Eysenck’s Personality Theory on Crime

Juanita Huipio

Longwood University

**Introduction**

The idea of psychology was not introduced in the criminal justice system until the early 1900s. Hans Eysenck was the first psychologist that studied the relationship between personality and crime. He wanted to determine whether certain personality traits contributed to criminal behavior. The three personality traits focused in his theory were extraversion, introversion, and neuroticism. Eysenck also stated the relationship between crime and the nervous system. He goes into detail by discussing the central and autonomic nervous system. This paper aims to further discuss the relationship between crime and personality traits, as well as the nervous system on certain types of individuals. A theoretical background will be examined to discuss the theory as a whole. This will state the personality traits and further explore the characteristics of the three. The nervous system will also be examined to help understand the relationship towards the individual and criminal behavior. Next, specific studies will be examined to help understand Eysenck’s theory and the relationship it has to certain types of groups with personality traits and the nervous system.

**Theoretical Overview**

A psychological perspective of crime was not introduced until the twentieth century when Hans J. Eysenck created his theory of personality and crime. During the twentieth century, psychology was starting to become influential in almost every topic because of the impact and change it was doing for society. What Eysenck wanted to demonstrate in his theory was the importance of genetics and the environment together. At the time, genetics was the only influence considered in the expression of criminal behavior. Studies were done to express how genetics played an important role in criminal behavior, but Eysenck thought of it in a different way. His theory argues that genetic and psychobiological factors together can help understand criminal behavior together. (Bartol and Bartol, 2011).

Eysneck stated that a theory must examine the neurophysiological makeup and the socialization history of each individual to understand their criminal behavior (2011). He further states the nervous system is an important factor that contributes to individuals committing crimes (2011). He proposed, “Criminal behavior is the result of an interaction between certain environmental conditions and features of the nervous system” (2011:70). This new style of research challenged previous theories by stating the importance of heredity and the environment together. Eysenck suggested, “different combinations of environmental, neurobiological, and personality factors give rise to different types of crimes,” (2011:70). This suggests that certain personalities are more prone to commit certain crimes than others. Learning from the environment is an important role that later connects with the neurophysiological factors of an individual.

A key factor that demonstrated Eysenck’s theory was different compared to contemporary theories during his time period was the heavy role he argued. He stated that genetic predispositions played towards criminal and antisocial conduct (2011). It is important to understand that Eysenck was not stating that individuals are born criminals but that some individuals are born with nervous system characteristics that are different from the general population (2011). This prevents those individuals from conforming to society and follow the rules causing them to commit crimes.

After covering the biological antecedents to criminality, Eysenck moves to the psychology aspect of his theory by including the three higher order factors of personality, extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism. Eysenck argued that all individuals possess these personality traits but, they exist on a continuum and become problematic when they exist at extremes (2011). Extraversion and neuroticism are essentially the core concepts of his theory, but psychoticism was used as an explanation when the other two factors failed to explain certain behaviors. No neurophysiological mechanism was developed for psychoticism. Extraversion was said to reflect basic functions of the central nervous system, while neuroticism reflected functions of the peripheral nervous system (2011). No neurophysiological mechanism was developed for psychoticism.

The first two personality traits discussed by Eysenck were extraversion and introversion. Those who are extrovert have characteristics of being sociable, impulsive, optimistic, and have a strong desire for excitement as well as a change of environment. Extraverts lose their temper quickly, are more aggressive, and tend to be unreliable (2011). When it comes to other people, extraverts love to socialize and attend parties. Eysenck states, “because extraverts have higher needs for excitement and stimulation to break the daily boredom, they are also most likely to run counter to the law (2011:73). Extraverts enjoy finding challenges in opportunities to do the unconditional and tend to use powerful firearms when committing crimes (2011). On the other side of the spectrum, introverts prefer to be reserved, cautious, and quiet. Introverts keep their feelings under close control and typically avoid excitement and change (2011). They are also reliable, unaggressive and place value on ethical standards (2011). What Eysenck focuses on between extraverts and introverts is the genetic differences in the reticular activating system located in the central nervous system (2011). The reticular activating system is said to alert and awaken the cerebral cortex of incoming stimuli (2011). Eysenck hypothesized that the RAS (reticular activating system) of extraverts “does not generate cortical excitation or arousal effectively,” (2011:74). Introverts on the other hand, have an RAS that heightens their stimulation input, keeping their arousal at high levels for most of the time. Because extraverts have low levels of cortical arousal, they tend to seek for excitement, causing them to break the law. This is where Eysenck states, “most people involved in criminal activity are cortically under aroused and have a strong drive to obtain stimulation or sensation from their environment” (2011:74). Whereas introverts maintain high levels of arousal making them less involved to disobey the law.

The next personality trait Eysenck focused on was neuroticism. Similar to extraversion, neuroticism is an important variable when discussing the relationship between personality and crime (2011). Neuroticism focuses on the intensity of emotional reactions and is said to reflect an innate biological predisposition towards the reaction of stress (2011). Someone who is high on this personality trait tend to react intensely and lasting to stress. Individuals tend to be moody, sensitive, touchy, and anxious. Individuals tend to complain about physical ailments and have a difficult time retuning to a normal state. Eysenck then moves into an explanation of the relationship between neuroticism and the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system can be broken down into the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system activates the body towards emergencies. Heart rate increases, as well as blood flow, respiration, pupil dilation, and perspiration. The parasympathetic nervous system on the other hand, does the opposite and brings the body back to its normal state. Eysenck states, “differences in emotionality are due to variances in the sensitivity of these subdivisions, which are under the control of the visceral brain or limbic system” (2011:75). The hypothalamus, located in the limbic system, exerts the greatest amount of control over the ANS (autonomic nervous system) and represents the central control of emotionality. Individuals who are neurotic are said to have sensitive limbic systems causing them to achieve emotionality quickly, and for longer periods of time (2011). Eysenck believed that if an individual is high on emotionality, they are more likely to commit criminal activities than someone who is on the lower spectrum (2011). If an Individual develops antisocial habits, they are more likely to commit crimes because of their neurotic tendencies.

The final personality trait Eysenck explains in his theory is psychoticism. He goes into detail about males with high levels of testosterone, and low levels of enzyme monoamine oxidase and neurotransmitters. These factors impact the cause of psychoticism (2011). Individuals who have this trait tend to be cold, cruel, are sociably insensitive, unemotional, have disregard for danger, a dislike of others, and an attraction to unusual things. Because this personality trait has not received the research that extraversion and introversion had, Eysenck emphasizes the importance of psychoticism and the function it plays in criminal population (2011).

After explaining each personality trait, Eysenck then connects learning and criminal behavior. The three types of learning he focuses on is classical, instrumental, and social learning (2011). His theory mainly focuses on classical conditioning and the importance it has to when the individual is conditioned. Eysenck argued that “classical conditioning was, “classical conditioning has a stronger effect on most people than instrumental learning” (2011:79). Individuals at a young age are shown the rules of society, conditioning them to follow with the rest of society. What redirects the individual after a negative act or behavior is the conditioned reflex. This reflex tells the individual whether or not the behavior was moral or immoral. Eysenck believed that, “people do not participate in criminal activity because after a series of trials, they have made strong connections between deviant behavior and aversive consequences,” (2011:79). Individuals who did not make a strong association towards society, whether it be the lack of environment or trained condition, tend to display deviant or criminal behavior (2011). These types of individuals simply do not care about the consequences when it comes to criminal behavior because the association has not been developed. Learning from the environment is an important role that later connects with the neurophysiological factors of an individual.

Eysenck later explains the connection between learning, neurophysiological, and the four personality traits to his theory. He believed that, “extraverts condition less readily than introverts due to biological differences in their nervous system (2011:79). Introverts on the other hand, are conditioned better allowing them to follow society’s laws and morals. Eysenck believed in two things when it came towards the conditioned conscience on behavior. First, “it may prevent us from indulging in forbidden activities,” (2011:80). Second, “it may make us feel guilty after we commit them,” (2011:80). He believed if an individual experiences guilt from previous negative behaviors, the conscience will be conditioned towards that guilt making the individual feel discomfort while disobeying the law. Finally, Eysenck briefly mentions the lack of conditional learning in homes and schools. This causes the individuals to develop weak consciences, which engages them into criminal behavior in the future.

Eysneck’s theory has made controversial debates when it comes towards criminal behavior. The lack of information on psychoticism has pushed some researchers to look the other way, or the absence of information on the other types of learning in his theory. Although the theory is controversial, Eysnekc’s theory of personality and crime is one of the few to articulate a worldwide theory of criminal behavior.

**Empirical Section One**

Eysneck’s theory of criminality, in part, argues that individual with a low response Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) will be less able to cognitively understand, perceive and respond to the environment in socially acceptable ways and as such will be over-represented among the criminal population. Tests conducted to assess this statement rely on medical science, particularly tests of resting heartbeat, galvanic skin response and Electro Encephalogram readings. Researchers often present incarcerated or convicted test subjects with case details, imagery or words designed to elicit a response on these tests that will indicate whether or not the subject has a normal or abnormal ANS response. While some studies have not found a significant difference between the arousal rates of those classified as introverts and extroverts (Friggon 1976) others have linked slow ANS arousal to the extroverted personality type, a personality type that is argued by Eysneck to be over-represented among the offending population (Stenberg 1992). Studies examining the particular link of slow ANS arousal to criminality have focused on crimes such as intimate partner abuse, finding that male batters had low arousal in heart rate and skin conductance. The author argued that the low levels related more to the behavioral thoughts and patterns of the males, and related to the general antisocial spectrum of behavior. (Babcock, Greene, Webb and Yearington 2006). Thus, while the empirical evidence is mixed in regards to support for this element of Eysneck’s theory, some positive research studies indicate that this is an area of research that should be further explored.

**Empirical Section Two**

Eysenck’s theory of personality on crime has a main focus on the personality traits of introversion, extraversion, and neuroticism. These personality traits were a determining factor in whether or not the individual performed criminal behavior. Eysneck established certain personality tests to further study the relationship between personalities and crime. These personality tests allowed researchers to test the theory and study certain criminals with personality traits of introversion, extraversion, and neuroticism. It was seen in research that individuals with an introvert personality were sentenced longer prison terms because of their undesirable view of society (Barholomew, 1959). Environment conditions also played an important role within these personality traits. Eysenck stated that certain personality types interact with certain environment conditions. Eysenck further explores this theory by studying students, criminals, and non-criminals and their relationship to psychoticism. Research showed criminals in prison scored extremely higher in the neuroticism and extraversion scale (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1970). Those who act in criminal behavior at an early age tend to show signs of higher levels of neuroticism. The relationship between neuroticism and psychoticism are further studied to determine whether they play a role in criminal behavior. Studies revealed that delinquents have higher personality traits of neuroticism and psychoticism thus strengthening their relationship with criminal behavior (Levine and Jackson, 2004). Further studies need to be made in order to support the relationship between extraversion, introversion, and neuroticism with certain criminal groups.

**Conclusion**

Eysenck’s theory of personality on crime helped expand the knowledge of criminals and their behaviors towards their psyche. His theory allowed further studies to support the relationship between criminal identity and criminal thinking (Boduszek, Shevlin, Adamson, and Hyland, 2013). The three personality traits: extraversion, introversion and neuroticism has allowed researchers to understand and identify certain group of criminals and their criminal behavior. Further studies need to be made in order to fully comprehend Eysenck’s theory, but overall, the theory has allowed a new branch of research to be made to help understand criminal behavior.

**References**

Babcock, Julia, Charles Green, Sarah Webb, and Timothy Yerington. 2005. “Psychophysiological Profiles of Batters: Autonomic Emotional Reactivity as It Predicts the Antisocial Spectrum of Behavior Among Intimate Partner Abusers.” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 114(3):444-455

Bartholomew, Allen. 1959. “Extraversion-Introversion and Neuroticism in First Offenders and Recidivists” *The British Journal of Delinquency* 10(2):120-129

Bartol, Curt and Anne. 2011. *Criminal Behavior A Psychological Approach*. 9th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Boduszek, Daniel, Shevlin, Mark, Adamson, Gary, and Hyland, Philip. 2013. “Eysenck’s Personality Model and Criminal Thinking Style within a Violent and Nonviolent Offender Sample: Application of Propensity Score Analysis.” *Deviant Behavior* 34:483-493

Eysenck, Sybil, and H. J. Eysenck. 1970. “Crime and Personality: An Empirical Study of the Three-Factor Theory” *The British Journal of Criminology* 10(3):225-239

Frigon, Jean-Yves. 1976. “Extraversion, Neuroticism and Strength of the Nervous System.” *British Journal of Psychology* 67(4):467-474

Levine, Stephen, and Chris Jackson. 2004. “Eysenck’s Theory of Crime Revisited: Factors or Primary Scales?” *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 9:135-152

Stenberg, Georg. 1992. “Personality and the EEG: arousal and the emotional arousability.” Persons Individual Differences 13(1):1097-1113