that empathy did not moderate this relationship.

In simpler terms, empathy helps lower moral disengagement in general, but it does not weaken the influence of CU traits.

This means that adolescents with high CU traits may show such deep emotional detachment that empathy alone cannot offset their tendency to justify wrongdoing.

These results align with previous research showing that empathy is a strong protective factor but not always a moderator (Paciello et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2023; Schmitt et al., 2024). While empathy promotes understanding and reduces moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004), CU traits may operate through more stable emotional mechanisms that are less sensitive to empathy-based influence (Frick & White, 2008; Pardini & Byrd, 2012).

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that empathy-building programs are important but may not be enough on their own for adolescents with high CU traits. Interventions for these youth should combine empathy training with strategies that directly target emotional detachment and distorted moral reasoning.

Approaches that integrate emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components are more likely to help reduce moral disengagement and antisocial patterns over time.

In conclusion, empathy acts as a strong and reliable protective factor but not as a moderator. It reduces moral disengagement directly, yet it does not significantly change how CU traits influence antisocial thinking.

Understanding this distinction is essential for designing more effective prevention and rehabilitation programs for adolescents at risk.

Hypothesis 5: The Role of Social and Cultural Factors

Hypothesis 5 predicted that social and cultural factors would interact with cognitive processes such as empathy and moral justification, shaping differences in adolescents' moral functioning. The results partly supported this prediction. The most relevant finding was that residence (urban vs. rural) interacted significantly with empathy in predicting moral disengagement. This means that empathy had a stronger protective role among adolescents living in urban areas, helping them show less moral disengagement compared to those in rural contexts.

A second pattern the interaction between residence and moral justification was close to significance, suggesting a small tendency for moral reasoning to differ slightly between urban and rural adolescents.

No meaningful effects were found for parental education or age, which may reflect the limited variability in the sample, since most parents had low or medium levels of education.

These findings suggest that where adolescents live influences how empathy functions as a protective factor.

Urban environments may offer broader opportunities for social interaction and exposure to diverse moral perspectives, which can strengthen empathy and moral awareness. By contrast, in more rural contexts, fewer social experiences and different community norms may limit empathy's effectiveness in preventing moral disengagement.

Although parental education did not show a significant effect in this study, previous research has consistently linked it to moral and cognitive development (Caprara et al., 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2006).

It is therefore possible that its influence remains important but was not fully captured here due to the sample's educational homogeneity.

Gender also continued to play a relevant role, with boys showing slightly higher moral disengagement and lower empathy, consistent with earlier studies (Hyde et al., 2010; Caravita et al., 2012). Together, these results indicate that moral functioning in adolescence cannot be understood in isolation from the social environment.

Empathy and moral reasoning are shaped not only by individual differences but also by the broader cultural and community context in which adolescents grow up.

From a practical point of view, these findings underline the value of context-sensitive interventions.

Prevention programs should take into account the specific social and cultural background of adolescents, adapting activities to the realities of both urban and rural settings. Encouraging empathy, open dialogue, and moral reflection within families, schools, and communities can help reduce moral disengagement and promote prosocial behavior.

Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings of this study broadly align with previous research while also adding new insights to the literature on adolescent antisocial behavior. One of the most consistent outcomes was the strong differentiation between delinquent and non-delinquent adolescents in relation to callous–unemotional (CU) traits. This supports the argument that CU traits form a distinct developmental pathway toward severe and persistent antisocial behavior (Frick & White, 2008). Prior studies have shown that adolescents with high CU traits are at greater risk for aggression and chronic delinquency (Pardini & Fite, 2010), a pattern also confirmed in more recent work emphasizing their role in predicting proactive aggression and empathy deficits (Goulter et al., 2022). The present study reinforces these conclusions by revealing particularly strong differences between groups, underscoring the robustness of CU traits as a marker of risk.

Equally consistent with prior research is the protective role of empathy. A large body of work has positioned empathy as a cornerstone of moral development and prosocial adjustment (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007).

The current findings extend this perspective by showing that empathy not only differentiates adolescents in conflict with the law from their non-delinquent peers but also exerts a significant negative association with both CU traits and moral disengagement. In doing so, the study provides evidence that empathy operates across multiple domains of risk, thereby confirming its central importance in adolescent moral functioning.

The role of moral disengagement is also strongly supported. In line with social cognitive theory, harmful behaviors appear to be maintained through mechanisms such as moral justification, displacement of responsibility, and dehumanization (Bandura, 1999).

Previous studies have documented that delinquent youth are particularly prone to using such cognitive strategies (Hyde et al., 2010; Pelton et al., 2004), and the present study confirms that moral disengagement is elevated in adolescents in conflict with the law.

More recent findings that emphasize the predictive power of moral disengagement for misconduct and criminal activity (Rico et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2023) are directly supported here, with evidence that disengagement levels clearly distinguish delinquent from non-delinquent groups.

A novel contribution of the present study lies in its focus on social context. Contrary to expectations from earlier research (Caprara et al., 2014), parental education did not emerge as a significant predictor in this sample. Instead, the interaction between residence and empathy was significant, indicating that empathy had a stronger protective role among urban adolescents.

This suggests that opportunities for social contact and exposure to diverse experiences in urban environments may enhance empathic development and reduce moral disengagement. In contrast, more limited social contexts in rural areas might restrict empathy's protective impact.

Taken together, these comparisons confirm that the current study both supports and extends existing literature. By integrating emotional traits (CU), protective factors (empathy), cognitive mechanisms (moral disengagement), and socio-cultural variables (parental education), the study advances a multidimensional understanding of adolescent antisocial behavior.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings underline the importance of considering emotional and cognitive processes together rather than in isolation. The co-occurrence of high CU traits and moral disengagement illustrates that emotional detachment and cognitive distortions interact to create a particularly stable and concerning risk profile for deviant behavior.

This observation lends strong support to theories that frame antisocial conduct as the result of an interplay between affective and cognitive vulnerabilities (Frick & White, 2008; Bandura, 1999). Furthermore, the robust protective role of empathy suggests that emotional responsiveness serves as

a critical counterweight to processes that sustain antisocial tendencies, in line with classical models of moral development (Eisenberg et al., 2006).

On a practical level, these results suggest that programs focusing only on external behavior control are unlikely to be effective if they ignore the emotional and cognitive foundations of moral behavior.

Interventions should combine empathy training, perspective-taking exercises, and strategies that help adolescents recognize and challenge moral justifications for wrongdoing.

Such multidimensional approaches are likely to be more effective than discipline-based strategies alone.

The findings also emphasize the importance of **contextual factors**. The significant role of residence, and the stronger effect of empathy among urban youth, suggest that the environment shapes moral development.

Parent-focused and community-based programs, especially in rural areas, could help strengthen empathy and moral understanding in settings where these resources are less accessible. Policies that reduce social and educational inequalities may also indirectly lower moral disengagement by improving family and community support.

In summary, the study bridges psychological and social perspectives, providing a framework for more comprehensive and sustainable interventions that address both individual and contextual influences.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study offers valuable insights, a few limitations should be kept in mind. First, the data were collected through self-report questionnaires, which can sometimes be affected by personal bias. Participants might have answered in ways they believed were socially acceptable, or they may have found it difficult to accurately describe their own emotions and behaviors. Future studies could reduce these biases by combining self-reports with other methods for example, feedback from teachers or parents, behavioral observations, or even physiological measures that capture emotional responses more objectively.

Second, because this study used a cross-sectional design, it provides only a snapshot in time. This means we can't say for sure whether one factor causes another or how these relationships develop as adolescents grow older.

Long-term, or longitudinal, studies that follow young people over several years would help clarify how empathy, CU traits, and moral disengagement influence each other throughout adolescence.

Another limitation concerns the sample itself. The participants came from a relatively similar background, which doesn't fully reflect the diversity of adolescents in terms of culture, social environment, or family situation.

This limits how much the findings can be generalized to other groups. Future research should include larger and more varied samples, possibly from different regions or countries, to see whether these results hold across different cultural contexts.

It's also important to note that this study mainly focused on individual and family factors. Other influences such as friendships, school experiences, and community settings were not explored in depth, even though they likely play a key role in shaping behavior. Future work could take a broader approach by looking at how these different layers of influence interact to shape moral and emotional development.

Finally, while this research offers new evidence from the Albanian context, it also opens the door for comparisons with other countries in the region. Such studies could highlight both shared and unique cultural aspects that shape empathy, CU traits, and moral disengagement.

Despite these limitations, this study represents an important first step in understanding how emotional, cognitive, and social factors come together to influence adolescent behavior. It provides a foundation for future work and points toward the value of integrated approaches that address not just the individual, but also the family and wider cultural environment.

Conclusions

Restating the Aim and Objectives

The aim of this doctoral research was to examine the relationship between callous–unemotional (CU) traits, empathy, and moral disengagement among adolescents in Albania. The study compared young people in conflict with the law to their non-offending peers, with the broader goal of understanding how these psychological constructs interact and contribute to antisocial behavior. Five hypotheses were tested, addressing differences between delinquent and non-delinquent adolescents, gender variations, the protective role of empathy, its potential moderating function, and the impact of social and cultural conditions.

Summary of Key Findings

The findings strongly supported most of the hypotheses. Adolescents in conflict with the law showed significantly higher CU traits and moral disengagement compared to non-offenders, confirming that these are core psychological dimensions of antisocial behavior. Empathy emerged as a powerful protective factor, reducing both CU traits and moral disengagement. However, it did not function as a moderator between CU traits and moral disengagement.

This means that although empathy lowers the risk of antisocial tendencies, it cannot fully buffer the influence of stable personality traits such as CU traits. Gender differences were also observed: boys scored higher on CU traits and moral disengagement, while girls reported higher empathy.

In terms of socio-cultural factors, the interaction between residence and empathy proved significant. Empathy had a stronger protective effect among urban adolescents, suggesting that broader social exposure may support emotional and moral growth. No significant effects were found for parental education or age . Taken together, the findings show that emotional, cognitive, and environmental factors jointly influence adolescent moral functioning.

Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to theory by integrating emotional, cognitive, and social variables into a single framework of adolescent antisocial behavior. The results provide strong support for Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement and extend the developmental model of CU traits proposed by Frick and colleagues.

An important contribution is the clarification of empathy's role. While empathy strongly predicts lower levels of antisocial tendencies, it does not always moderate the effect of CU traits on moral disengagement. This highlights the limits of empathy as a protective mechanism and suggests that both emotional and cognitive processes need to be considered together. The results on parental education add a further layer, showing that cognitive and emotional development is embedded within broader socio-cultural contexts.

Practical Implications

The findings also carry significant practical implications. Programs aimed at delinquent adolescents should not only focus on controlling behavior but also address the underlying emotional and cognitive mechanisms that sustain antisocial actions. Empathy training, perspective-taking exercises, and structured moral reasoning programs should be central parts of intervention strategies.

At the same time, the strong effect of parental education underlines the importance of family and community-based initiatives. Supporting parents through education and resources may indirectly strengthen adolescents' moral reasoning and reduce reliance on moral disengagement.

A multidimensional approach, combining psychological interventions with family and school involvement, is more likely to reduce recidivism and promote long-term reintegration.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of self-report questionnaires may have introduced response biases or limited accuracy in self-reflection.

Future research could combine self-reports with other sources of information such as teacher, parent, or peer evaluations and include behavioral or physiological measures to gain a more objective understanding of emotional and moral functioning.

Because this was a cross-sectional study, it captures only one point in time and cannot show how these processes evolve.

Longitudinal research is needed to understand how CU traits, empathy, and moral disengagement develop across adolescence and whether interventions can produce long-term change.

The relatively small and homogeneous sample also limits how far the findings can be generalized.

Future studies should involve larger and more diverse groups of adolescents, ideally including participants from different social and cultural contexts.

Cross-cultural comparisons could help reveal which aspects of empathy and moral reasoning are universal and which depend more on the environment.

Beyond behavioral data, future studies could also use brain imaging techniques, such as fMRI or EEG, to explore how specific brain regions are involved in empathy, emotional regulation, and moral judgment.

This approach could help identify neural patterns linked to CU traits and moral disengagement, offering a deeper understanding of how emotional and cognitive mechanisms interact in the brain .

Combining psychological measures with neurobiological data would create a more complete picture of antisocial behavior in adolescence.

Finally, the limited moderating role of empathy found in this study suggests that future research should explore the conditions under which empathy is most effective as a protective factor. Empathy might need to be combined with other abilities — such as emotion regulation, self-control, or perspective-taking — to fully weaken the link between CU traits and moral disengagement. Such integrated approaches would strengthen both theory and intervention design.

Despite these limitations, this study offers an important starting point for understanding how emotional, cognitive, and social processes work together in shaping adolescent behavior. It provides a strong foundation for future research and for developing interventions that combine psychological, social, and even neurobiological perspectives

Final Reflections

Despite its limitations this research represents an important step forward. It is one of the first systematic studies to explore CU traits, empathy, and moral disengagement within the Albanian context.

The findings connect psychological theory with real-world practice, showing that antisocial behavior in adolescence results from the interplay between emotional tendencies, cognitive processes, and social context.

By recognizing this complexity, prevention and intervention programs can become more holistic addressing not just individual traits but also the environments that shape moral and emotional growth. In this way, the study contributes both to theoretical understanding and to the development of practical, culturally relevant strategies for supporting adolescents at risk.

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Appendix

Ethical Permissions and Authorizations for Research Instruments.

This appendix presents the official email correspondence confirming ethical authorization to use the psychological instruments employed in the present doctoral research. These communications document formal consent from the respective authors for the academic and non-commercial use of the Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU), the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), and the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS).

A.1 Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU)

Request Email (Sent by Denada Kreshpaj to Dr. Paul.J.Frick)

Date: April 23, 2025

Subject: Request to Use ICU Scale for Doctoral Research Conducted in Albania

Dear Dr.Frick

My name is Denada Kreshpaj, and I am a PhD candidate in Psychology at Sapienza University of Rome. I also work as a lecturer at the University of Vlora “Ismail Qemali” in Albania. As part of my doctoral research, I will be conducting a study in Albania focusing on the association between Callous-Unemotional traits, empathy, and moral disengagement mechanisms in juvenile offenders

I am writing to kindly request permission to use the Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU), self-report version, as one of the core instruments in my research. The study is carried out under academic supervision and ethical approval, strictly for non-commercial purposes.

If possible, I would sincerely appreciate receiving the official version of the ICU and any relevant instructions for use and citation.

Kind regards,

Denada Kreshpaj

PhD Candidate – Sapienza University of Rome

Lecturer – University of Vlora "Ismail Qemali "

Email: denadakreshpaj@gmail.com

Response from Dr. Paul J.Frick (April 23, 2025)

You are welcome to use the scale in your work, including adapting it for online administration. However, the instructions, item wording, and response format should not be changed. I retain the unrestricted copyright to the scale, and I ask that you send me copies of any manuscripts that use the scale so I can maintain an updated reference list.

Best wishes,

Paul J. Frick,

Department of Psychology Louisiana State University

Email: pfrick@lsu.edu

A.2 Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)

Request Email (Sent by Denada Kreshpaj to Dr. Mark H. Davis)

Date: April 23, 2025

Subject: Request to Use Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) in Research in Albania

Dear Dr Davis,

I am currently pursuing a PhD in Psychology at Sapienza University of Rome and working as a lecturer at the University of Vlora “Ismail Qemali” in Albania. As part of my doctoral research, I am conducting a study that explores empathy, Callous-Unemotional traits, and moral disengagement among juvenile offenders.

I respectfully request permission to use the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) in my study. The research is academic in nature, ethically approved, and entirely non-commercial.

Sincerely,

Denada Kreshpaj

PhD Candidate – Sapienza University of Rome

Lecturer – University of Vlora “Ismail Qemali”

Email: denadakreshpaj@gmail.com

Response from Dr. Mark H. Davis (April 23, 2025)

Dear Denada ,

You have my full permission to use the instrument in your project. I am attaching a few items that may be of use to you. Please let me know if I can be of additional assistance.

Best of luck with your research ,

Mark H. Davis

Email: davismh@eckerd.edu

A.3 Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS)

Request Email (Sent by Denada Kreshpaj to Prof. Gian Vittorio Caprara)

Date: July 15, 2025

Subject: Request for Confirmation to Use the Moral Disengagement Scale in PhD Research

Dear Professor Caprara,

I am Denada Kreshpaj, PhD student at Sapienza University of Rome and lecturer at the University of Vlora “Ismail Qemali.” For my doctoral research, I am exploring empathy, Callous-Unemotional traits, and moral disengagement among juvenile offenders in Albania .

I selected the Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996) as a key measure. I have translated and administered it to my sample for academic, non-commercial purposes, ensuring proper acknowledgment and citation.

I would kindly like to ask for your formal confirmation to proceed with this use of the scale.

Best regards,

Denada Kreshpaj

PhD Student – Sapienza University of Rome

Email: denadakreshpaj@gmail.com

Response from Prof. Gian Vittorio Caprara (July 15, 2025)

Dear Denada,

I am glad to accord you the permission you require to translate, validate, and use the Moral Disengagement Scale.

Sincerely,

Gian Vittorio Caprara

Professor of Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome

Consent Form for Participation in the Study

This study aims to understand the relationships between empathy, callous-unemotional traits, and the degree of moral disengagement in adolescents. Participation in this study is voluntary, and all data will be treated confidentially. The participant has the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Child's Demographic Characteristics

Please fill in the following information:

Age: _____

Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

Child's status

☐ In conflict with the law (has been processed by authorities)

☐ Not in conflict with the law

If in conflict with law , type of offense : _____

Place of residence: ☐ Urban ☐ Rural

Parents' Education:

☐ Primary school

☐ Secondary school

☐ University

☐ Doctorate

Study Instruments

Participants will complete three internationally recognized questionnaires:

- Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), 28 items, Likert scale 0–4
- Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU), 24 items, Likert scale 0–3
- Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS), 26 items, Likert scale 1–5

Parental/Guardian Consent Statement

I, the parent/legal guardian of the participant, declare that I have read and understood the purpose of this study. I agree for my child to take part in this study and I give my informed consent.

Parent/Guardian's Full Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: ____ / ____ / ____

Formular pëlqimi për pjesmarrje në studim

Ky studim ka për qëllim të kuptojë marrëdhëniet midis ndjeshmërisë (empathy), tipareve callous-unemotional, dhe shkallës së shkëputjes nga moraliteti tek adoleshentët. Pjesëmarrja në këtë studim është vullnetare dhe të gjitha të dhënat do të trajtohen në mënyrë konfidenciale. Pjesëmarrësi ka të drejtë të tërhiqet nga studimi në çdo moment pa asnjë pasojë.

Karakteristikat Demografike të Fëmijës

Ju lutem plotësoni informacionin e mëposhtëm:

Mosha: _____

Gjinia: ☐ Mashkull ☐ Femër

Statusi i fëmijës

☐ Në konflikt me ligjin (proceduar nga autoritetet)

☐ Jo në konflikt me ligjin

Nëse po lloji i veprës :_____

Vendbanimi: ☐ Qytet ☐ Fshat

Arsimi i prindërve:

☐ Shkollë fillore

☐ Shkollë e mesme

☐ Universitet

☐ Doktoraturë

Instrumentet e Studimit

Pjesëmarrësit do të plotësojnë tre pyetësorë të njohur ndërkombëtarisht:

- Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), me 28 pohime, Likert nga 0-4
- Inventory of Callous – Unemotional Traits (ICU), me 24 pohime, Likert 0-3
- Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS), me 26 pohime, Likert 1-5

Deklaratë Pëlqimi nga Prindërit/Kujdestarët

Unë, prindi/kujdestari i ligjshëm i pjesëmarrësit, deklaroj se kam lexuar dhe kam kuptuar qëllimin e këtij studimi. Jam dakord që fëmija im të marrë pjesë në këtë studim dhe jap pëlqimin tim të informuar.

Emri dhe Mbiemri i prindit/kujdestarit: _____

Nënshkrimi: _____

Data: ____ / ____ / ____

INTERPERSONAL REACTIVITY INDEX

The following statements inquire about your thoughts and feelings in a variety of situations. For each item, indicate how well it describes you by choosing the appropriate letter on the scale at the top of the page: A, B, C, D, or E. When you have decided on your answer, fill in the letter on the answer sheet next to the item number.

READ EACH ITEM CAREFULLY BEFORE RESPONDING. Answer as honestly as you can.

ANSWER SCALE:

A	B	C	D	E
DOES NOT				DESCRIBES ME
DESCRIBE ME				VERY
WELL				WELL

1. I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me. (FS)
2. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me. (EC)
3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view. (PT) (-)
4. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems. (EC) (-)
5. I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel. (FS)
6. In emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease. (PD)
7. I am usually objective when I watch a movie or play, and I don't often get completely caught up in it. (FS) (-)
8. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision. (PT)
9. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them. (EC)
10. I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation. (PD)
11. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective. (PT)
12. Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me. (FS) (-)
13. When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm. (PD) (-)
14. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal. (EC) (-)
15. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments. (PT) (-)

16. After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters. (FS)
17. Being in a tense emotional situation scares me. (PD)
18. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them. (EC) (-)
19. I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies. (PD) (-)
20. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen. (EC)
21. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both. (PT)
22. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person. (EC)
23. When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character. (FS)
24. I tend to lose control during emergencies. (PD)
25. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while. (PT)
26. When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me. (FS)
27. When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces. (PD)
28. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place. (PT)

NOTE:(-) denotes item to be scored in reverse fashion

PT = perspective-taking scale

FS = fantasy scale

EC = empathic concern scale

PD = personal distress scale

A = 0

B = 1

C = 2

D = 3

E = 4

Except for reversed-scored items, which are scored:

A = 4

B = 3

C = 2

D = 1

E = 0

Thank you!

INDEKSI I NDËRVEPRIMIT NDËRNJERËZOR (INTERPERSONAL REACTIVITY INDEX)

Deklaratat e mëposhtme pyesin për mendimet dhe ndjenjat tuaja në situata të ndryshme. Për secilin pohim, tregoni sa mirë ju përshkruan ju, duke zgjedhur shkronjën përkatëse sipas shkallës në fillim:

A

B

C

D

E

NUK MË PËRSHKRUAN FARE ... MË PËRSHKRUAN SHUMË MIRË

Kur të vendosni për përgjigjen, shënoni shkronjën përkatëse pranë numrit të pyetjes.

LEXONI ME KUJDES ÇDO POHIM PARA SE TË PËRGJIGJENI.

1. Fantazoj dhe ëndërroj, mjaft shpesh, për gjëra që mund të më ndodhin. (FS)
2. Shpesh ndiej butësi dhe shqetësim për njerëzit më pak me fat se unë. (EC)
3. Ndonjëherë e kam të vështirë të shoh gjërat nga këndvështrimi i tjetrit. (PT) (-)
4. Ndonjëherë nuk më vjen shumë keq për njerëzit kur ata kanë probleme. (EC) (-)
5. Përfshihem shumë me ndjenjat e personazheve në një roman. (FS)
6. Në situata emergjente ndiej shqetësim dhe paretë. (PD)
7. Zakonisht jam objektiv kur shoh një film ose shfaqje, dhe rrallë përfshihem plotësisht. (FS) (-)
8. Përpqem të shoh të gjitha anët e një mosmarrëveshjeje para se të marr një vendim. (PT)
9. Kur shoh dikë që po e keqpërdorin, ndiej njëfarë mbrojtjeje ndaj tij. (EC)
10. Ndonjëherë ndiej pafuqishmëri kur jam në mes të një situatë shumë emocionale. (PD)
11. Ndonjëherë përpqem t'i kuptoj më mirë miqtë e mi duke imagjinuar si i shohin ata gjërat. (PT)
12. Përfshirja shumë e madhe në një libër ose film të mirë është e rrallë për mua. (FS) (-)
13. Kur shoh dikë të lëndohet, zakonisht qëndroj i qetë. (PD) (-)
14. Fatkeqësitë e të tjerëve zakonisht nuk më shqetësojnë shumë. (EC) (-)
15. Nëse jam i sigurt që kam të drejtë për diçka, nuk harxhoj shumë kohë duke dëgjuar argumentet e të tjerëve. (PT) (-)

16. Pas shikimit të një shfaqjeje apo filmi, ndiej sikur jam një nga personazhet. (FS)
17. Të jem në një situatë emocionale të tensionuar më tremb. (PD)
18. Kur shoh dikë që trajtohet padrejtësisht, ndonjëherë nuk ndiej shumë mëshirë për të. (EC) (-)
19. Zakonisht jam mjaft efektiv në përballimin e emergjencave. (PD) (-)
20. Shpesh prekem shumë nga gjërat që shoh të ndodhin. (EC)
21. Besoj se ka dy anë për çdo çështje dhe përpiqem t'i shoh të dyja. (PT)
22. Do ta përshkruaja veten si një person mjaft të ndjeshëm. (EC)
23. Kur shoh një film të mirë, mund ta vendos shumë lehtë veten në vendin e personazhit kryesor. (FS)
24. Kam tendencë të humbas kontrollin gjatë emergjencave. (PD)
25. Kur jam i mërzhitur me dikë, zakonisht përpiqem të “vendos veten në këpucët e tij” për një moment. (PT)
26. Kur lexoj një histori ose roman interesant, imagjinoj si do të ndihesha sikur ngjarjet e treguara po më ndodhnin mua. (FS)
27. Kur shoh dikë që ka shumë nevojë për ndihmë në një emergjencë, e humbas toruan. (PD)
28. Para se ta kritikoj dikë, përpiqem të imagjinoj si do të ndihesha në vendin e tij. (PT)

SHËNIM: (-) tregon që pyetja vlerësohet në mënyrë të kundërt

PT = shkalla e marrjes së perspektivës

FS = shkalla e fantazisë

EC = shkalla e shqetësimit empatik

PD = shkalla e shqetësimit personal

Shkallët e vlerësimit:

Për pyetjet normale:

A = 0 B = 1 C = 2 D = 3 E = 4

Për pyetjet që vlerësohen në mënyrë të kundërt:

A = 4 B = 3 C = 2 D = 1 E = 0

INVENTORY OF CALLOUS-UNEMOTIONAL TRAITS (ICU)

Instruction:

Below are statements that may describe your child. Please indicate how well each statement describes him/her by circling the appropriate number.

Scale:

0 = Not at all true

1 = Somewhat true

2 = Very true

3 = Definitely true

Items:

1. He/She expresses his/her feelings openly.
2. He/She does not care who he/she hurts to get what he/she wants.
3. He/She feels bad or guilty when he/she does something wrong.
4. He/She is concerned about the feelings of others.
5. He/She does not care about doing things well.
6. He/She does not show emotions.
7. He/She is concerned about the schoolwork of others.
8. He/She does not care if he/she is in trouble.
9. He/She is good at keeping promises.
10. He/She does not show feelings to others.
11. He/She is concerned about others when they are upset.
12. He/She does not care about being on time.
13. He/She does not care about breaking rules.
14. He/She hides his/her feelings from others.
15. He/She cares about the feelings of his/her family.
16. He/She does not care if he/she is liked.
17. He/She cares about how well he/she does in school.
18. He/She does not care about being fair.
19. He/She does not care if he/she hurts someone's feelings.
20. He/She cares about how well he/she does at sports or hobbies.
21. He/She does not care about being honest.
22. He/She does not care about losing friends.

23. He/She does not care if he/she is punished.
24. He/She does not care about being a good person.

INVENTARI I TIPAREVE JOEMOCIONALE (ICU)

(Versioni në shqip)

Udhëzimi:

Më poshtë gjeni disa pohime që mund ta përshkruajnë fëmijën tuaj. Ju lutemi tregoni sa mirë e përshkruan secili pohim atë, duke rrethuar numrin përkatës.

Shkalla e vlerësimit:

0 = Fare i pavërtetë

1 = Pjesërisht i vërtetë

2 = Shumë i vërtetë

3 = Plotësisht i vërtetë

Pohimet:

1. Ai/Ajo shpreh hapur ndjenjat e tij/saj.
2. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson kë lëndon për të arritur atë që dëshiron.
3. Ai/Ajo ndihet keq ose fajtor kur bën diçka të gabuar.
4. Ai/Ajo shqetësohet për ndjenjat e të tjerëve.
5. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson të bëjë gjërat mirë.
6. Ai/Ajo nuk tregon emocione.
7. Ai/Ajo shqetësohet për detyrat shkollore të të tjerëve.
8. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson nëse futet në telashe.
9. Ai/Ajo është i/e mirë në mbajtjen e premtimeve.
10. Ai/Ajo nuk u tregon ndjenja të tjerëve.
11. Ai/Ajo shqetësohet për të tjerët kur janë të mërzhitur.
12. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson të jetë në kohë.
13. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson të thyejë rregullat.
14. Ai/Ajo fsheh ndjenjat e tij/saj nga të tjerët.
15. Ai/Ajo kujdeset për ndjenjat e familjes së tij/saj.
16. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson nëse e pëlqejnë apo jo.
17. Ai/Ajo kujdeset për sa mirë bën në shkollë.
18. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson të jetë i/e drejtë.
19. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson nëse lëndon ndjenjat e dikujt.
20. Ai/Ajo kujdeset për sa mirë bën në sporte ose hobi.

21. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson të jetë i/e ndershëm/e.
22. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson nëse humbet miq.
23. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson nëse ndëshkohet.
24. Atij/Asaj nuk i intereson të jetë një person i mirë.

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT SCALE (MDS)

(English Version – Bandura et al., adapted for adolescents)

Instruction:

Below are statements that describe thoughts or situations. Please indicate how much you agree with each statement.

Scale:

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Items (26 statements):

1. It is alright to fight to protect your friends.
2. Slapping and shoving someone is just a way of joking.
3. Stealing a little money is not as bad as stealing a lot of money.
4. If kids are told to do something by grown-ups, they shouldn't be blamed if something bad happens.
5. A kid in a gang should not be blamed if others in the gang start a fight and he joins in.
6. Teasing someone doesn't really hurt them.
7. Some people deserve to be treated like animals.
8. If people get hurt in a fight, they usually start the fight themselves.
9. It is okay to fight to protect your friends' reputation.
10. Insulting someone is just a way of having fun.
11. Damaging some property is no big deal when others are doing much worse things.
12. Kids cannot be blamed for misbehaving if their friends pressured them to do it.
13. If a group decides to do something harmful, it is unfair to blame any one member of the group.
14. Insults don't really hurt anyone.
15. People who behave like savages should be treated the same way.
16. People who get mistreated usually do things that deserve it.

17. It is alright to lie to keep your friends out of trouble.
18. Talking badly about someone behind their back is just a harmless way of joking.
19. Saying mean things to others is not as bad as beating them up.
20. If people are told to do something by someone in charge, they shouldn't be blamed for it.
21. You can't blame a kid who misbehaves if all his friends are doing it too.
22. It's okay to tell small lies because they don't really do any harm.
23. Some people have to be treated roughly because they don't have feelings like other people.
24. If kids fight and one of them gets hurt, it's their own fault.
25. If someone leaves their things out where they can be stolen, it's their fault if they get stolen.
26. People who get pushed around often do things that deserve it.

SHKALLA E SHKËPUTJES NGA MORALITETI (MDS)

(Versioni në shqip – përshtatur për adoleshentë)

Udhëzimi:

Më poshtë gjeni disa pohime që përshkruajnë mendime ose situata. Ju lutem tregoni sa shumë pajtoheni me secilin pohim.

Shkalla:

- 1 = Nuk pajtohem aspak
- 2 = Nuk pajtohem
- 3 = As pajtohem as nuk pajtohem
- 4 = Pajtohem
- 5 = Pajtohem plotësisht

Pohimet (26):

Është në rregull të luftosh për të mbrojtur shokët e tu.

2. Të shtysh ose të qëllosh dikë lehtë është thjesht një shaka.

3. Të vjedhësh pak para nuk është aq keq sa të vjedhësh shumë.

4. Nëse fëmijëve u kërkojnë të rriturit të bëjnë diçka, ata nuk duhet fajësuar nëse ndodh diçka e keqe.

5. Një fëmijë që është pjesë e një grupi nuk duhet fajësuar nëse të tjerët fillojnë sherrin dhe ai bashkohet.

6. Të tallësh dikë nuk e dëmton vërtet.

7. Disa njerëz meritojnë të trajtohen si kafshë.

8. Kur njerëzit lëndohen në një sherr, zakonisht e kanë filluar vetë sherrin.

9. Është në rregull të luftosh për të mbrojtur reputacionin e shokëve të tu.

10. Të ofendosh dikë është thjesht një mënyrë për t'u argëtuar.

11. Të dëmtohet ndonjë pronë nuk është ndonjë gjë e madhe kur të tjerët bëjnë gjëra më të këqija.

12. Fëmijët nuk mund të fajësohen për sjellje të keqe nëse shokët i kanë shtyrë ta bëjnë.

13. Nëse një grup vendos të bëjë diçka të dëmshme, nuk është e drejtë të fajësosh vetëm një anëtar të grupit.

14. Fyerjet nuk e lëndojnë vërtet askënd.

15. Njerëzit që sillen si të egër duhet trajtuar po njësoj.
16. Njerëzit që trajtohen keq zakonisht bëjnë gjëra që e meritojnë.
17. Është në rregull të gënjeshtrosh për të mbajtur shokët jashtë telasheve.
18. Të flasësh keq për dikë pas shpine është një mënyrë shakaje pa dëme.
19. T'u thuash të tjerëve gjëra të këqija nuk është aq keq sa t'i rrahësh ata.
20. Nëse njerëzve u kërkohet një autoritet të bëjnë diçka, nuk duhet fajësuar për këtë.
21. Nuk mund ta fajësosh një fëmijë që sillet keq nëse të gjithë shokët e tij e bëjnë.
22. Është në rregull të thuash gënjeshtrosh të vogla sepse nuk shkaktojnë ndonjë dëm të vërtetë.
23. Disa njerëz duhet trajtuar ashpër sepse nuk kanë ndjenja si të tjerët.
24. Nëse fëmijët zihen dhe njëri lëndohet, është faji i tyre vetë.
25. Nëse dikush i lë sendet e veta në vend që mund të vidhen, është faji i tij nëse i humbasin.
26. Njerëzit që trajtohen keq shpesh bëjnë gjëra që e meritojnë.

