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Personality correlates of aggressive and non-aggressive antisocial behavior

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Abstract

Research indicates that specific personality traits predict antisocial behavior, but has yet to determine whether these associations differ with the well-documented heterogeneity within antisocial behavior. We thus evaluated which personality traits (as measured via the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire – Brief Form) uniquely predicted aggressive (AGG) and non-aggressive rule-breaking behavior (RB) in two undergraduate samples. None of the personality scales independently predicted both AGG and RB. Instead, low control was associated with RB and high stress reaction was associated with AGG. Such findings highlight meaningful psychological differences within the overarching construct of antisocial behavior, such that affective dysregulation/negative affectivity represents a core deficit in AGG whereas diminished behavioral control is specific to RB.

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Personality predicts many important life outcomes, including crime and antisocial behavior (ASB; defined as actions and attitudes that violate societal norms and the personal or property rights of others) (Cale, 2006; Caspi et al., 1994; Krueger, 1999; Miller & Lynam, 2001; Trull & Sher, 1994). In particular, high negative emotionality (the propensity to experience aversive

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affective states) and low constraint (lack of behavioral inhibition) appear to predict ASB both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. A critical limitation to the above research, however, is that the well-documented heterogeneity within ASB has not been considered. Indeed, there are psychometric, developmental, and genetic indications of an aggressive dimension (AGG) and a non-aggressive, rule-breaking dimension (RB) within the broader construct of ASB (Moffitt, 2003; Tackett, Krueger, Iacono, & McGue, 2005). Accordingly, research that explicitly considers the independent associations of AGG and RB with particular personality dimensions is needed.

To date, however, research has only indirectly considered this possibility. For example, the potentiation of negative affect following completion of an aversive task was associated with AGG but not RB (Burt & Larson, 2007), implying that state levels of negative affect are largely specific to AGG. Low empathy, another form of affective dysfunction, also appears to be specific to AGG (Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Pardini, Lochman, & Frick, 2003). Finally, affect dysregulation appears to be particularly important for precipitating aggressive behavior (Verona, Patrick, & Lang, 2002). Although more work is clearly needed, such findings imply that affective dysregulation/negative emotionality may be specific to AGG.

Likewise, personality traits related to behavioral control might be uniquely related to RB. The well-replicated association between diminished central serotonin and ASB (Manuck et al., 1998; Virkkunen, Goldman, Nielson, & Linnoila, 1995) appears to extend to impulsive but non-aggressive behaviors (LeMarquand, Benkelfat, Pihl, Palmour, & Young, 1999) but not to premeditated, non-impulsive aggression (Davidson, Putnam, & Larson, 2000; Linnoila et al., 1983). To be sure, other studies have not supported this conclusion (Coccaro, Kavoussi, Hauger, Cooper, & Ferris, 1998; Virkkunen, Eggert, Rawlings, & Linnoila, 1996); however, such findings tentatively suggest that impulsivity may not constitute a core component of aggression per se.

All told, there is circumstantial support for the notion that core personality dimensions are differentially associated with aggressive and non-aggressive forms of ASB. The current studies sought to more explicitly evaluate this hypothesis. We predicted that negative emotionality/affective dysregulation would uniquely predict AGG whereas low behavioral control would be specific to RB. Evidence of unique and replicable personality correlates for different forms of ASB would provide additional support for conceptually-meaningful distinctions within ASB and offer a significant refinement of current theories of the role of personality in ASB (Krueger & Tackett, 2003).

1. Study one

1.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 292 undergraduates (49% male; average age 19) at a large Midwestern research university who participated in exchange for course credit or extra credit. Participants were representative of the ethnic composition of the area: Caucasian (80%), African-American (6%), Asian or Pacific Rim (4%), Hispanic/Latino (3%), Native American (1%), Pacific Islander (1%), and other (5%) ethnicities.

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