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A quantitative review of the relations between the “Big 3” higher order personality dimensions and antisocial behavior

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Abstract

In this meta-analytic review, Hans J. Eysenck's theory of criminality (Eysenck, 1964, 1977) serves as a theoretical framework for examining the relations between higher order personality dimensions and antisocial behavior (ASB). The three higher order dimensions examined are referred to as extraversion/sociability, neuroticism/emotionality, and impulsivity/disinhibition (see Sher & Trull, 1994), and they are likened to Eysenck's dimensions of extraversion (E), neuroticism (N), and psychoticism (P), respectively (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) and Tellegen's dimensions of positive emotionality (PEM), negative emotionality (NEM), and constraint (reversed) (CON), respectively (Tellegen, 1982). Ninety-seven samples, from 52 published and unpublished studies, were reviewed. The results indicated that among the “Big 3” personality dimensions, impulsivity/disinhibition is most strongly related to ASB and extraversion/sociability is least strongly related to ASB. Additional variables, including age and methodological differences, were found to moderate the associations between the personality dimensions and ASB.

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Keywords: Eysenck; Personality theory; Personality dimensions; “Big 3”; Antisocial behavior, Meta-analysis

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1. Introduction

Understanding individuals who engage in antisocial behavior (ASB) has long been a challenge to researchers in the social sciences (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). ASB comprises a number of socially deviant behaviors, typically investigated in terms of criminality, delinquency, and other relevant clinical syndromes [e.g., antisocial personality disorder, conduct disorder; American Psychiatric Association (APA), 1994, 2000]. Because personality features are relatively stable and predict overt behaviors, personality's role in predicting ASB has been extensively researched (Caspi et al., 1994; Krueger et al., 1994).

Many researchers have used personality models to generate hypotheses about the causes of ASB, and Hans J. Eysenck's theory has been one of the most influential in this body of literature (Furnham, 1984; Raine, 1997b). Although Eysenck's "Big 3" dimensions have been the most widely researched, other personality constructs map onto his dimensions to a substantial extent and are pertinent to the study of ASB. A better understanding of the degree to which these dimensions are associated with ASB and of variables (e.g., biological and social variables) that moderate these associations may open doors for better predicting and treating ASB.

1.1. Eysenck's personality theory of crime

Positing that individuals inherit predispositions to behave in certain ways under specific environmental conditions, Eysenck's theory has been referred to as a biosocial model of behavior (Lane, 1987; Raine, 1997b). Though acknowledging that individual differences are shaped partly by environmental factors, Eysenck argued that genetic factors largely account for biological differences that influence personality (Eysenck, 1977, 1996b). He also asserted that personality features are manifested and measurable via behaviors in laboratory and social settings (Eysenck, 1964, 1996b; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1970). Eysenck used factor analytic techniques to develop instruments for assessing personality dimensions [e.g., the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975] and to advance his theory (Eysenck, 1972; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1976). Early in his career, he asserted that the two dimensions of *extraversion* and *neuroticism* underlie normal personality functioning.

Eysenck's conceptualization of extraversion (E) was derived from research on brain functioning and Pavlov's learning theory (Eysenck, 1964). He reasoned that high E individuals have relatively low levels of cortical arousal and seek excitement to increase arousal levels (Eysenck, 1977, 1996a). He further argued that high E individuals are underaroused, require high levels of stimulation to learn, and therefore, are less conditionable than low E individuals (Eysenck, 1964; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1970). He postulated that the conditioning of a conscience is integral to refraining from ASB and that criminals do not develop consciences capable of doing so (Eysenck, 1996a).

Predictions concerning neuroticism (N) extended from Hull's learning theory and Eysenck's hypotheses about emotional reactivity (Eysenck, 1964, 1972). Eysenck presumed that N was related to autonomic nervous system functioning, involving

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