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Longitudinal examination of the impact of Eysenck's psychoticism dimension on emotional well-being in teenagers

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Abstract

Using a two-wave longitudinal design with a 12-month interval, we assessed the impact of Eysenckian psychoticism on the emotional well-being of teenagers ($N = 660$). The mean age of the participants was 12 years at Time 1. At both times, participants completed the Eysenck psychoticism measure as well as a number of measures of positive and negative affect derived from the PANAS-X, namely, hostility, fear, sadness, and joy [Watson, D. & Clark, L. A. (1994). *The PANAS-X: manual for the positive and negative affect schedule – expanded form*. Department of Psychology, University of Iowa]. Structural equation modeling (SEM) indicated structural differences in psychoticism between boys and girls. Further SEM analyses revealed that amongst girls, P was associated with increases in hostility, sadness, and fear, whereas amongst boys it was associated with decreases in joy. These results are discussed with reference to the nature of Eysenckian psychoticism, its links to emotional states, and their implications for behaviour in young people. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

When considering the dimensions of major contemporary personality schemes such as the Big Five and the Gigantic Three, none has generated as much debate and conjecture as Eysenck's

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psychoticism (P) dimension.¹ Also referred to as “toughmindedness” (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975), the P dimension is viewed as an “unspecific vulnerability” in which individuals are predisposed to varying degrees of psychosis (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985, p. 64) or a continuum, ranging from altruistic and empathic tendencies at one end to impulsive, aggressive and other “near-psychotic” states at the other (Eysenck, 1997, p. 111).

From the outset this proposal generated vigorous debate. The major discussions have centered on the extent to which P is distinguishable from agreeableness and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1995; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985) and whether or not this personality dimension predicts psychotic behaviour. Questions have also been raised regarding the exact nature of the P scale itself (e.g. Bishop, 1977; Block, 1977; Claridge & Birchall, 1978; Davis, 1974; Eysenck, 1977, 1992; Howarth, 1986; Van Kampen, 1993). Most scholars, it now seems, are agreed that the P scale does not predict psychosis. Indeed, following a 10-year longitudinal study, Chapman, Chapman, and Kwapil (1994) concluded that the P scale best predicts personality disorders (e.g. schizotypy and paranoia), and psychotic-like experiences (e.g. aberrant beliefs and aberrant visual experiences), rather than psychosis. Claridge (1997) concluded that the “traits associated with psychoticism... cannot be considered as uniquely, or importantly, ‘psychotic’ as is claimed (but) the P dimension is clearly relevant to our understanding of serious mental illness” (pp. 377–378).

Despite the arguments that P is essential to understanding mental health and well-being, relatively little research has investigated the extent to which P actually predicts aspects of emotional well-being, especially in adolescents. Emotional or affective states are worthy of study because of their known links to subjective well-being, and because of their significant influences on cognitions and self-evaluations (Watson, Clark, & Carey, 1988). Still less research has investigated whether P is likely to be a mere correlate of well-being, or even a consequence of poor well-being. Thus, we utilized a two-wave longitudinal design to investigate the extent to which P predicts changes in emotional well-being, and the extent to which emotional well-being predicts changes in P.

2. Psychoticism and maladjustment in adolescents

Longitudinal studies into the effects of psychoticism on young people are extremely limited and largely confined to studies of anti-social behaviours rather than emotional well-being. Thus, Heaven (1996) found that the P factor predicted self-reported delinquency two years later. Lane (1987) demonstrated that high P scale scores among youth significantly predicted convictions five years later and that, the higher the original P score, the more likely it was that the subsequent misbehaviour was severe, persistent, and violent. More recently, P scores at Time 1 among boys, but not girls, predicted antisocial behaviour 12 months later (Romero, Luengo, & Sobral, 2001).

Psychoticism has also been found to predict a range of other behaviours in teenagers including health-related behaviours (Brayne, Do, Green, & Green, 1998), drug-taking behaviours (Kirkcaldy, Siefen, Surall, & Bischoff, 2004), and peer-crowd affiliations (Mak, Heaven, & Rummery, 2003).

¹ In all, the Eysencks proposed three major personality dimensions, namely, extraversion–introversion, emotional stability–neuroticism, and psychoticism–impulse control (e.g. Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1976).

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