



PERSONALITY AND SELF-REPORTED DELINQUENCY: ANALYSIS OF THE “BIG FIVE” PERSONALITY DIMENSIONS

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(Received 11 April 1995)

Summary—The results of two studies into the “Big Five” personality factors associated with interpersonal violence and vandalism/theft are reported. In the first, respondents were 216 high school students with a median age of 17 yr. It was found that Agreeableness and, to a lesser extent, Conscientiousness and Neuroticism were significant ‘domain’ correlates. Respondents in the second study were 90 university undergraduates who participated in a study for course credit. Several important ‘facet’ correlates were identified and multiple regression analyses showed trust and excitement-seeking to be significant predictors of both forms of delinquency. Self-discipline was found to be a significant predictor of vandalism only. The results are discussed with reference to previous research into the personality correlates to delinquency.

INTRODUCTION

The association between delinquent and anti-social behaviour on the one hand and personality factors on the other is an area that continues to generate considerable research interest in Australia as elsewhere (e.g. Binder, 1988; Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989; Farrington, 1992; Furnham & Thompson, 1991; Heaven, 1993, 1994; Mak, 1994; Rigby, Mak & Slee, 1989; Rutter & Giller, 1983; Shaw & Scott, 1991). There are two possible reasons for this. Firstly, delinquent behaviour is costly to the community. Not only is it becoming increasingly expensive to operate the juvenile justice system, but victims also pay dearly in emotional and psychological terms. A second reason for the continued interest is a theoretical one: there continues to be some debate as to the predictive ability of hitherto identified personality factors that are said to be associated with delinquency.

A review of the literature suggests that several primary personality traits (or facets) are related to delinquency. These tend to include the following: anger/hostility, sociability, venturesomeness (e.g. Heaven, 1993), assertiveness, low conventionality (e.g. Binder, 1988), aggression, anxiety, low self-control (e.g. Feldman, 1977), low self-esteem (Rice, 1992), impulsiveness, negative attitudes to authority (e.g. Rigby *et al.*, 1989), sensation-seeking, low empathy (e.g. Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989), and locus of control (e.g. Shaw & Scott, 1991). A large research effort, however, has tended to adopt an Eysenckian perspective by examining the relationship between delinquency and the three major personality dimensions said to incorporate many of the facets listed above. These dimensions are psychoticism (P), extraversion–introversion (E) and neuroticism–emotional stability (N).^{*} For example, in a series of Australian studies among high school students, Heaven (1993) was able to demonstrate that P (or toughmindedness) appeared to be a much more important predictor of self-reported delinquency than other personality types such as E. Indeed, it was suggested that P is the mechanism through which other personality traits (such as hostility, venturesomeness and impulsiveness) channel their influence on behaviours labelled as delinquent.

It has been noted that P has important mediating and additive functions with respect to certain family factors and personality traits (Heaven, 1994). It was found that P exacerbates the effect of such factors as venturesomeness by increasing the likelihood that venturesome individuals will engage in delinquent acts. In addition, P was found to have a mediating effect on negative family

^{*}There is considerable controversy surrounding H. Eysenck’s labelling of his third dimension as ‘psychoticism’ which he elsewhere refers to as ‘toughmindedness’ (see Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). Interested readers should consult Block (1977), Claridge (1981), Eysenck and Eysenck (1976) and Howarth (1986).

communication among females. Thus, it was concluded that P fulfils an important, yet complex, function in explaining delinquency. These results support the work of others such as Furnham and Gunter (1983) who showed that high P-scorers find it difficult to control their temper or to take orders from others. It also supports the work of Claridge (1981) who found the P dimension to be closely linked to aggression as well as the research of Eysenck and Gudjonsson (1989) who reported that the P scale is useful for distinguishing criminals from non-criminals.

Findings with respect to the personality dimensions E and N are more equivocal and it would seem that results very often reflect the measures and samples used. According to Eysenckian theory, E and N are major predictors of delinquency. It is argued that the ascending reticular activating system controls levels of physiological arousal and that those who are high in E tend to be low in arousal (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). In order to raise their levels of arousal these individuals therefore engage in various thrill-enhancing or sensation-seeking activities. Although Eysenck and Gudjonsson (1989) cite several studies indicating support for the role of E, not all research supports this view. In a British study (Furnham & Thompson, 1991) no significant relationship was observed between E and self-reported delinquency among a sample of 18–25 yr olds. On the other hand, using a shortened version of the revised E scale (Eysenck, Eysenck & Barrett, 1985) among two different samples of Australian teenagers, Heaven (1993) found the predictive ability of E to vary from sample to sample.

It has also been argued that N is a significant correlate of delinquency and that the role of this dimension is amplified in conjunction with E. That is, high E/high N individuals are more likely to engage in delinquent or criminal behaviour (Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989). One explanation that has been suggested is that these individuals condition less easily and do not learn behaviours through conditioning as easily as do introverts (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). As with E, however, not all research supports the link between N and self-reported delinquency (see Furnham, 1984). It has been suggested that the influence of N might be selective, that is, its influence among non-criminal respondents and different types of delinquent behaviours is unclear (Furnham & Thompson, 1991), whilst it has also been observed that N is more important in explaining delinquency among older rather than younger respondents.

There appears to be growing support among some trait theorists that personality can be described in terms of five rather than three dimensions (e.g. Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1990; Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990; John, 1990; Noller, Law & Comrey, 1987; Peabody & Goldberg, 1989). As Goldberg (1990, p. 1223) puts it: there is now "...sufficient evidence to alleviate any qualms about the generality of the Big Five structure...".

Costa and McCrae (1985) have identified the following personality dimensions: Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). N and E overlap with those identified by Eysenck, whilst O has been described as characteristic of those who are "...curious about both inner and outer worlds...willing to entertain novel ideas and unconventional values..." (Costa & McCrae, 1985, p. 10). There has recently been some debate regarding overlap between A, C, and P. Some authors (e.g. Digman, 1990) have argued that these dimensions are similar, although Eysenck (1992) has gone further by suggesting that A and C are, in fact, primaries of the super factor P. Costa and McCrae (1992a) reject such arguments and contend that N, E, A, C and O "...are essentially orthogonal and irreducible" (p. 862).

As far as can be established no research on the relationship between the Big Five and self-reported delinquency has been undertaken. Thus, the present series of studies was designed to address this issue. The first study was designed to assess the relationships between self-reported delinquency and the five domain measures of personality. The second study was designed to replicate and extend the first.

EXPERIMENT 1

The following hypotheses guided this study. First, it was hypothesized that self-reported delinquency would be significantly related to E and N (Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989). Given the possibility that P overlaps somewhat with A and C (Eysenck, 1992), it was also hypothesized that these two dimensions would be significantly negatively associated with self-reported delinquency.

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