



# Hans Eysenck's theory on the 'causes' and 'cures' of criminality: A personal reflection



Gisli Gudjonsson\*

King's College, London, UK and Reykjavik University, Iceland

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## ABSTRACT

Hans Eysenck's theory of criminality was first published in 1964 and evolved over the next 30 years. The principal theme of his work is that psychological factors and individual differences are related to personality, namely Psychoticism (P), Extraversion (E) and Neuroticism (N), which are of central importance in relation to both the causes of crime and its control. His theory generated a great deal of research, which has provided mixed support with regard to E and N. In contrast, P has consistently been shown to discriminate between offenders and controls, and predict the extent and severity of offending, but the nature of P is ambiguous and it has poor explanatory power. The relationship between these three 'super traits' and criminality is more complex than his theory predicts. A further limitation of Eysenck's theory is that the 'causes' of crime, as determined by P, E and N, do not translate adequately into 'cure' or the prevention of offending. Normally distributed personality traits are of limited value in predicting offending and the focus has shifted on more tangible and persistent signs/symptoms of antisocial personality traits/disorder and attitudes that are amenable to intervention.

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## 1. Introduction

In the late 1980s, Hans Eysenck approached me and asked if I was interested in writing a book with him on 'The causes and cures of criminality'. He said that the book would have a similar title to his previous book with Stanley ('Jack') Rachman, 'The causes and cures of neurosis' (Eysenck & Rachman, 1965). It would be in two parts, focusing on the 'causes' and 'cures' of criminality, respectively. I agreed and Hans Eysenck wrote Part 1 and I wrote Part 2 (Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989). The main theme throughout the book was that "psychological factors and individual differences related to the personality are of central importance in relation to both the causes of crime and its control" (p. 247).

Whilst writing the book, Eysenck allowed me complete freedom to write whatever I thought that is appropriate about his theory and its relevance to the prevention and treatment of criminality. He did not interfere or try to control what I wrote. He had collected a great number of articles, which I was free to review along with the material that I had collected myself. From reviewing the evidence, I soon realised that, as far as the prevention and cure of criminality were concerned, the links between his theory of personality as the 'cause' of crime and its 'cure' were limited. Eysenck's primary argument was that individual differences are important in relation to treatment responsiveness (e.g., introverts being more responsive to punishment and extraverts to reward). This may have been one of the reasons why his theory has generated little research

into the 'cures' of criminality, whilst being highly influential in stimulating research into its 'causes' (Gudjonsson, 1997a).

The purpose of this article is to provide a personal reflection on the evidence of Eysenck's theory of criminality, its most important contributions, and its limitations.

## 2. The basis of Eysenck's theory in relation to criminality

Eysenck's theory of criminality was originated in 1964 (Eysenck, 1964) and was extended a few years later (Eysenck, 1970) by briefly introducing the dimension of Psychoticism (P) in the final chapter, its essential characteristics, and presenting some preliminary findings among prisoners. P was formally introduced in 1975 when the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) replaced the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI) (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975, 1976).

In Eysenck's (1970, p. 193) early work, the most important question related to the distribution of personality scores among prisoners:

"The first, and possibly the most important [question], relates to the actual distribution of personality scores in prison populations; our theory demands that prisoners should have higher extraversion and neuroticism scores than normal groups, and a proper test for this prediction is of course of the greatest urgency."

Rushton and Chrisjohn (1981) suggested an alternative to Eysenck's focus on prisoners; namely to examine the natural variation of both antisocial behaviour and personality dimensions in 'normal' populations. This became the alternative way of testing Eysenck's theory of criminality

\* Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, De Crespigny Park, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AF, England, UK.

E-mail address: [gisli.gudjonsson@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:gisli.gudjonsson@kcl.ac.uk).

(Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989). In their comprehensive review of Eysenck's theory, Eysenck and Gudjonsson concluded:

“Throughout we have laid stress on one particular point, namely the importance of factual, empirical, and if possible, experimental evidence.”

The psychological factors in criminality, Eysenck argued, were related to genetic and constitutional causes that interact with certain environmental factors that, in a given situation, increase the likelihood of offending. Psychoticism (P), Extraversion (E) and Neuroticism (N) were the three major dispositional factors that provided criminal propensity: P through its association with antisocial traits and lack of empathy; E via poor conditioning of a conscience and strong sensation seeking; and high N due to its emotional drive of antisocial habits.

P, E and N are the major personality dimensions (referred to as ‘higher order factors’ or ‘super traits’) that are derived from a number of associated primary traits. High P people are described as emotionally cold, aggressive, antisocial, impulsive, and lacking in empathy. High E represents sociable, active, assertive, dominant and sensation-seeking people. High N people are prone to anxiety and depression symptoms, have low self-esteem, and are moody and emotionally reactive.

However, P, E and N are all normal personality traits with the great majority of people obtaining neither a particularly high nor low score on these dimensions.

According to Zuckerman (1989, p. 399):

“With the construction of the P scale and its inclusion in the EPQ, the nature of the E dimension was changed. Most of the impulsivity items were discarded, found their way into the P scale, or became part of separate scales for impulsivity (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1977). This redefinition of the constructs in terms of the scales defining them required a reanalysis of the relationship between conditioning and dimensions of personality since impulsivity, which was most related to conditionability, was no longer part of the E dimension.”

Of particular importance, P was now more directly associated with conditionability than E.

Zuckerman (1989) cogently argues that P is more complex than E and N and “includes impulsivity, lack of socialisation and responsibility, aggression, a strong need for independence, and sensation seeking...The clinical extremes of this dimension are postulated to include antisocial personality disorder, bipolar affective disorder (manic phase), and hostile types of paranoid schizophrenia, but not other forms of schizophrenia characterised by withdrawal and sensation avoidance” (p. 412). P was seen as more related to the concept of psychopathy than psychosis, has a strong genetic component, and has more direct links with antisocial behaviour and offending than E and N. Psychopaths are known to have “difficulty in acquiring passive avoidance behaviour, or restraining action when it may lead to punishment or loss of reward” (for a review, see Newman & Kosson, 1986).

Blackburn (1993, p. 127) provides one of the most cogent critiques of Eysenck's theory of criminality:

“It must be concluded that Eysenck's theory of criminality is not well supported. While attempts to test it have produced a number of significant findings, these are not for the most part related to the central components of the theory, which is concerned with the relation between extraversion, its physiological substrate, and the process of socialisation. The evidence points to a more consistent link between antisocial behaviour and the P dimension rather than E, but given the ambiguities surrounding the meaning of P, and lack of theory linking P with socialisation, this association currently has little explanatory power.”

### 3. Treatment

The key focus of Eysenck's (1970, p. 172) early theory was that the development of a conscience was a conditioned response associated with introversion:

“We start out with the problem that some people are very easy to condition, others very difficult, and that those who are difficult to condition will not, on the whole, develop moral responses as early, as quickly, and as strongly as those who condition easily. [There] are two distinct things we can try to do to deal with this highly extraverted, highly emotional group. One thing we can do is submit them to a much more rigorous and efficient system of conditioning than the normal person or the typical introvert. This of course, would have to be done during childhood and it would require a good method of diagnosing this particular disability quite early in life.”

In addition:

“The other approach is more biologically oriented and depends ultimately on the notion that there must be ways of influencing the central nervous system directly, to alter the position of a person on the extraversion/introversion continuum.”

To support his argument, Eysenck (1970, pp. 173–174) used evidence that stimulant medication (e.g. amphetamine) markedly improved the conduct of behaviourally disordered children and juveniles. He described the remarkable effects:

“They became much more amenable to discipline and much more socialized in their pattern of activities; they often ceased to show behaviour problems. Usually the improvement ceased when the drug treatment itself was stopped, but sometimes the improvement in behaviour continued well beyond this point and seemed to become an enduring feature of the individual.”

Eysenck did not recommend any specific psychological treatment whilst the child was on the stimulant medication, but the implication was that this was an ideal opportunity to facilitate the formation of “socially desirable conditioned responses” (p. 178) through a process of positive reinforcement for the improved behaviour. The children Eysenck was referring to would undoubtedly meet current criteria for symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD – see Section 9.0).

### 4. The ‘postulate of generality’

In his discussion of the relationship between crime and personality Eysenck, provides ‘a postulate of generality’ for offending, which is fundamental to his theory (Eysenck, 1970, p. 34):

“One type of crime, that of the road offender, is specific and in no way related to another type of crime, that of the habitual criminal. Our postulate of generality, however, would lead us to believe the opposite. It would lead us to believe that there is a general tendency for people to break the law, whether in relation to property or in relation to motoring offences, and that, therefore, we would find a distinct relationship or correlation between the two.”

Eysenck illustrated support for his ‘postulate of generality’ by a reference to a study of road traffic offenders conducted by Terence Willett (1964). All 653 persons had been charged with one or more of the following serious violations: causing death by dangerous driving, reckless or dangerous driving, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, driving whilst disqualified, driving without third party insurance, and failure to stop after, or report, an accident. Willett had found that about 20% of the sample had a criminal record for non-motoring offences, and a further 24% had a previous conviction for motoring

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