

Personality correlates
and their predictive
ability to self-report
delinquency es...



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There is a pressing need to better understand youth crime and delinquency as it has been harming society for decades. Delinquent behaviour is costly to society because not only is it becoming increasingly expensive to operate the juvenile justice system but it also damages the emotional well being of victims (Heaven, 1996). The fatal shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, USA on 20th April, 1999 emphasized on this need for a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind these motivations and perhaps a way to predict future delinquent or criminal behaviour.

Society needs to acknowledge that adolescent crime and violence may be more multifaceted than popularised media reports suggest (Mak, Heaven, & Rummery, 2001). For years, criminologists and other professionals have maintained a socialization-based theory behind delinquent activities (Rivera and Widom, 1990; Farrington, 1989; Widom, 1996 cited in Sigurdsson, Gudjonsson & Peersen, 2001). These suggest that criminal behaviour may be a result of unemployment, racism, poor housing, education and other socio-economic factors (Slayton, Kern & Curlette, 2000). Nevertheless, although different learning patterns may be an important source of the individual differences in moral behaviour that are found, it is also possible that these may associate with certain " personality dispositions" (Rushton & Chrisjohn, 1981). More recently, psychologists and criminologists have suggested that the personality of delinquents must also be considered more meticulously to understand the reasons and motives of individuals who choose a life of deviance (Andrews & Bonta, 1994; Clinard, Quinney & Wildeman, 1994; Walters, 1990). In discussion of these criminal personalities, Yochelson and Samenow (1976) and Walters (1990), have proposed that children at an

early age develop personality attributes in response to the “ harshness of their environments”.

These writers have proposed that certain children at a developing age develop belief systems, “ cognitive maps” or modes of thinking that gradually evolve into criminal personalities. This leads us into the theoretical need for understanding personality correlates and delinquency. There seems to be continued debate as to the predictive ability of thus far identified personality factors that may be related to delinquency (Binder, 1988; Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989; Farrington, 1992). This paper will critically evaluate the major theses put forward by Eysenck and his colleagues and attempt to focus on specific traits within the dimensions identified by Eysenck (1977). Previous literature has offered several primary personality traits such as anger/hostility, sociability, “ venturesomeness” (Heaven, 1993), assertiveness, low conventionality (Binder, 1988), aggression, anxiety, low self-control (Feldman, 1977 cited in Heaven, 1996), impulsiveness, negative attitudes to authority (Rigby et al. , 1989), low empathy and sensation seeking.

A large amount of research has gone into the Eysenckian perspective by investigating the relationship between delinquency and the three personality dimensions said to include most of the characteristics mentioned above. These dimensions are psychoticism¹, extraversion-introversion and neuroticism-emotional stability (Eysenck, 1977). In *Crime and Personality* (1977), Eysenck hypothesized that criminals will be high-scorers on measures of psychoticism, extraversion and neuroticism. However,

Eysenck’s work is not as simplistic. Its predictions are derived from a “
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causal model of central nervous system functioning” which involve the influence of both genetics and learning (Rushton ; Chrisjohn, 1981).

Extraversion and psychoticism are related to criminality through “ low cortical arousal, poor conditionability, and failure to develop the conditioned response ‘ conscience’”(Eysenck ; Gudjonson, 1989 cited in Sigurdsson et al.

, 2001). It is unnecessary to elaborate on the biological rationale of Eysencks work, as it does not concern the relevance of this study². Heaven (1996) suggests that psychoticism is the instrument through which personality traits such as anger and hostility, channel their influence on behaviours identified as delinquent. Heaven (1993) expanded his work from Feldmans (1977) research on traits such as low self-control (impulsivity as an element of neuroticism) and anger/hostility (aggression as an element of psychoticism). Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) general theory of crime is considered to support this theory that personality traits can be predictive of delinquency.

Eysenck on the other hand, was not in complete agreement with impulsivity being positively correlated with delinquency (Laak, 2003). He argued that successful criminals need to conduct cost benefit analysis of criminal activities and need organizational and computational skills to estimate the risks involved in criminal acts (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1976 cited in Laak, 2003). This hypothesis has also been contested; lack of self-control and impulsiveness have often been observed in delinquents (DeHaan & Vos 1993 cited in Laak, 2003). The majority of Eysenck’s theory has been empirically replicated when it came to psychoticism.

The claim of a relationship between neuroticism and self-reported was yet to be accepted. There has been very limited support for Eysenck's hypothesis regarding neuroticism as predictive of delinquency (Furnham, 1984 cited in Furnham & Thomson, 1991). But it has been suggested that the influence of neuroticism might be selective, that is, its relationship between non-criminal respondents who have engaged in delinquent behaviour, is unclear (Furnham & Thomson, 1991). Furnham et al. (1991) observed that neuroticism may be more important in explaining delinquency among older, rather than younger participants. Heaven (1996) also found no significant relationship between the facets of neuroticism and self-reported delinquency.

On the other hand, an association between psychoticism and self-reported delinquency has found widespread support (Eysenck & Gudjonson, 1989; Eysenck 1981 cited in Heaven, 1993; Rigby et al. , 1989). The current research has tried to extract certain specific personality traits from Eysenck's psychoticism and neuroticism, namely aggressiveness and impulsiveness respectively. The present paper attempts to find a relationship between the aforementioned traits of personality and self-reported delinquency.

It was hypothesized that scores on self-reported delinquency would be positively correlated with individual aggressiveness and impulsiveness.