

# Effects of Moral Self, Self Esteem and Parental Bonding on Delinquency among Young People in Hong Kong

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**Abstract:** This study was designed to investigate the effects of global self-esteem, moral self, and parental bonding on youth's delinquency. A sample of young Chinese adults (N=200) were drawn from public areas such as playgrounds and campus. Respondents were to complete a questionnaire consisted of the General Self, Moral Self, Parental Bonding, and Behavior Checklist on an individual basis. As a result, males reported higher delinquency as well as general self-esteem than females. Among the demographic variables, gender was found to significantly predict delinquency. For the self variables, moral self but not global self-esteem was found to predict delinquency significantly, even when the effect of gender was being controlled. Among the parenting aspects (authoritarianism, protectiveness, care), protectionism significantly predicted delinquency, while parental care and authoritarianism did not. These findings confirmed the need of considering multidimensional aspects of self-esteem and the cultural perspective in explaining the parental impacts on delinquency.

**Keywords:** Moral self, self-esteem, parental bonding, delinquency.

## INTRODUCTION

While Hong Kong has reportedly low overall crime rates, less violent crimes (such as triad related crimes, thefts, narcotics offences, indecent assaults) are still prevalent or even increasing (Police in Figures, n.d.). Moreover, the proportion of youth offenders (aged 16 to 20) was high on certain less serious crimes. For example, number of youth arrested for triad related crimes and robberies was around 48% and 40% of total arrests in the categories respectively in year 2013.

Research has shown that childhood problems were responsible for a wide range of adverse psychosocial outcomes in adulthood, including delinquency, poor mental health and interpersonal relationships (Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005). Delinquent involvement in teenage was found to be associated with young adults' crime involvement and had a persistent effect in later years (Mason *et al.* 2010). From a developmental psychological perspective, childhood cognitive and affective experiences with their significant others and about themselves will likely extend to development in adult life (Sroufe, 2005). Psychosocial variables such as parental care, good relationship with peers, sense of achievement, and self-esteem are believed to be protective factors for the child against adverse development (e.g. Cheung & Cheung, 2007; Hovee, Dubas, Eichelsheim, van der Laan, Smeenk, & Gerris, 2009). The present study aimed at delineating the effects of perceived

experience with parents during childhood, specifically parental bonding, and the sense of self-worthiness (self-esteem) on delinquency of young adults.

## Delinquency & Self-Concept

The association between self-concept (or generally termed self-esteem) and delinquency has been widely investigated (e.g. Church, Tomek, Bolland, Hooper, Jagers, & Bolland 2012; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi 2005; Kaplan, 1978; Lee & Lee 2012). Yet, both the strength and direction of the relationship, if any, seem to be inconclusive. In some studies, self-esteem was found to be positively correlated with delinquency (e.g. Caldwell, Beutler, Ross, & Silver, 2006), while some suggested a negative correlation between self-esteem and delinquency (Lee & Lee, 2012). Lee and Lee (2012) found that delinquency was negatively correlated with subsequent self-esteem among Korean adolescents. Donnellan and colleagues (2005) showed that, in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, there was a robust relationship between low self-esteem and externalizing problems such as aggression and delinquency even after controlling for confounding variables such as IQ, socioeconomic status, parent-child and peer relationships. On the other hand, Cheng (2014) delineated the relationship between self-esteem and delinquency and found that the relationship was of curvilinear nature, suggesting that the relationship between self-esteem and delinquency could be more complex and not denoted by correlational analysis. Lo and colleagues (Lo, Cheng, Wong, Rochelle, & Kwok, 2011) also found that delinquents could have relatively low self-esteem when they were in the emerging stage

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of delinquency, and they would gradually build up their self-esteem through association with delinquent peers who would serve as their role models. Moreover, Van de Schoot and Wong (2012) found that the strength and direction of association between self-concept and delinquency depended on the domain of self-concept.

A way to better understand the relationship between the self and delinquency is to look into the specific facets/domains of the self. Among different self-concepts, Hardy, Walker, Olsen, Woodbury, and Hickman (2014) found an important role of moral identity in adolescent functioning, such that moral ideal self negatively predicted externalizing symptoms. Tarry and Emler (2007) found evidence suggesting that self-reported delinquency was predicted by moral values. Cheng (2014) also found that moral self was more predictive of delinquency than a global measure of self-esteem did. To sum up, while the relationship between self-concept and delinquency has been posited for a long time, there are still unanswered questions about its nature. The relationship could be positive or negative, linear or non-linear, and it could be more salient if specific domain or facet of the self (e.g. moral self) instead of the global self (self-esteem) was addressed.

### **Delinquency & Parenting**

Parenting variables have been considered as one of the most significant predictors of negative outcomes of the child. A meta-analysis of 161 published and unpublished manuscripts conducted by Hovee and colleagues (Hovee *et al.*, 2009) revealed that there was a strong link between parental monitoring, psychological control and negative aspect of support, and delinquency, these parenting factors totally has accounted for up to 11% of the variance in delinquency. Stoltz, Londen, Dekovic, Prinzie, de Castro, and Lochman (2013) found that a positive parent-child relationship was associated with less aggression. According to Stoltz et al (2013), parent-child relationship could 'buffer' the development of more serious aggressive behavior. In a study with samples of African American and Caucasian American, Huey and colleagues (2000) found that positive changes in family relations (such as family cohesion, family cohesion, parental monitoring) were associated with reduction in delinquent behaviors. By and large, parenting experiences of a child have been found to be associated with his/her later development in adulthood.

Perhaps the most influential work on parenting can be attributed to John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), Mary

Ainsworth (1978), and Diana Baumrind (1971). While the details of their great work are outside the scope of this paper, their theories and models have prompted decades of research. The key concepts of Bowlby's and Ainsworth's writings are about the affectional bond between parent (mother) and the child. Bowlby emphasized the internal working models of infants which are being formed as a result of the infant's exploration and attachment relationship with the caregiver, primarily the mother. Through analyzing the children's behavior in the Strange Situation episodes, Mary Ainsworth categorized the children's relationship attachments into securely attached, insecure / avoidant, insecure / ambivalent. Diana Baumrind focused on the roles of parents and described parenting along the demandingness (control) and affectionate (responsiveness) dimensions. Under these two dimensions four types of parenting styles are classified, namely, authoritarian, authoritative, indulgent, and neglectful. Both authoritarian and authoritative parents place limits and controls on their children, but authoritarian parenting is of a more restrictive and punitive style, while authoritative parents encourage their children to be independent and are more affectionate and warm.

From an epidemiological perspective Parker (1990) identified two principal dimensions underpinning the parenting characteristics regarding child development and parent-child attachment, i.e. care and protection / control. The original Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) was developed to measure the two dimensions – Care and Overprotection. Care refers to the degree of warmth and affection, whilst Overprotection measures parental intrusion and control. Later research (Kendler 1996) discovered a third factor – authoritarianism, which was originally embedded in the Overprotection dimension. Authoritarianism refers to parental control that is restrictive and discourages the child's autonomy.

In Western societies, parenting variables such as care, secured attachment, authoritative parenting are widely considered as conducive of children's later positive development, while insecure, authoritarian controlling parenting is associated with negative outcomes. This notion is generally supported by research findings on Western samples (e.g. Maziti, 2014; Sartaj & Aslam, 2010; Sroufe *et al.* 2005; Strage & Brandt, 1999). However, cross-cultural studies suggested that the effect of parenting on children's outcomes may not be as straight forward.

What defines good parenting could be different across different cultures. Children from different cultural backgrounds may have different understanding of what parental support or control means. The research of García and Gracia (2009) suggested that in the Spanish cultural context, the optimum style of parenting is indulgent parenting, and adolescents who perceived their parents as indulgent scored more positively on all measures of self-esteem when compared with those who characterized their parents as authoritarian or neglectful. There was no significant difference on measures of problem behavior (school misconduct, delinquency, and drug use) between adolescents from indulgent families and those from authoritative families. Martínez, García, and Yubero (2007) have cited several studies which showed that parenting practices have different meanings and implications for children depending on the sociocultural context in which these practices occur. In particular, Martínez *et al.* pointed out that authoritative parenting is not associated with optimum self-esteem in Brazil. Similarly, researchers in Hong Kong found that family variables such as secure attachment to parents may not be significant predictors of deviant behavior (Cheung, 1997).

While there is a good volume of literature on the relationship between delinquency and self-esteem, and the relationship between delinquency and parenting, few studies have investigated the effects of both the parenting factors and self-esteem on delinquency simultaneously. Furthermore, while self-esteem (the global domain of the self) was studied extensively in delinquency research, inclusion of moral self (self evaluation on the moral facet) was rarely found. While it is widely accepted that parenting and the child's self-concept and behavioral outcomes should be interrelated, it is not known whether general self-esteem or specific facet of the self (such as moral self), and whether overall parenting or specific dimensions of parenting (e.g. control, over-protection) should be conducive of child's negative behavioral outcomes (delinquency).

## METHOD

### Participants

This study targeted at young persons (aged 18 to 25) in Hong Kong. Totally 163 young people were conveniently sampled from youth centers, playgrounds, food courts, cafes and fast food shops, and 37 students were drawn from a university campus in Hong Kong. The sample included 114 males and 86 females, 77

(38.5%) of them were below 20 years old, 114 (57.0%) fell between 20 to 25 years old, and 8 (4.0%) were between the ages of 26 to 29. One respondent did not report his age.

### Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of four sections including 1) self-esteem and moral self, 2) parental bonding, 3) daily behavior checklist, and 4) demographic variables including age, gender, occupation, domestic income. The questionnaire was in the Chinese language.

#### **Self-Esteem and Moral Self**

The General Self (GS) and Moral Self (MS) subscales of the Chinese Adolescent Self-Esteem Scales (CASES) (Cheng & Watkins, 2000) were used to measure global self-esteem and moral self-concept respectively. Each subscale consisted of 8 items and it adopted a 5-point Likert Scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The CASES was emic-etically developed in the Chinese language to assess multidimensional self-concept of young Chinese people (Cheng 1997), and has been widely adopted in studies with Hong Kong and Macau samples (EMB 2003; Lo *et al.* 2011). The scale has demonstrated good psychometric properties in terms of construct validity and reliability (Cheng & Watkins, 2000, Wong & Watkins 2001). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of GS and MO in this study were .89 and .79 respectively, suggesting high internal consistency reliability.

#### **Parental Bonding**

The Chinese version (Shu, Lo, & Lung, 1999) of the 16-item version (Kendler, 1996) was adopted, which was based on the original Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) (Parker *et al.*, 1979). Respondents were asked to rate on a 4-point scale from 0 (very unlike), 1 (unlike), 2 (like) to 3 (very like) about their feeling of bonding with mothers and fathers. The PBI has three subscales, namely, Care, Authoritarianism, Protectiveness. The three subscales have shown good internal consistency reliability as indicated by Cronbach's alpha ranging from .74 to .88.

#### **Daily Behavior Checklist**

A behavior checklist consisting of 33 items was developed with reference to several studies on delinquency (Cheng 2014; Cheung & Cheung, 2008; Le, Monfared, & Stockdale, 2005; Lo *et al.* 2011). The items include 21 items on delinquent behaviors (e.g.

stealing, physical bullying, gambling) and 12 positive or neutral items (e.g. sports, browsing social media websites) (see Appendix for the list of behaviors). Respondents were to report the frequency of having these behaviors *in the past three months* on a 5-point scale, from 1 (never) to 5 (always). A total delinquency score (TD) was computed by adding the scores of the 21 delinquent items. Responses on the neutral or positive items were not scored. The internal consistency reliability of the TD scale was high (Cronbach's alpha = .848).

## Procedures

Ethics approval was obtained from the university college research committee concerned. Research staff randomly approached young people in playgrounds, basketball courts, food courts, café, fast food shops and a youth centre to participate in the study. The targeted participants were briefed of the objectives of the study and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. They were to sign the informed consent form before administration of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed on an individual basis and handed back to the research staff. The whole procedure took around twenty minutes.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

The most commonly reported delinquent behaviors were verbal argument with parents, speaking foul language, buying pirated goods or illegal downloading, and watching pornographic materials. A total of 41% of respondents reported that they sometimes argued with their parents while 15.5% often or always argued with

their parents. Speaking foul language was one of the most salient behaviors, having 26.5% sometimes speaking foul language, 38% often or always speaking foul language. Illegal downloading or buying pirated products ranked the third most common delinquent behavior, 43.2% reported they sometimes, often, or always download or buy pirated products. Watching or reading pornography materials ranked the fourth with 26.6% of respondents reported that they sometimes, often or always read/watch materials of pornographic nature.

Descriptive statistics on self-esteem, moral self, parental bonding, and delinquency were shown in Table 1. Significant gender differences were only found on general self-esteem (GS) and delinquency (TD) but not on other measures. Males reported a higher general self-esteem than females (Cohen's  $d = .28$ ,  $p < .05$ ) as well as higher delinquency than females (Cohen's  $d = .802$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Other than these two variables, male and female participants did not show significant differences.

### Relationship between Self, Parenting, and Delinquency

Pearson's correlation analysis of all measured variables was shown in Table 2. Total delinquency (TD) was correlated negatively with moral self (MO) ( $r = -.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not with any other measures, despite that general self-esteem (GS) and moral self (MS) were correlated ( $r = .51^{**}$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Regarding the relationship between self-esteem and parental bonding, self-esteem was positively correlated with both father's and mother's caring ( $r = .37$  and  $.36$  respectively) but negatively with father's and mother's authoritarianism ( $r$

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Self-Esteem, Moral Self, Parental Bonding and Delinquency Behavior by Sex**

Variables	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)	t-test	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
General Self	28.79 (6.31)	27.07 (5.74)	1.98*	.285
Moral Self	30.41 (4.75)	31.00 (3.44)	-1.00 ns	-.142
Paternal Care	11.33 (4.73)	11.39 (4.87)	-.082 ns	-.012
Paternal Authoritarianism	3.61 (2.79)	3.37 (2.46)	.606 ns	-.091
Paternal Protectiveness	4.59 (3.14)	4.85 (2.57)	-.645 ns	-.091
Maternal Care	13.75 (4.29)	13.72 (4.24)	.055 ns	.007
Maternal Authoritarianism	3.53 (2.79)	3.91 (2.46)	-1.01 ns	-.144
Maternal Protectiveness	5.69 (3.55)	5.69 (2.56)	-.01 ns	.000
Total Delinquency	36.76(10.22)	29.79 (6.84)	5.649**	.802

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , ns = non-significant.

**Table 2: Correlation between Self-Esteem, Moral Self, Parental Bonding, and Delinquent Behavior**

	GS	MO	PC	PA	PP	MC	MA	MP	TD
General Self (GS)	1	.512**	.369**	-.225**	.026	.361**	-.224**	-.025	.008
Moral Self (MO)		1	.315**	-.193**	.031	.204**	-.170*	-.040	-.157*
Paternal Care (PC)			1	-.390**	.043	.614**	-.348**	-.087	-.134
Paternal Authoritarianism (PA)				1	.360**	-.357**	.676**	.179*	.038
Paternal Protectiveness (PP)					1	-.067	.253**	.612**	.132
Maternal Care (MC)						1	-.506**	-.040	-.108
Maternal Authoritarianism (MA)							1	.383**	-.036
Maternal Protectiveness (MP)								1	-.072
Total Delinquency (TD)									1

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

= -.23 and -.22 respectively). For correlations within the PBI subscales, the pattern of correlations among the three maternal subscales was similar as those among the three paternal subscales, and the pattern was also similar for the male as for the females samples. In short, authoritarianism was negatively correlated with care but positively with protectionism, but protectionism and care was not correlated. Nevertheless, when analyzed separately for the males and females samples, the correlations between delinquency and other variables were quite different. For the male participants, only paternal protectionism was significantly correlated with delinquency ( $r = .22$ ,  $p < .05$ ). But for the female participants, their level of

delinquency was correlated with a range of variables including self-esteem (-.27), paternal caring (-.35) and maternal caring (-.38), paternal authoritarian (.31) and maternal authoritarian (.30).

In order to control for the effects of gender and other demographic variables, a stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted. Demographic variables (gender, age, household income) were entered in Step One, followed by the predictor variables (general self-esteem, moral self, father's and mother's authoritarianism, care, protectionism) in Step Two (Table 3). Results suggested that delinquency was predicted by gender ( $\beta = -.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but not by age

**Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis of Delinquency Predicted by Demographic Variables, Self-Esteem, Moral Self, and Parental Bonding Measure (all Samples)**

Model Predictor Variables	Std. $\beta$	SE	R	R <sup>2</sup> change
Step 1			.39	0.154***
Sex	-.382***	1.36		
Age	-.048	0.26		
Income	-.046	0.61		
Step 2			.49	.089**
Sex	-.379***	1.41		
Age	-.056	0.26		
Income	-.053	0.61		
Self-esteem	.059	.135		
Moral self	-.187*	.181		
Paternal Authoritarianism	-.214	.417		
Paternal Caring	-.139	.194		
Paternal Protectionism	.260*	.342		
Maternal Authoritarianism	-.003	.457		
Maternal Caring	-.065	.238		
Maternal Protectionism	-.051	.332		

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

or household income, this model has accounted for 15.4% of total variance in delinquency. To summarize, male participants tended to manifest more delinquent behaviors than females did, while age and income did not have significant predictive effect on delinquency. By adding the self variables (self-esteem, moral self) and the parental bonding variables to the model (Step 2), the regression model has increased 8.9% additional variance in explaining total delinquency. Among the self and the parental variables, moral self ( $\beta = -.19, p < .05$ ), and paternal protectionism ( $\beta = .26, p < .05$ ) significantly predicted delinquency (while effect of gender was controlled), but other variables (authoritarianism, care) were not predictive of delinquency.

## DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that self-concept should be negatively correlated with delinquency was partially supported. Moral self was found to be associated with delinquency, while general self (self-esteem) was not predictive of delinquency in general. By including both the general and moral facets of self-esteem, this study has confirmed that the linkage between self-concept and delinquency should be domain specific. The effect of gender was significant, it alone has accounted for 15% of variance in delinquency. After controlling the effect of gender, moral self and father's protectionism were still significantly predicting delinquency. Moral self was found to be associated negatively with delinquency, meaning that people who have lower moral self would have higher delinquency. This finding concurs with the studies of Tarry and Emler (2007) and Cheng (2014). Tarry and Emler (2007) found evidence supporting the notion that delinquency was negatively associated with moral values. In another study on Chinese people in Hong Kong, Cheng (2014) found that moral self was predictive of different kinds of delinquency, such as gambling, gangsters and bullying, sexual misconduct. To summarize, domain specific self-concept (such as moral self or social self) rather than a generic measure of self-esteem should be used in future research.

Another focus of the present study is about the association between parental bonding and delinquency. Our study has confirmed that some parental factors should be accountable for child's delinquency. Among the three aspects of parental bonding (care, authoritarianism, protectionism), only paternal protectionism was significantly associated with delinquency. Other aspects of parental bonding were

not associated with delinquency. The effect of father's protectionism was strong and significant, even after the effect of gender being controlled. This finding has further clarified the previous research about the effects of parenting and family relation on delinquency (e.g. Hoeve *et al.* 2009; Huey *et al.*, 2000). Our study shows that parent's care and authoritarianism may not predict delinquency as believed, at least not among Hong Kong Chinese people, but father's over-protection did show strong direct effect on delinquency. This finding shows that the linkage between authoritarian parenting and delinquency may not be always true. Alternatively, the effects of family and parental relationship may be culture specific.

Findings from Gunnoe, Hetherington and Reiss (2006) revealed that the impact of authoritarian parent was different among families of different religious backgrounds. Gunnoe and colleagues found that authoritarian parenting could predict externalizing and internalizing problems for adolescents in Conservative Protestant families but not for adolescents in control families. Research findings from Quoss and Zhao (1995) revealed that while children could be dissatisfied with their family rules, they were generally satisfied with the parent-child relationship that they perceived to be authoritarian. A high level of authoritarianism does not necessarily be associated with delinquency or other negative outcomes. As stated by Van Campen and Russell (2010), "parenting that leads to optimal development for adolescents can differ by culture in important ways" (p. 4). Van Campen and Russell (2010) also highlighted that although authoritative parenting can be beneficial, it is not necessarily more beneficial than authoritarian parenting in some ethnic groups. They pointed out that the first-generation Chinese youths from authoritarian homes did just as well in school as those from authoritative homes. As Chao (1994) argued, scoring high on measures of authoritarian should not have the same meaning for Chinese as for European-Americans. Therefore, how children interpret and perceive authoritarian parenting style, rather than authoritarian parenting practices *per se*, may have more impact on parent-child relationship and children's well-being.

## CONCLUSION

This study has provided evidence on the negative association between moral self and delinquency, and the positive association between paternal over-protection and delinquency. However, a global measure of self-esteem (general self) may not be

predictive of delinquency, while self-evaluation on the moral domain should be indicative of a person's delinquent behaviors. While authoritarian and high controlling parents are believed to be disadvantageous of child development, our study shows that over-protection of parents (especially father's) is of serious concern.

### LIMITATION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study has a number of limitations. The study adopted a cross-sectional instead of a longitudinal approach. While moral self was found to be a significant predictor of delinquency in this study, previous research has shown that delinquency was correlated with subsequent self-esteem (Lee & Lee, 2012), which suggested that the relationship between self-esteem and delinquency can be reciprocal. A longitudinal approach will provide more information on the relationship between self-concept, parenting and delinquency and how they may interact with one another. Second, gender differences were found on correlations between delinquency and a range of self and parental bonding. While gender difference was not one of the focuses of the present study, our regression analysis showed that gender has accounted for around 15% of variance in predicting delinquency. How parenting affects delinquency for men and women differently would worth further studies. More in-depth research on how the three PBI dimensions of mothers and fathers are related to males' and females' delinquency separately may shed light on how parenting can be used as an effective protective factor on youth delinquency. This study did not focus on how maternal and paternal parenting styles interact. While there are benefits of separately examined the parenting styles or behaviors of fathers and mothers (Hoeve *et al.*, 2011), it will be beneficial for future studies to investigate the combined effect of maternal and paternal parenting styles on boys and girls and how different combinations may have affected their delinquency. Thirdly, respondents were to report their feeling about parental bonding in this study. This approach may have the limitation of observer bias or subjective bias. The measurement may be more objective if peer- and/or parent-report measurement can be included. Due to this limitation, the parenting experience reported in this study can be arguably understood as the parental bonding from the child's perspective. A dyadic approach (parent-child) in measuring the parental bonding may shed different lights on the topic in future studies.

### Appendix 1: Behavior Checklist

1. Watch TV / Listen to Music*
2. Verbal conflict with parents
3. Speak foul language
4. Do homework / revision*
5. Gambling
6. Read book / magazine*
7. Smoking
8. Buy or download pirated products
9. Learn musical instruments or other arts*
10. Verbal conflicting with teachers / boss
11. Verbal bullying
12. Volunteering work / community services*
13. Drink alcohol outside of home (e.g. pub)
14. Theft / Stealing
15. Drug taking
16. Religious activities*
17. Physical bullying
18. Play online game*
19. Go home late without informing parents
20. Window shopping*
21. Vandalism
22. Jump queue (e.g. when waiting for bus)
23. Recreational activities / sports*
24. Watch / read pornography
25. Pretend to be sick to avoid school / work
26. Participate in youth center activities*
27. Browse Facebook or other social media websites*
28. Pre-marital sex
29. Transacting with friends who have triad society backgrounds
30. Play smartphone applications*
31. Graffiti in public areas
32. Fighting
33. Participate in (video) games of gambling nature

\*Note: Items with star (\*) are excluded for the computation of Total Delinquency.

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Received on 15-05-2015

Accepted on 02-06-2015

Published on 30-06-2015

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2015.04.12>

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