



The impact of adolescent and parental characteristics on adolescent levels of delinquency and depression

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Abstract

Using a cross-sectional design, we examined the effects of adolescent and parental characteristics on depression and delinquency among a sample of Australian high school students. The sample comprised 276 students (median age = 15 years) and 274 biological parents of these students. The characteristics measured included adolescent reports of their personality and perceptions of parental bonding as well as parental reports of their own parenting styles and personality. As expected, depression and delinquency scores were significantly correlated, although the significant predictors of these outcome measures were found to be quite distinct. Adolescent personality scores were the strongest predictors of the outcome measures, although fathers' personality and parenting styles were also found to be implicated in adolescent adjustment. These results are discussed with reference to previous work in this area.

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1. Introduction

To what extent do self-reported parental and adolescent characteristics co-determine adolescent levels of delinquency and depression? Is one set of characteristics more influential than the other in shaping behaviour? Although many studies have examined those adolescent characteristics (e.g. adolescent personality, perceptions of family functioning, etc.) associated with adolescent adjustment, very few have simultaneously studied self-reported parental characteristics. The present

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study will therefore examine the joint influence of parental and adolescent personality traits and reports of parenting styles on adolescent levels of behavioural and emotional adjustment.

Although not necessarily a time of “storm and stress” (Arnett, 1999), it would appear that the teenage years are quite volatile. This is evidenced by the fact that some young people are prone to engage in a range of problem behaviours such as delinquency with some also experiencing emotional problems, including depression (Heaven, 2001; Noller & Callan, 1991). Reports of the incidence of youth depression vary widely, it being suggested by some scholars that major depressive disorder affects just over 3% of teenagers (Garrison, Waller, Cuffe, & McKeown, 1997), although it may be as high as 5% (Kashani et al., 1987).

It is important to study depression because of its links to problem behaviours such as suicide, while there is also evidence to suggest that depression and delinquency are not totally independent of each other. An early exposition referred to delinquency or acting out behaviour as “masked depression”, that is, it was asserted that delinquency stems from underlying depression (Weiner, 1970). Other writers identified the “depressed-borderline” delinquent, suggesting that delinquency represents an attempt to escape feelings of depression (Offer, Marohn, & Ostrov, 1979). There would appear to be some support for this thesis as Kandel and her colleagues noted a significant association between delinquency and depression in their sample of over 500 American youth (Kandel, Raveis, & Davies, 1991; see also Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1998). Thus, the following hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 1:

Adolescent reports of their delinquency and depression will be significantly correlated.

1.1. Adolescent predictors of behavioural and emotional outcomes among youth

Extensive research has linked various personality dimensions as well as adolescent perceptions of family functioning to behavioural and emotional outcomes among youth. For instance, many studies have adopted the Eysenckian paradigm and examined the importance of the major personality domains, extraversion (E), neuroticism (N) and psychoticism (P), on criminal and delinquent behaviours (see Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989; Furnham & Thompson, 1991, for reviews). Several of these have concluded that P is a critical factor in this regard (e.g. Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989; Furnham, 1984; Gudjonsson, 1997; Furnham & Thompson, 1991; Heaven, 1996a; Saklofske & Eysenck, 1980). Gudjonsson (1997, p. 160) explains as follows: “Whereas in Eysenck’s early work E (extraversion) played a crucial role in his theory of criminality, P has now taken the more prominent role. A high P score is associated with the severity and persistence of criminality. . .”. The importance of N and E appear equivocal, their influence to some extent dependent upon factors such as the age of the respondents (Furnham & Thompson, 1991) or the exact form of the measuring instruments that are used (Rocklin & Revelle, 1981).

Thus far, limited research has been conducted into the Big Five correlates of delinquency, but the evidence to hand suggests that low conscientiousness (C) and low agreeableness (A) are probably implicated (Heaven, 1996b). One study directly compared the importance of P, C and A as predictors of delinquency (Mak, Heaven, & Rummery, 2003). It was found that, when these variables were entered as a block in a regression analysis, P but not A or C made a significant contribution to explaining the variance of delinquency.

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