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A test of Eysenck's antisocial behavior hypothesis employing 11–15-year-old students dichotomous for PEN and L

David B. Center ^{a,*}, Nora Jackson ^b, Dawn Kemp ^c

^a *Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, College of Education, Georgia State University, MSC 6A0820, 33 Gilmer Street, SE Unit 6, Atlanta, GA 30303 3086, USA*

^b *Northwest Georgia Regional Educations Service Agency, 3167 Cedartown Hwy SE, Rome, GA 30161, USA*

^c *Special Education, Rome City Schools, 508 East 2nd Street, Rome, GA 30161, USA*

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Abstract

This study examined the strongest form of Eysenck's antisocial behavior hypothesis. The hypothesis predicts that high scores on the P, E, and N traits combined with a low score on the L Scale from Eysenck's personality instrument is a profile that holds the greatest risk for the development of antisocial behavior. Ninety-four 11–15-year-old participants were selected from a pool of 763 potential participants. Participants in the study were divided into two groups of 47 matched by age and gender. One group consisted of participants who met the at-risk profile and the second group had the opposite profile. All participants were administered a self-report scale that assessed externalizing conduct behavior. An ANOVA was used to test the dichotomous categorization of the participants. All differences between the groups on the traits comprising the independent variable were highly significant. An independent *t*-test was used to test the difference between the groups on the dependent variable. This difference was highly significant in the predicted direction and yielded a very large effect size. A regression analysis determined that three of the four scores used for categorizing participants best predicted the dependent variable. Further, the analysis indicated a significant interaction between P and E. The results are discussed as well as suggested directions for future research.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-404-651-2310; fax: +1-404-651-4901.

E-mail address: dcenter@gsu.edu (D.B. Center).

1. Introduction

The problem of children and adolescents exhibiting antisocial behavior (ASB) in public school programs has been widely discussed (Kamps & Tankersley, 1996; Maag & Howell, 1991; Nelson, Center, Rutherford, & Walker, 1991; Nelson, Rutherford, Center, & Walker, 1991; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Sprague & Walker, 2000; Vance, Fernandez, & Biber, 1998). There are many factors that contribute to the development of conduct problems (McMahon & Wells, 1998; Sprague & Walker, 2000), including a number of biological factors (Chess & Thomas, 1987; Niehoff, 1999). One clearly articulated theory that addresses biological factors in ASB is the biosocial theory of Eysenck (1997a). Eysenck's temperament-based theory is sometimes referred to as a three-factor model of personality in which the three factors are Extraversion (E), Neuroticism (N), and Psychoticism (P).

The Extraversion (E) trait is represented by a bipolar scale that is anchored at one end by sociability and stimulation seeking and at the other end by social reticence and stimulation avoidance. Extraversion is hypothesized to be dependent upon the baseline arousal level in an individual's neocortex and mediated through the ascending reticular activating system (ARAS) (Eysenck, 1967, 1977, 1997a). The difference in basal arousal between introverts and extraverts is evident in research on their differential response to drugs. Claridge (1995) reviewed drug response studies that demonstrated introverts require more of a sedative drug than do extraverts to reach a specified level of sedation. This finding is explained by the higher basal level of cortical arousal in introverts.

The Neuroticism (N) trait is anchored at one end by emotional instability and spontaneity and by reflection and deliberateness at the other end. This trait's name is based on the susceptibility of individuals high on the N trait to anxiety-based problems. Neuroticism is hypothesized to be dependent upon an individual's emotional arousability due to differences in ease of visceral brain activation, which is mediated by the hypothalamus and limbic system (Eysenck, 1977, 1997a).

The Psychoticism (P) trait is anchored at one end by aggressiveness and divergent thinking and at the other end by empathy and caution. The label for this trait is based on the susceptibility of a significant sub-group of individuals high on the P trait to psychotic disorders (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1976). Psychoticism is hypothesized to be a polygenic trait (Eysenck, 1997a). Polygenic refers to a large number of genes each of whose individual effect is small. Each of these "small effect" genes is additive, so that the total number inherited determines the degree of the P trait in the personality. When the small effect genes are found in combination with large effect genes associated with susceptibility to psychotic disorders, there is a significant increase in the risk for developing a psychosis.

Eysenck's theory predicts that individuals high on the P trait will be predisposed to developing antisocial behavior (Eysenck, 1997a). Further, an individual high on both the P and E traits will be predisposed to developing antisocial, aggressive behavior. Aggressive behavior is associated with low cortical arousal (high E) because a person with a relatively under reactive nervous system does not learn restraints on behavior or rule-governed behavior as readily as do individuals with a higher basal level of cortical arousal. Further, when such an individual is high on the N trait as well, this will add an emotional and irrational character to behavior under some circumstances.

Finally, antisocial individuals typically score lower than others on the Lie (L) Scale in Eysenck's personality questionnaire. The L Scale is a measure of the degree to which one is disposed to give

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