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Personality, perceptions of family and peer influences, and males' self-reported delinquency☆

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to assess the joint influences of personality factors (extraversion (E), neuroticism (N), and psychoticism (P)), family control (parental inductiveness, punitiveness, and love withdrawal), and delinquent companionship on males' self-reported delinquency. Respondents were two groups of 13-year-olds ($n = 110$ and $n = 89$). Structural equation modelling showed that personality and delinquent companionship consistently had direct effects on self-reported delinquency. It is concluded that this study provides important evidence on the interplay between personality and environmental factors on delinquency. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Delinquency; Personality; Psychoticism; Companionship; Parental discipline style

1. Introduction

What are the most significant predictors of self-reported delinquency, personality factors or environmental influences such as those involving family and peers? The psychology of delinquency continues to enjoy considerable research attention by behavioural scientists. This research effort has most notably been dominated by the study of personality influences (see, for example, Binder, 1988; Eysenck, 1977; Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989; Feldman, 1977; Furnham & Thompson, 1991; Gudjonsson, 1997; Heaven, 1993, 1996; Lane, 1987; Putnins, 1982; Rigby, Mak & Slee, 1989; Weaver & Wootton, 1992), although there is growing interest in the role of major

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environmental factors such as the effects of family processes (Baumrind, 1967; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz & Simons, 1994; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates & Pettit, 1996; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991; McFadyen-Ketchum, Bates, Dodge & Pettit, 1996; Shaw & Scott, 1991; Peiser & Heaven, 1996) and delinquent peers (see Emler & Reicher, 1995 for a recent integrative approach).

The present research was designed to assess the joint effects of the major personality domains, perceptions of parental discipline style, and association with delinquent companions on levels of self-reported delinquency among male youth. As far as we can establish, these joint effects have not yet been investigated.

1.1. The role of personality

This perspective posits that delinquency is the result of fixed and biologically determined personality factors. Most (but certainly not all) research relating personality to delinquency has adopted the approach of Eysenck (e.g., Eysenck, 1977; Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989), who proposed that the major personality domains psychoticism (P), neuroticism (N), and extraversion (E) are crucial in predicting delinquency and criminality. Those high on E are said to be cortically under-aroused and are therefore more likely to engage in thrill- and sensation-seeking behaviours. While it is suggested that N is linked to anxiety which acts as a drive ensuring that delinquent behaviours are amplified, high P scorers have been described as anti-social, aggressive, cold, and unempathic (Claridge, 1981; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). Thus, perhaps not surprisingly, P has been found to discriminate between criminals and non-criminals. Whereas early theorising gave prominence to the role of E and N, several studies employing both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs suggest that P is more influential in predicting criminality (e.g., Gudjonsson, 1997; Heaven, 1993, 1996; Lane, 1987; Putnins, 1982). This may be due, in part, to the fact that the impulsiveness component of E has been shifted to P, while N seems sensitive to the age of respondents (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985; Furnham & Thompson, 1991; Gudjonsson, 1997).

1.2. The role of family processes

It is well established that family functioning affects the emotional and behavioural outcomes of children (Noller & Callan, 1991). Schaefer (1959) proposed his well known two-dimensional model of parental behaviour patterns (autonomy–control vs hostility–love) suggesting that each had differential outcomes for youth. Baumrind (1967) differentiated different parenting styles and showed that an authoritative style was most likely to lead to behavioural and emotional competencies in children. In an early British longitudinal study (West & Farrington, 1973) it was shown that parental psychopathology is linked to childrens' maladjustment and delinquency. Likewise, Patterson and colleagues (Patterson, DeBarsyshe & Ramsey, 1989) reported that anti-social parents tend to raise anti-social teenagers.

In this research we were specifically interested in the role of parental discipline style which has been the focus of recent studies (e.g., Ge, Best, Conger & Simons, 1996; Peiser & Heaven, 1996; Pettit, Bates & Dodge, 1997; Shaw & Scott, 1991). Grounded in earlier theorising regarding social control (Hirschi, 1969) and moral development (Hoffman, 1963), researchers distinguish between power assertive and psychological techniques of parenting. On this basis, Shaw and Scott (1991)

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