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Personality and Individual Differences 39 (2005) 7–19

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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PEN, Big Five, juvenile delinquency and criminal recidivism

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Received 25 September 2003; received in revised form 19 May 2004; accepted 30 June 2004
Available online 19 April 2005

Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine which of the two personality models, PEN or Big Five, differentiates best between Dutch juvenile offenders ($n = 96$) and college students ($n = 204$), between Dutch self-reported recidivists ($n = 43$) and non-recidivists ($n = 14$), and between officially recorded recidivists ($n = 37$) and non-recidivists ($n = 24$). Students (mean age = 17.23 years) and offenders (mean age = 18.63 years) filled out the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised and the Short Big Five Questionnaire. Occurrence and severity of recidivism were measured by a self-report questionnaire and by official police records. Students were higher than offenders on PEN's Extraversion and the Big Five dimensions Agreeableness and Openness. PEN's Extraversion appeared to be higher in officially recorded recidivists compared to non-recidivists. PEN's Psychoticism, Big Five's Neuroticism and Agreeableness differentiated self-reported recidivists from non-recidivists. Only PEN's Psychoticism predicted severity of self-reported recidivism. Proposals for future research in recidivism are formulated.

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Keywords: Personality; Juvenile delinquency; Recidivism

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0. Introduction

In this study relationships among personality, delinquency and recidivism are examined from the perspective of two influential personality theories: Eysenck's PEN model and the Big Five model. Eysenck's PEN model (Eysenck, 1977) is one of the few theories that explicitly related personality traits to criminality (see Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989). However, this model has not often been used to explain recidivism after a period of incarceration.

The Big Five model (see Goldberg, 1990) is relatively new, and seems to be the dominant model of personality traits today. It is to some extent related to the PEN model, but has scarcely been used to study relations between personality and delinquency or recidivism. In this study we analysed which of both models (PEN or Big Five) is better able to differentiate between an offender sample and a normal sample of college students, and between recidivists and non-recidivists.

According to Eysenck (1977, 1998) the three basic PEN dimensions of personality (Psychoticism, Extraversion and Neuroticism) are related to physiological mechanisms in the brain and central nervous system (CNS). Through the working of the CNS and the related conditioning processes (Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989), it could be convincingly theorized that delinquents should score high on the PEN dimensions. However full empirical support for Eysenck's hypothesis has not been found. Studies are conclusive in their findings that high Psychoticism is always involved in criminality, regardless of age, and both in offender as well as in normal samples. Mixed results though, have since long been found for Neuroticism and Extraversion (Blackburn, 1993). Some studies found high Psychoticism and high Neuroticism to be associated with juvenile delinquency in both offenders (Romero, Luengo, & Sobral, 2001) and college students (Heaven & Virgen, 2001). Other studies found Psychoticism and Extraversion instead of Psychoticism and Neuroticism to be positively related to juvenile delinquency in offender samples (Aleixo & Norris, 2000) and normal samples (Heaven, 1996). Daderman (1999) found Psychoticism, Extraversion and Neuroticism to be significantly higher in juvenile offenders compared to a non-delinquent control group. In another study of Daderman (Daderman, Meurling, & Hallman, 2001) only differences with regard to Extraversion were found, while Morizot and Le Blanc (2003) concluded that antisocial individuals are not typically different in this domain.

In research on relations between personality and delinquency, less attention has been paid to recidivism. Recidivism might be considered as a persistent form of delinquency. Only one study examined the relation between the PEN dimensions and juvenile recidivism. Eysenck and Eysenck (1974) measured Psychoticism, Extraversion and Neuroticism of 187 boys in a juvenile detention centre. Approximately three years later, reconviction rates of these boys were checked. Non-recidivists were significantly lower on Extraversion. No significant differences were found with regard to Psychoticism and Neuroticism.

The Big Five model (Goldberg, 1990) also includes Extraversion and Neuroticism, but next to Extraversion and Neuroticism also Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness. Empirical results of several studies have shown that Extraversion and Neuroticism of both models show high resemblance and that Psychoticism is negatively related to Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Eysenck, 1992; Costa & McCrae, 1992). The state of Openness is less clear. Eysenck (1991,

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