The impact of family relations and personality factors on delinquent behaviours among youth

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THE IMPACT OF FAMILY RELATIONS 
AND PERSONALITY FACTORS ON  
DELINQUENT BEHAVIOURS AMONG YOUTH 

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree  

Ph.D (CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY)  

from  

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG 

Department of Psychology  

by  

NADINE C. PEISER  

2001
DECLARATION

This thesis was completed under the supervision of Associate Professor Patrick Heaven, at the Department of Psychology, University of Wollongong. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of PhD (Clinical Psychology). I certify that this manuscript is entirely my own work. It has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

The data reported in Study 1 were published in 1996 in the *Journal of Adolescence*, volume 19, pages 557-568 (see Appendix A). The data reported in Study 2 has being submitted for publication to *Personality and Individual Differences*. The data reported in Study 3 were presented to the *First Australian Forensic Psychology Conference*, in Sydney, 9th February 2001. The papers are co-authored by Dr Heaven.

Nadine C. Peiser
2 October 2001
DEDICATION

Dedicated to my parents

in gratitude for their support

of me as their daughter,

in gratitude for their encouragement

of me educationally which has

culminated in this PhD thesis,

in admiration of the unique people

that Mom is and Dad was,

and in awareness of

the enormous impact

they have had on my life,

and the rich contribution

they have made to who I am.

And, dedicated to my husband

who has inspired my thinking

with his thinking,

who has extended me

and opened worlds to me,

who has had faith in me.
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To my Mother, Father and sisters, Andrea, Stephanie and Michelle - I am forever grateful to you for your never-ending love, for the way you all have stood by me throughout the years of this research project, for your interest in my work, for your confidence in me, and for spurring me on.

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To my friends – who supported me and encouraged me – I am grateful.

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Abstract

Adolescent delinquency is a growing social problem affecting individuals, families, and communities. The current research comprised three studies, which sought to explore the contribution of family and personality factors to self-reported delinquency, and to discover the nature of the relationship between perceptions of parental discipline style and perceptions of the seriousness of delinquent behaviour. The first study examined the links between perceptions of family relationships, perceptions of parental discipline style, locus of control, self-esteem and self-reported delinquency among Australian high school students (N = 177). The prediction that locus of control and self-esteem would mediate the effects of family processes on delinquency was tested using structural equation modelling. Although there appeared to be a good fit between the data and the proposed model, the amount of variance explained by the predictor variables was not large. Among females, the best predictor of low levels of self-reported delinquency was an inductive discipline style, whilst for males high levels of self-reported delinquency were best predicted by a punitive discipline style. Among males, positive family relations was a significant predictor of high self-esteem. No mediating effects of self-esteem and locus of control were observed. Given these results and the findings of previous research indicating links between family process factors, Eysenck’s Psychoticism (P) factor, and delinquency, the second study investigated the relationships between perceptions of parental discipline style, perceptions of parental bonding, P, and self-reported delinquency among a sample of delinquent youth (N = 39). It aimed to determine the intervening effect of P on family process factors and self-reported delinquency. As expected, this sample of delinquent youth obtained significantly
higher delinquency scores than mainstream high school students, as well as significantly higher P levels than established norms. Scores on the parental bonding instrument differed significantly in the expected direction from nondelinquent students. Self-reported delinquency was significantly related to an inductive parental discipline style and high P levels. As predicted, P mediated the effect of inductive parenting on delinquency. The third study aimed to assess the structure of adolescents' and adults' perceptions of the seriousness of behaviours labelled as "delinquent", and to determine whether these perceptions vary across the sex of the respondent and sex of target (that is, the person engaging in the behaviour). A further aim was to examine whether these perceptions are linked to particular parenting discipline styles. The results indicated that, within a sample of high school students (N = 321) and their parents (N = 193), adolescent and adult perceptions of delinquent behaviours are multi-dimensional, possessing a particular structure. As expected, sex of target and sex of respondent were found to have some impact on adolescents' perceptions of offence seriousness. Parental discipline style was found to be especially important in predicting the perceptions of adolescent boys rather than girls, as well as some perceptions of parents. In examining the contribution of family and personality factors to delinquency, all the studies in this research found parental discipline style to be a key variable. The results of the three studies are discussed with reference to previous research, recommendations for intervention and clinical practice are made, and implications of the findings for further research are noted.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE</td>
<td>(i)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>(ii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>(iii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>(iv)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>(v)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>(vii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>(xii)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 1: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Delinquency: the problem .................................................. 1
1.2 Conduct Disorder versus delinquency .................................. 3
1.3 Incidence ................................................................. 7
1.4 Psychological perspectives on the causes of delinquency ........... 8
  1.4.1 Biological factors and heredity .................................... 9
  1.4.2 Personality .......................................................... 12
    1.4.2.1 The Eysenckian perspective .................................. 13
    1.4.2.2 Self-esteem .................................................. 21
    1.4.2.3 Locus of control ............................................ 22
  1.4.3 Environmental factors .............................................. 25
    1.4.3.1 School influences ........................................... 26
    1.4.3.2 The role of the peer group .................................. 28
  1.4.3.3 Family influences on delinquency ............................. 32
    1.4.3.3.1 Family structure ........................................ 33
    1.4.3.3.2 Family process ........................................ 35
  1.4.4 General summary and conclusion .................................. 41
1.5 The present series of studies .......................................... 42
  1.5.1 Study 1 ............................................................ 44
  1.5.2 Study 2 ............................................................ 45
  1.5.3 Study 3 ............................................................ 46

## CHAPTER 2: STUDY 1

Family and personality influences on self-reported delinquency among high school students

2.1 Introduction ............................................................. 48
2.2 Aims ................................................................. 49
2.3 Hypotheses ............................................................ 49
2.4 Method ................................................................. 50
  2.4.1 Respondents .................................................... 50
  2.4.2 Measures ........................................................ 52
  2.4.3 Procedure ..................................................... 55
2.5 Results ............................................................... 56
4.6 Discussion .......................................................... 135
  4.6.1 General findings and theoretical implications .............. 135
  4.6.2 Implications of findings for clinical practice .............. 141
  4.6.3 Implications for further research .......................... 144
4.7 Conclusion ....................................................... 145

CHAPTER 5: GENERAL DISCUSSION .................................. 146
5.1 Introduction ...................................................... 146
5.2 Summary of the findings ........................................ 147
5.3 Theoretical implications ....................................... 149
5.4 Implications for intervention and clinical practice .......... 155
5.5 Directions for future research ................................. 161
5.6 Thesis conclusion ................................................ 163

REFERENCES .................................................................. 164

APPENDICES .................................................................. 197
A. Study 1 Journal publication ...................................... 198
B. Study 1 Questionnaire .............................................. 211
C. Study 1 Consent Forms ............................................ 222
D. Study 2 Questionnaire .............................................. 225
E. Study 2 Consent Forms ............................................ 239
F. Study 3 Questionnaire – Student sample ...................... 242
G. Study 3 Questionnaire – Parent sample ....................... 253
H. Study 3 Consent Forms – Student sample ..................... 264
I. Study 3 Consent Forms – Parent sample ....................... 267
LIST OF TABLES

Chapter one: Introduction

Table 1: Tabulated studies that offer full or partial support for the Eysenckian thesis regarding crime and personality (Furnham & Thompson, 1991, p. 586,587) .................................................................17

Table 2: Tabulated studies that show results that do not support the Eysenckian thesis regarding crime and personality (Furnham & Thompson, 1991, p. 587) .................................................................19

Table 3: Tabulated studies looking at the relationship between the Eysenckian personality dimensions and self-reported delinquency (Furnham & Thompson, 1991, p. 588) .................................................................19

Chapter two: Study 1

Table 1: Students’ living arrangements ..............................................51

Table 2: Parents’ occupational prestige .............................................52

Table 3: Mean scores and standard deviations on measures .................56

Table 4: Pearson correlations between measures ...............................58

Table 5: Goodness-of-fit indicators ..................................................59

Chapter three: Study 2

Table 1: Descriptive statistics ..........................................................82

Table 2: Parental Bonding scores of delinquent and nondelinquent male students .................................................................83

Table 3: Comparison between Study 1 and Study 2 means on parental discipline style measures for males only .................................................................85

Table 4: Pearson correlations between measures ...............................86

Table 5: Mean delinquency and P scores for the different parenting styles ......87

Table 6: Multiple regression analyses ................................................89
Chapter four: Study 3

Table 1: Percentage of respondents engaged in certain behaviours .............104

Table 2: Parents' occupational prestige of the adolescent sample .................112

Table 3: Occupational prestige of the adult sample .................................113

Table 4: Rotated factor loading for the perceived seriousness of behaviours ...115

Table 5: Rotated factor loading for the perceived seriousness of behaviours ...117

Table 6: Mean scores and standard deviations on perceived seriousness factors female and male student respondents as they relate to female and male targets .................................................................122

Table 7: Mean scores and standard deviations on perceived seriousness factors female and male parent respondents as they relate to female and male targets .................................................................123

Table 8: Mean scores and standard deviations on the perceived seriousness of behaviours items for students and parents .........................................................124

Table 9: Mean scores and standard deviations on parent discipline style measures for female and male students .................................................................126

Table 10: Mean scores and standard deviations on parent discipline style measures for female and male parents .................................................................126

Table 11: Correlations between discipline style and perceived seriousness factors for adolescent male respondents .................................................................129

Table 12: Correlations between discipline style and perceived seriousness factors for adolescent female respondents .................................................................130

Table 13: Correlations between discipline style and perceived seriousness factors for adult male respondents .................................................................131

Table 14: Correlations between discipline style and perceived seriousness factors for adult female respondents .................................................................132

Table 15: Multiple regression analyses for male students ............................134
LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter two: Study 1

Figure 1: Path diagram of causal relationships for females .........................60
Figure 2: Path diagram of causal relationships for males .........................61

Chapter three: Study 2

Figure 1: Mediation of parental induction by psychoticism .........................90