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Face off: Misunderstood expressions facilitate adolescent aggression

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Juvenile delinquency may be a result of misunderstood social cues. Research published in BioMed Central's open access journal *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* shows that male juvenile delinquents frequently misinterpret facial expressions of disgust as anger, providing a possible cause for their aggressive behaviour.

Wataru Sato from Kyoto University and Naomi Matsuura from the Tokyo University of Social Welfare worked with a team of researchers to compare the ability of 24 male adolescent delinquents incarcerated in Japan with that of their peers without conduct problems to recognize emotional states. The adolescents were shown 48 photographs of faces expressing 6 basic emotions and were asked to match each face with an emotion. They found that delinquents were more likely than their peers to misinterpret facial expressions of disgust as anger.

According to Sato, "The present study provides the first clear evidence that delinquents have a bias toward the misrecognition of others' disgusted expressions as anger." When taken in social context, this misinterpretation of disgust as anger could result in delinquents experiencing a more intense emotional response than necessary and consequently cause the misinterpretation of situations as hostile. "This bias towards misrecognizing other emotions as anger is particularly significant because anger appears to play an important role in delinquency", adds the author. Previous studies have found that juvenile delinquents often have short tempers and experience more intense anger than other children.

The researchers conclude, "Taken together the data suggest that delinquents might be projecting their own heightened angry emotions onto others when they misperceive others' negative, but not hostile, emotional states as anger."

<http://www.capmh.com/>

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