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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.

Finally, I am indebted to the students and parents who participated in this research, and the school staff who made the data collection run smoothly – my thanks to them, without whom this thesis could not have been accomplished.
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.
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