

## Exploring the Moral Emotions among Juvenile Delinquents in the Maldives

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**DOI Link:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i2/27286>

**Published Date:** 01 February 2026

### Abstract

Many societies around the world face challenges posed by juvenile delinquency, and within this context, moral emotions are highly applicable both to the understanding of the problem and the potential solutions. This study analyses juvenile delinquency in the context of the Maldives and the potential of moral emotions – guilt, shame, empathy, and remorse. This study incorporates Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Agnew's General Strain Theory. The results of the study indicate that moral emotions are crucial in juvenile behavior and the outcomes of decisions made. The study demonstrates the importance of understanding the socio-cultural context of the Maldives in designing moral emotions and developing socio moral scaffolding, therefore reducing delinquent behavior and aid positive development within the youth.

**Keywords:** Juvenile Delinquency, Moral Emotions, Guilt, Shame, Empathy, Remorse, Rehabilitation, Maldives, Social Learning Theory, Moral Development

### Introduction

Juvenile delinquency, which refers to acts of adolescent contravention of legislation as well as social norms, still exists as a troubling problem on a global scale. It is a product of an intricate social, as well as, environmental influences, like, cognitive growth, family dynamics, emotional control, and peer affiliation (Thompson, 2025). Among them, moral emotions are most influential to understand some adolescent's deviations from normative antisocial behavior, and other's failure to do so. Moral emotions are a special set of social emotions that arise from evaluative situations and impel individuals of certain constituencies to act in alignment with normative behavior and social good (Haidt, 2007; Pizarro, 2007).

There are some specific moral emotions which affect and control behavior of people such as guilt and causing a recognition of injury to others, which is channeled into reparative behavior, and by shame, which from moral wrongdoing is triggered negative self-evaluation (Ferguson et al., 1991). In addition, the emotional capacity of empathy, which is to understand

and feel what others are experiencing, has been associated with helpful behavior and less aggression and it significantly serves as a buffer against delinquent behavior (Eisenberg et al., 2008). Absence of these moral emotions is positively correlated to antisocial and delinquent behaviors as moral emotional affective responses to wrongdoing and societal controlling mechanisms are lacking.

Juvenile delinquents show some difference in the development of morality compared to non-delinquent peers in some domains such as moral reasoning and experiencing emotions in moral situations (Gibbs et al., 2007; Stams et al., 2006; Spruit et al., 2016). There is evidence that youth in the study of delinquency show lesser levels of empathy and self-reflection and emotions of guilt and shame associated with the persistent antisocial behavior and the poor prognosis for rehabilitation (Heynen et al., 2023). Reduced moral awareness—the ability to see that there is a moral dimension in a particular situation—has also been found to reinforce delinquent behavior by enabling moral disengagement and the neutralization of moral restraints (Jati, 2025).

The evidence on the role of emotions shaped the explanation of the phenomenon of delinquency on morality, and moral emotions, becomes a basis for the expectation that the programs addressing emotional development along with moral reasoning will have value.

It further indicates the need for exploring emotional and moral reasoning interventions. Indeed, morally oriented programs that target empathy and moral cognition have shown potential to improve prosocial outcomes and reduce future offending, although more research is needed on their long-term effectiveness (Heynen et al., 2023). In terms of the Maldives, the rapid socio-cultural changes, national youth developmental approaches, and the evolving socio-cultural dimensions of the country, understanding the role of moral emotions related to delinquent behaviors is fundamental to the development of constructive education programs for the country.

### **Background of Study**

The impact of crime and misbehaviour does not only affect one individual but also one society as a whole and on a global scale, it affects the well-being of many people. According to Juvenile Delinquency Definition in Criminal Law Key Term Fiveable (2025), delinquency is a global phenomenon that is particularly concerning to policymakers, enforcement officers and psychologists among others. In its broadest sense, delinquency, which is the illegal or antisocial behaviour of children, encompasses a wide range of activities, including petty offences such as theft and vandalism, and major offences such as gang assault and the abuse and trafficking of dangerous drugs. The development of delinquent behaviour is often associated with a lack of moral development coupled with emotional regulation as well as with socio-environmental variables. Therefore, getting to appreciate the impact of moral emotions such as delinquency, shame and pride on the behaviour of such youthful offenders is quite crucial in order to prevent and rehabilitate the young offenders.

The incidence of adolescent delinquency has been growing in many parts of the world. Thus, the necessity of understanding the psychological and social aspects of these behaviours is pivotal and urgent. The United Nations describes juvenile delinquency as an escalating problem globally, with increasing violence, gang-related activities, and drug abuse in younger

generations (UNICEF, 2021). In the United States, the United Kingdom, and parts of Europe, the adolescent delinquency problem is often related to socio-economic issues like low income, family disorganization, and lack of educational opportunities (Stams et al., 2006). The problem behaviours are often compounded by lack of social conscience, which is the ability to experience and understand the moral feelings that are vital for social integration. Research has shown that the morally limited juvenile delinquents are the most miserable, and their inability to feel for the sufferer leads to the inescapable cycle of juvenile delinquency (Barriga, 2009). Loss of empathy and guilt in the juvenile delinquency population, has been the most frequently cited variable, in order to predict subsequent noncompliant behaviour and the prediction of recidivism (Heynen et al., 2023).

With the Maldivian archipelago being a small nation in the Indian Ocean, the phenomenon of adolescent delinquency has begun to take a severe shape, especially with the rapid urbanisation and social transformation taking place in the nation. There are significant social advancements in the country, especially with social services such as education and medicine. There is, however, a growing concern regarding the increased rate of youth crime which is disproportionate to the level of development of the country. This tendency is particularly pronounced in the capital city, Malé, where offences associated with youth, such as gang violence and drug trafficking, have escalated markedly over the previous decade (Maldives Police Service, 2024). There have been various efforts to deal with the social causes of juvenile delinquency, including the enactment of laws such as the Juvenile Justice Act and the Child Rights Protection Act. However, there is still a significant lack of thorough and in-depth local studies of the moral sentiments of juvenile offenders in the Maldives. This knowledge gap underscores the need to focus specifically on a study on the effect of moral sentiments on adolescent criminal behaviour in the Archipelago in this unique context.

Recent statistics published by the Maldives Bureau of Statistics and the UNICEF Situation Analysis of Children and Youth in the Maldives (2021) show that about 33.5 percent of the entire population of children in the country live in Male and the rest 66.5 percent are spread over the atolls. These population tendencies are of great importance to juvenile delinquency research as children in Male, especially the underprivileged ones, are more exposed to criminal activities, gang associations, and substance abuse (UNICEF, 2021). Children in the rural districts of the Maldives, however, despite their lesser exposure to criminal elements, often grapple with insufficient education and economic prospects and this might result in delinquent behaviour as they find alternative ways of meeting their demands. Following this, the idea to reduce the minimum age of criminal responsibility, which is discussed by the Maldives Policy Think Tank, can add several newer problems to them as it might make the lives of children who are already struggling with social and educational limitations even more criminal (Mahmood, 2024). In turn, a combination of urbanisation, socioeconomic inequality, and cultural factors, often not targeted by the available measures, determines the onset of juvenile delinquency in the Maldives (Nasheed Aboobakuru, 2016).

There is qualitative research on young offenders and their emotions and thinking, but the scope of this research is highly lacking, particularly regarding emotional thinking in Maldivian juveniles. Moral emotions, absences of which are likely to lead to the commission of a crime, are of particular concern, and the absence of which are likely to inhibit such an individual from having the capacity to think about and understand the consequences of their own

actions. Such emotions are of a highly socially interactive nature and negative emotions such as guilt, shame, and empathy are particularly of concern. In the case of juvenile offenders, the consequences of such emotional thinking are highly predictable and as rehabilitation is the concern of the study, it is clear that the study attempts to inform the design of rehabilitation. The research accordingly seeks to inform the scope of closure.

Thus, adolescent delinquency is a serious global challenge, especially in the Maldives, where socio-economic conditions, urbanization, and lack of resources aggravate the problem. The purpose of this research is to fill the gap in current research by examining the moral emotions of juvenile offenders in the Maldives, explaining how deficiencies of such emotions correlate to delinquent behavior, and proposing potential frameworks for intervention. Understanding the moral and emotional underpinnings of delinquency is critical to developing effective rehabilitation that manages the offending behavior, emotes unhealthily the developmental problem of the young offenders, and ultimately contributes to the enhanced security and fairer arrangement of social conditions.

#### *The Escalating Incidences of Juvenile Delinquency in the Maldives*

The Maldives has been witnessing a gradual increase in juvenile crime especially in the capital of Male whereby the socio-economic disparity and urbanisation play a significant role in shaping criminal behavior among young people. Childhood gang affiliation and drug abuse among the underprivileged children in Male are particularly susceptible when living in certain areas (UNICEF, 2021). This urban environment increases the risk of delinquency because teenagers are often lured into criminal activities because of the lack of social support and economic opportunities.

Based on the Maldives Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Situation Analysis of Children and Youth in the Maldives (2021), 33.5 percent of children live on Male and the other 66.5 per cent on the atolls. The urban-rural divide influences the type of delinquency, since children located in Male are more likely to experience direct exposure to crime, but children in their rural counterparts are often faced with limited access to education and limited economic opportunities, which can also trigger delinquent behaviour (Mahmood, 2024).

#### *Inadequate Comprehension of the Function of Moral Emotions in Juvenile Delinquency*

Although empirical studies around the globe argue that the lack of moral emotions plays a significant role in causing juvenile delinquency (Gibbs, 2014; Moshman, 2011), a systematic analysis of the exact correlation between the state of moral development and delinquency is not conducted in the context of the Maldives. Moral emotions that are formed through the interactions between children and their family members, peers, and society are the crucial elements to guide them through ethical dilemmas and decision-making. However, there are limited qualitative research examining how moral emotions affect the likelihood of youths to indulge in criminal behaviour in the Maldives. This lack of knowledge hampers the development of meaningful prevention measures and interventions that can be used to deal with juvenile delinquency.

#### *The Necessity for Contextualised Solutions to Mitigate Juvenile Delinquency*

The young people of urban areas are in greater exposure to crime, gang violence, and substances, and the youth of rural areas are faced with a challenge of having limited access to education and economic opportunities (UNICEF, 2021). The need to incorporate contextualised solutions is a must that complies with unique cultural and geographical environments of the Maldives. Rebuilding the community through community-led initiatives focused on rehabilitation, development of empathy and emotional support is essential in the efforts to deal with the root causes of juvenile delinquency. These interventions should integrate local awareness, social support and education so as to lower criminal activities and curb recurrence of criminal activities in future (Nasheed Aboobakuru, 2017). Self-control and emotional skills are other causes that play a major role in juvenile delinquency alongside socio-economic and environmental. One of the new studies has shown that emotional control and self-efficacy are the keys to academic performance and self-development. As shown by Motevalli et al. (2021), the improvement of study skills and self-efficacy among teenagers is capable of improving emotional regulation and decision-making, which can inhibit the susceptibility to delinquent behavior. The focused training of the emotional regulation abilities by using the systematic interventions can help mitigate the negative effects of stress, frustration, or emotional distress commonly triggering the criminal behavior among adolescents (Motevalli et al., 2021).

#### *Albert Bandura Social Learning Theory*

The social Learning Theory (SLT) proposed by Albert Bandura argues that behaviour can be learned by observational learning whereby a learner observes the behaviour of another, replicates it, and subsequently, he gets to experience the associated consequences; hence, this influences his or her decision to repeat the behaviour observed (Bandura, 1978). This involves the factors of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, which cannot be done without the internalisation and reproduction of behaviours that are modifiable by observable results (Bandura, 1990). This process has an especially acute educational role in relation to juvenile delinquents, who can model their behaviour after others who practise deviant behaviour or adults who do the same, in particular, when they find such behaviour socially or materially beneficial (Akers, 2017). The focus on modelling by Bandura implies that adolescents are inclined to imitate the delinquent behaviours in case they see the role models being socially accepted or rewarded with material possessions because of the same behaviour (Sharma and Gupta, 2023).

The main concept of the theory by Bandura is his moral disengagement in which people justify unethical behavior and dissociate themselves with the emotional consequences of the behavior, including guilt or shame, which would otherwise prevent such behavior. Bandura (1990) has outlined the different tactics of moral disengagement such as the shifting of guilt, euphemistic labelling and dehumanisation of victims that help individuals to do the harmful acts without any emotional disturbance. The lack of moral emotion in the juvenile offenders makes it easier to continue to commit crimes without moral emotional responses that usually act as discouragement (Sellers and Winfree, 2010; Bandura et al., 1996). These mental processes are especially relevant to the provision of understanding of why the minds of children who commit delinquency experience no or block the feelings of guilt, shame, or sympathy upon the perpetration of illegal behaviors.

In the framework of the concept of differential reinforcement, the theory was advanced by Bandura who argued that behaviour is learned as individuals observe it and it is further developed by reinforcement or punishment that those individuals receive (Akers, 1998). When juvenile offenders are rewarded or punished with the use of peer approval, monetary gains, or emotional satisfaction, there is a risk of the repetition behavior that may be reduced when there is a negative punishment (Akers et al., 1979). This reinforcement can be in different forms such as positive reinforcement of deviant behaviour by other peer groups, which increases the likelihood of deviant behaviour to continue (Bandura, 1978; Akers, 2017).

Differential association is a crucial aspect of the Social Learning Theory developed by Bandura based on the differential association theory developed by Sutherland (Sutherland, 1947) which is a viewpoint that individuals learn to behave and have sentiments of morals by interacting with others. Exposed adolescents might internalise rationalisations, which support criminal behaviour and dissuade moral feelings, because of associating with deviant peers or family (Sutherland, 1947; de Carvalho & Ossorio, 2021). This procedure highlights the role of social networks and peer pressure in development of delinquent behaviour. Young individuals who engage with others with deviant behaviour too often tend to acquire those behaviour and rationalise them in a way that would enable them to disengage themselves with emotional consequences often linked to criminal behaviour (Opp, 2020).

In addition, vicarious reinforcement plays a critical role in the theory by Bandura. Learning is not only obtained by direct experience but also by observation; the juveniles observe when others are reinforced or punished due to their actions. As an example, when a minor sees a peer avoiding punishment after committing a crime or rewarded by some praise because of his/her actions, he/she might be more motivated to repeat such behaviour and view it as rewarding and acceptable in society (Bandura, 1990; Bethards, 2014). In cohesive societies where criminal behaviour is condoned, observational learning may have a drastic effect on moral sentiments by directing them to develop or suppress feelings of guilt, shame and empathy in these adolescents (de Carvalho & Ossorio, 2021).

The concept of self-reinforcement within the social learning theory as developed by Bandura is relevant directly to the case of juvenile misbehaviour. Juveniles, who commit delinquent behaviours, can also achieve self-rewarding in terms of improved status or acceptance of peers, thus reinforcing such behaviours and reducing emotional self-regulation (Opp, 2020). This procedure explains why the development of emotional aloofness can continue and escalate since teenagers might not share the moral feelings that generally forbid antisocial behavior.

The Social Learning Theory is effective in explaining how the behaviours and moral emotions are learnt by the juveniles in their social surroundings, thus making it a fundamental paradigm of understanding the juvenile misbehaviour, especially in relation to the moral feelings (see Fig 1). This theory can be a valuable tool in understanding the processes of moral disengagement, and why some juveniles can lack that feeling of guilt or empathy necessary to make ethical decisions, in such a society as the Maldives, where peer pressure, family dynamics and social norms are strong (Akers, 1998; Bandura et al., 1996). Through this knowledge, interventions can be devised to alter the social reinforcement and associations

that cause delinquency and, therefore, lead to healthy emotional and moral growth of adolescents.

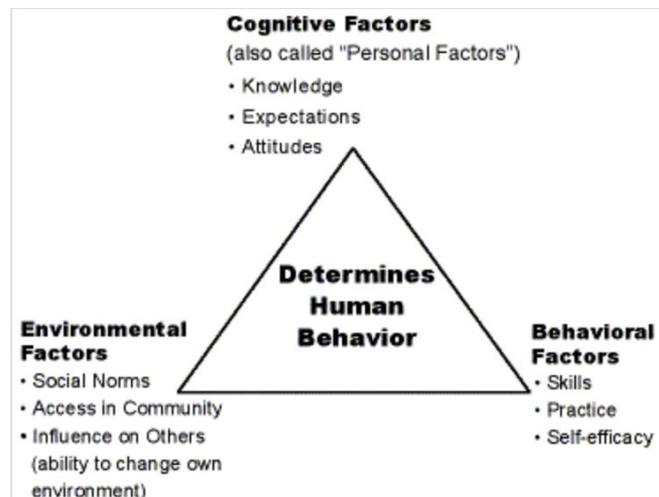


Fig 1 Adapted from the diagram in Social Learning Theory (n.d.), retrieved from [idtoolbox.eseryel.com](http://idtoolbox.eseryel.com)

#### *Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development*

The theory of moral development of Lawrence Kohlberg is an extension of the studies of Jean Piaget on the cognitive development of children, and focuses on the analytical maturation of moral reasoning throughout life. Kohlberg postulates that the process of moral development can be characterized by a series of stages, which represent more and more advanced abilities of moral thinking. He came up with three levels of moral development pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, each of which has two distinct stages in which elementary moral reasoning leads to advanced moral reasoning (McLeod, 2025). These steps are based on the cognitive development process that happens when a person communicates with other people and is exposed to moral dilemmas (see Fig 2).

At the pre-conventional level, which is common to children, the reasoning of morality is ruled by short term consequences. Stage 1 is the defining of obedience and the tendency to shun punishment; the right and wrong can only be understood in terms of negative consequences. An example is a child at this age who will not steal due to a fear of penalties and not because he or she understands its ethical importance (Cherry, 2025). Stage 2 is characterized by self-interest orientation; where decisions are driven by self-gain. A child can assist another child and this is in anticipation of a reward thus illustrating a transactional perception of morality.

As a human being advances to a conventional level, which is usually during adolescence and adulthood, a greater influence of moral reasoning is influenced by societal norms and expectations. In Stage 3, a person is prone to making moral decisions based on the need and wish to receive approval and uphold social relationships; adolescents can be reluctant to cheat in exams to not disappoint any peers or parents (McLeod, 2025). Stage 4 is characterized by the orientation to law and order, where people state that morality is decided by observing social order and adherence to regulations without regard to individual profit (Cherry, 2025).

Moral reasoning at the post-conventional level acquires abstract nature and is regulated by self-ethical principles. In Stage 5, the social-contract orientation, people are aware of the importance of laws in enhancing the welfare of the society yet they believe that laws can be changed once they do not benefit the common good. A person may support civil disobedience in cases where a law violates the basic human rights (McLeod, 2025). Stage 6, which is the stage of universal ethical principles, is the peak of moral thought; the conclusions are based on the principles of fairness, human rights, and equality, even when they are contradictory to the laws or the current social norms.

The opinion expressed by Kohlberg highlights the fact that moral thinking evolves with age and experiences and shifts to abstract and universal beliefs. However, he argued that not everybody achieves the post-conventional stage and someone might be stuck in the conventional stage of moral reasoning (McLeod, 2025). This theory has had another significant impact on the research on moral development; however it has not escaped criticism especially in terms of its culture biasness and its focus on justice to the neglect of other moral theories like care and empathy as discussed by Carol Gilligan (1982). The stages of cognitive development can offer a lot of information about how teenagers and adults address difficult ethical issues and how such reasoning will influence their behavior.



Fig 2 Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, Adapted from Practical Psychology, (Beatey, 2020).

### *Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory*

General Strain Theory (GST) is an extension of the previous strain theories in which Robert Agnew explains how strain may trigger criminal behaviour by its emotional reaction of rage, frustration or despair (Agnew, 1992). GST suggests that not only inability to achieve the goals of individuals but also the loss of positive stimuli (e.g., loss of a job or a loved one) or the exposure of the person to negative stimuli (e.g., bullying or abuse) is a source of strain (Agnew & Froggio, 2007). These strains trigger negative feelings and without a good coping strategy, people can resort to delinquency to alleviate their emotional distress (see Fig 3).

The thesis by Agnew is especially applicable to interpreting juvenile criminality because he points to the role of negative emotions on criminal behavior. As an example, teenagers facing family issues, peer rejection or cultural constraints can become deeply infused with feelings of anger or hopelessness. Without effective coping mechanisms, such sentiments can lead to criminal behaviour in a bid to relieve such sentiments (Agnew, 1992). This is particularly relevant in situations where deviant behaviours are peer approved and consequently the juveniles are more likely to engage in criminal activities without any moral feelings like remorse or shame to hold the deviant behaviours (Carey, 2021).

Agnew identifies objective and subjective strains as the latter is more prone to trigger a criminal action. Subjective strain is the perceptions of individuals about certain pressures. A teenager might feel that losing a loved one or the failure to perform well in school is especially unfair or a strain to him or her and therefore intensifies the level of emotional reaction and may increase the likelihood of committing deviant behaviour (Agnew and Froggio, 2007). This subjective view of strain is the reason that some juveniles react to misfortune by committing crimes, and some may not (Carey, 2021).

The General Strain Theory developed by Agnew is invaluable in explaining how emotional responses to strain, including rage and frustration, may trigger criminal behaviour, especially in juveniles who have no sense of morality or without effective coping strategies (Leiber and Peck, 2020). This theory also applies particularly well to the context of understanding juvenile delinquency in the Maldives because adolescents facing socioeconomic pressures, peer pressure, or family problems may have to turn to delinquency behaviour as a way of dealing with their negative emotional states (Agnew, 2001).

### Basic General Strain Theory (GST) Model

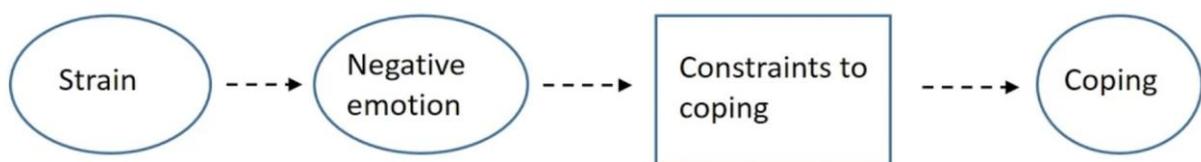


Fig 3 Adapted from the General Strain Theory diagram, retrieved from [criminologie.fandom.com](http://criminologie.fandom.com)

#### *The Role of Social Learning, Moral Development, and Strain in Shaping Juvenile Delinquency: A Theoretical Framework*

The available conceptual framework serves to outline the interrelationship between the Social Learning Theory of Bandura, the Theory of Moral Development of Kohlberg, and the General Strain Theory of Agnew based on juvenile delinquency. Emphasizing on the moral emotions, moderating variables, and juvenile offenders, thus explaining how these variables influence the attitudes to offending, behavioral change, the decision-making process, and subsequent intentions to avoid engaging in delinquent behaviour (see Fig 4).

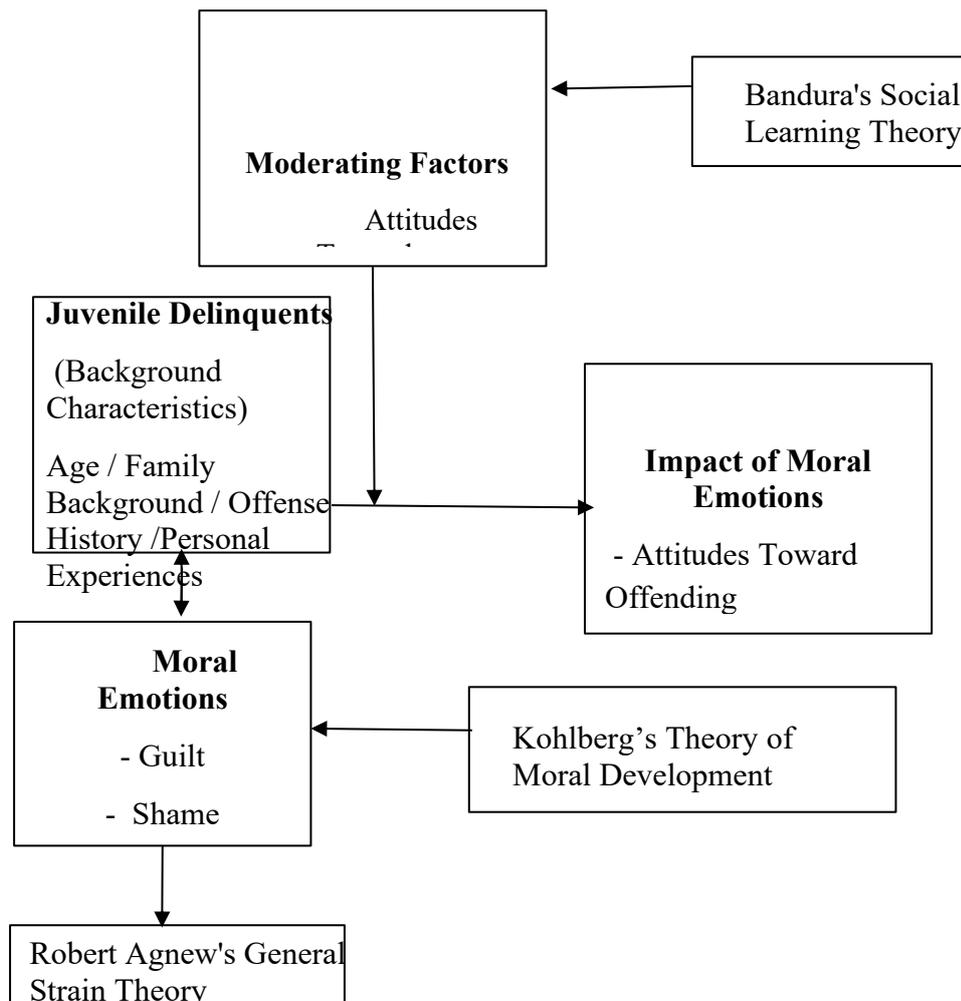


Fig 4 Proposed conceptual framework

The Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura, the Moral Development theory, developed by Kohlberg, and the Strain Theory developed by Agnew all control the attitudinal orientations toward offending, behavioral change, and decision-making to determine the likelihood of a juvenile to commit a crime and their ability to rehabilitate. Moral emotions such as guilt, shame, empathy and moral disengagement cannot be ignored to gain insights on the affective and psychological reactions of juvenile delinquents, and they influence the attitudes of the offender towards offending as well as the behavioral change. Moral emotions played a significant role as far as intentions and desistance in the future are concerned: deep moral emotions are more likely to make a juvenile avoid further offending, and those who do not are likely to continue criminal activity.

#### *Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory*

The Social Learning Theory by Bandura assumes that people learn by watching and imitating other people especially in families, peer groups, and societies (Bandura, 1977). In this paradigm, the theory of Bandura is linked with the moderating factors that mediate the attitudes towards offending, behavior change or rehabilitation, decision-making and intentions to future or desistance. Social learning has a great influence on juvenile delinquents as it recreates the moral development of a delinquent by associating with the family, friends, and their social environment at large. A juvenile can internalize the aspects and behaviors

they observe especially when the delinquent behavior is normalized in their environment. The social context has a strong influence on the decision making and delinquent behavior probability (Bandura, 1977).

#### *Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development*

Kohlberg argued that moral development occurs through four distinct stages through his Theory of Moral Development, which proceeds through self-interested motives to broaden to a concept of fairness and moral principles (Kohlberg, 1984). In this context, the theory can be used to explain the evolution of moral feelings, that is, guilt, shame, empathy, remorse, and moral disengagement. Emotional reactions of youngsters on their behavior such as remorse or humiliation can prevent or encourage further crime. People in the low moral development stages tend to engage in moral disengagement which is likely to justify their deviant behavior; on the other hand, persons in the advanced stages of moral development tend to develop more moral feelings including empathy and guilt which could minimize their urges to offend. It is moral emotions that influence the attitudes towards the offense, changes in behavior and rehabilitation, and intentions (Kohlberg, 1984).

#### *Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory*

The General Strain Theory as put forward by Agnew states that strains like failure, loss or negative treatment lead to emotional distress which may increase the probability of delinquent behavior as a response to the strains (Agnew, 1992). This hypothesis is applicable in the juvenile delinquents and moral emotions in the theoretical framework. Socio-economic conditions, family background, personal experiences are some of the stressors that can lead to emotional reactions (guilt, shame, moral disengagement) which in turn can be related to the delinquent behaviour. Stressed adolescents are also involved in delinquency activity as a way of handling the negative feelings and frustrations, which cannot be dealt with (Agnew, 1992). The impact of moral feeling in strategy to strain changes attitude towards offending and eventually decision and subsequent action.

#### *The Role of Moral Emotions in Juvenile Delinquency*

Guilt, shame, empathy, regrets and moral disengagement are the moral feelings that significantly determine moral conscience and can significantly impact the probability of juveniles committing delinquent behaviors. Recent studies provide more and more empirical data that the lack/imbalance of these emotions is connected to a high risk of delinquency and externalising behaviours (Heynen et al., 2023). A recent meta-analysis on the constituents of conscience including moral reasoning, empathy, and guilt found out that low levels of empathy and guilt during late childhood and early adolescence were major predictors of future delinquency. The authors argue that the moral emotions act as self-regulatory, and as they are not properly developed or suppressed, the internal control over deviant behavior decreases, which increases the probability of anti-social behaviour (Trivedi-Bateman, 2023).

A 2023 study of juvenile delinquents in Hebei Province, China revealed that many youths exhibited the lack of empathy, emotional control deficiency, and high moral disengagement. Moral disengagement as a mental process whereby people rationalise or justify immoral acts to escape guilt or shame is specifically applicable in relation to juveniles. It also allows accepting the wrong but not the guilt, which increases the likelihood of repeat delinquency (Sun and Zheng, 2023). The studies that utilize a situational-action situational approach reveal

that juveniles with low levels of self-conscious feelings (shame and remorse) and poor moral norms are significantly more likely to be involved in violent behaviour. It means that the moral emotions do not just act as individual attributes, they are combined with moral beliefs or principles, in case both the inner feelings and moral norms are weakened the transgression threshold is lowered (Trivedi Bitcoin, 2023).

A mediating factor, in this case, turns out to be empathy. Longitudinal research shows that teenagers exposed to high levels of empathic support and particularly in authoritative parenting display better empathy in the long run and a lower rate of engaging in delinquent behaviors (Goering & Mrug, 2021). This emphasizes the role of socialisation and emotional support in moral sentiments that discourage aberrant behaviour.

Despite such results, there is an infused picture in the recent meta-analytic research about the interventions aimed at promoting moral development in juvenile offenders: even though such interventions have a small-to-moderate positive effect on the moral judgement, there is little data to prove that such interventions produce a substantial effect in reducing the recidivism, and fewer interventions target moral emotions, including guilt or shame (Heynen et al., 2023). This gap suggests that despite the apparent relevance of moral emotions, there is still a major problem of applying moral-emotion theories to effective intervention programmes.

Overall, the post-2020 literature highlights that moral emotions do not represent the secondary effects but the key to understanding delinquency. Lack of empathy, remorse, shame, or lack of morality engagement can weaken the internal moral controls of teenagers, increasing their tendency to be offenders. In contrast, strong moral emotions which are normally fostered by favorable social environments like empathic parenting appear to counter misbehaviour. The results support the inclusion of moral-emotional variables in both the theoretical and practical adolescent delinquency frameworks.

#### *Factors Influencing Moral Development in Juvenile Delinquents*

The factors affecting the moral development of juvenile delinquents are very numerous and depend on the familial environment, the type of parenting, the socioeconomic status, the relations with peers, and the personality traits of a person. Collectively, these aspects influence inculcation of moral principles and control of the behavior in the juvenile population.

#### *Family Environment and Child-rearing Strategy*

Family setting is a major determinant of moral development. Relationships with parents that are positive and endow the warmth, attentiveness, and explicit moral education lead to the development of prosocial behaviours (Hou, 2023). Conversely, insensitive or erratic parenting interferes with moral internalisation and makes a person more prone to committing crimes (Pandey et al., 2024). According to a recent study, those teens brought up in cozy homes, where the issues of moral dilemmas were discussed openly, demonstrated better moral reasoning and were less likely to become delinquent (Sun and Zheng, 2023).

### *Socioeconomic Status*

The socio-economic status (SES) has a significant impact on moral development. Children with a background of higher SES have better chances of accessing educational resources, caring role models, and having secure settings that lead to moral reasoning (Keijer, 2021). On the other hand, members of low SES families often face other stresses (e.g., financial problems and violence in the community), and this aspect can slow down the process of moral development and enhance the tendency to commit delinquency (Sun and Zheng, 2023).

### *Peer Influence*

The influence of peer interactions on the process of moral development is very strong during adolescence. Peer group can either uphold prosocial behaviour or condone criminal behaviour. Young people who are embedded into prosocial networks of peers have increased chances to express strong moral feelings, including empathy and guilt, which prevent delinquency (Heynen et al., 2023). Conversely, antisocial behaviour can be justified in delinquent peer groups and reduced moral self-regulation is possible (Pandey et al., 2024).

### *Cognitive and Affective Factors*

Moral growth can be affected by personal traits, such as temperament, emotional self-management and cognitive maturity. Adolescents with elevated emotional reactivity or impulsivity might be incapable of assimilating moral norms and develop moral inactivity and a high probability of engaging in crime (Malti and Krettenauer, 2021). The crucial moral feeling called empathy has a defensive role; teenagers who show a higher level of empathy tend to be less willing to do harmful things and will feel more guilty of their actions (Goering & Mrug, 2021).

### *Community and Structural Influences*

Moral development is affected by the bigger community environment, including the safety of the neighbourhoods and the accessibility of social support. Societies with strong social network and selfless institutions will encourage better moral thinking and reduce crime. On the other hand, moral disengagement itself, which could be caused by exposure to violence and lack of community resources, can lead to higher chances of engaging in delinquent behavior (Keijer, 2021).

### **Juvenile Delinquency and Emotional Development in the Maldives**

The issue of juvenile delinquency in the Maldives is increasingly becoming a problem of concern though there is a dearth of empirical research on the direct interplay between emotional development and delinquent behaviour. Although studies on this matter are scarce, reports and studies have focused on the importance of emotional regulation, family matters, and socio-economic factors on the behaviour of adolescents. The family setting has always been identified as one of the most important factors of moral and emotional development. Warm and responsive parenting, which is known as positive parenting, is linked to emotional regulation and reduced delinquency, and inconsistent or negligent parenting is linked to emotional dysregulation and higher likelihood of criminality (Hou, 2023).

In Maldives, teenagers are emotionally distressed due to socio-economic factors including poverty and lack of resources and this increases the likelihood of committing delinquency. According to the UNICEF Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents in the Maldives

(2025), emotional well-being is one of the focal points of the intervention, which highlights the lack of mental health services among the youth. The discussion shows that stabilizing emotional support systems could significantly minimize delinquent behaviours among young people in the country (UNICEF, 2025). The Maldives National University (MNU) research on juvenile delinquency in 2022 proves that most youths who commit crimes have emotional regulation problems, which intensify their violent behaviours and unlawful actions (MNU, 2022).

The key to making moral decisions is emotional development, both in the capacity to regulate emotions and in the capacity to empathize and communicate empathy. Teenagers with poor emotional regulation tend to do impulsive things, which make them more prone to delinquency behaviour (Heynen et al., 2023). Besides, peer groups are important determinants of emotional reactions since they may maintain delinquency or contribute to more healthy emotional development (Heynen et al., 2023).

Although there is growing anxiety about youth crime in the Maldives, there is still a serious gap in the research which is directly related to delinquent behaviour and emotional development in this particular setting. Recent research is rather focused on family relations, socio-economic status, and education, not emotional and psychological ones. This gap shows that more studies are required to determine the influence of emotional control, empathy, and moral emotions on criminality among youths in Maldives. The fill in this gap will facilitate the development of future research to inform interventions aimed at addressing delinquent behavior and at the same time encourage emotional growth to suppress youth crime.

### **Interventions and Programs Addressing Moral Emotions in Juvenile Delinquents**

Recent research shows that moral emotion-improving interventions, including empathy, guilt, and emotion management, can have a positive impact on juvenile offenders, and they might lead to a decrease in recidivism rates. In a meta-analysis of moral-development interventions with youth who committed delinquent behavior, Heynen et al. (2023) found a small to medium-sized positive effect of such programs on moral judgment and decision-making; however, the impact of such programs on recidivism is inconclusive. This observation highlights the need to have more inclusive programmes that deal with moral reasoning, emotional as well as behavioural change.

The inclusion of emotional self-efficacy and empathy in rehabilitation programmes has presented a positive result. According to Maria et al. (2025), treatments that focused on enhancing emotional self-regulation and empathy had a significant negative impact on the antisocial behaviour of juvenile delinquents. Such programmes will equip adolescents with the emotional skills they need to contain their impulses and are able to reason morally which will reduce the likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour.

Moreover, the concept of social-emotional learning (SEL) being incorporated into juvenile justice programmes has become the subject of interest because of its potential to enhance prosocial behavior. Hicks (2024) posits the usage of a social-emotional learning (SEL) model in a community supervision environment with youth involved in the justice system and believes that the use of the SEL-based framework promotes the growth of emotional regulation, empathy, and decision-making skills. The focus of this method is to develop

emotional competencies and on the contrary to tackle the underlying factor that led to delinquency thus raising the chances of returning to the society.

In line with these observations, any worldwide outlook of the treatment methods highlights the fact that addressing both emotional and psychological needs of juvenile offenders is primary to rehabilitation. Since punitive measures alone do not reduce recidivism, Aazami et al. (2023) argue that emotional development and moral judgment interventions are more suitable to reduce recidivism. Such programmes usually include the use of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), family therapy and the use of peer-support groups to help resolve the emotional and ethical dilemmas of adolescent offenders.

Studies of psychological resilience claim that strengthening the resilience level can contribute to emotional regulation and minimize recidivism. A recent systematic review of resilience-focused interventions by Hodgkinson et al. (2020) has revealed that a study based on the principle of enhancing emotional resilience among young offenders was effective in reducing aggressive behaviour and enhancing moral decision-making. Emotional coping mechanisms are cultivated through these programmes thus reducing the chances of criminal behavior in the future.

### **Conclusion**

The article highlights the critical role of moral emotions to adolescent criminality especially in the Maldivian setting. The discussion of the Social Learning Theory, Theory of Moral Development by Kohlberg, and the General Strain Theory by Agnew gives an in-depth account of how adolescents develop delinquency and the attendant emotional and cognitive processes that influence such delinquency. It is noted that moral emotions, such as guilt, shame, and empathy, are significant as internal controls to prevent crime, as evidenced by the results. Young people who have no sense of control or moral behavior are more susceptible to delinquency and even more so when they are subjected to negative reinforcement or bad role models.

The moral development of adolescents is largely influenced by the effect of socialization and peer relationships. Juveniles who mix up with the bad ones or do not receive enough moral guidance are more likely to commit dangerous activities. The above observation reinforces the need for interventions that would focus on the behavior of juvenile delinquent youths as well as on their emotional and moral growth. Empathy training and moral development programs can be implemented in the juvenile justice systems to a great extent and help in reducing recidivism and encouraging positive behavioral change.

Given the specifics of the socio-cultural environment of the Maldives, where the familial and communal factors have a strong impact, any interventions have to be particularized in order to correspond to the cultural peculiarities of the region. Combined with educational programs designed to develop moral feelings, policies that enhance emotional support by family and community are necessary in prevention of criminality and promoting social integration.

This research paper is a proponent of a complex approach that incorporates emotional and moral growth in the system of juvenile justice and rehabilitation. The next step in which future research should be directed is the development of moral sentiments in young people using

specific interventions, and how they will reduce juvenile delinquency in the Maldives and other countries.

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