



Personality, antisocial behavior, and aggression: A meta-analytic review

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 22 April 2011

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Although the relationship between personality and antisocial behaviors has been widely examined and empirically supported in the psychological literature, relatively few efforts to study this relationship have appeared in mainstream criminology.

Materials and methods: The current study focuses on the domains and facets from the Five-Factor Model of personality, and how they are related to antisocial and aggressive behaviors.

Results: The meta-analytic findings indicate that the higher-order traits of Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism demonstrate the most consistent relationships with these outcomes. At the lower-order trait level, straightforwardness, compliance, and altruism from Agreeableness, deliberation from Conscientiousness, angry hostility from Neuroticism, and warmth from Extraversion were among the strongest correlates.

Conclusion: The findings are consistent with previous meta-analytic studies, thus providing compelling support for their utility in understanding antisocial and aggressive behavior. As such, they should be afforded greater theoretical and empirical attention within criminology.

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Introduction

Criminology has made great strides in uncovering factors that contribute to the commission of crime, including association with deviant peers (McGloin & O'Neill Shermer, 2009; Warr, 2002), parenting (Wright & Cullen, 2001; Jones, Cauffman, & Piquero, 2007), and self-control (Pratt & Cullen, 2000), among many others. Despite these general successes, criminology has largely ignored another construct thought by many to be critical to the understanding of antisocial behavior (ASB) – personality. This is unfortunate because general personality traits have been found to be robust correlates of a wide variety of externalizing/antisocial behaviors including delinquency (e.g., White et al., 1994), criminal behavior (e.g., Miller & Lynam, 2001), substance use (e.g., Flory, Lynam, Milich, Leukefeld, & Clayton, 2002), risky sex (Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000), and risky driving (Iversen & Rundmo, 2002).

Why personality matters for criminology

At its most basic level, personality refers to relatively consistent patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving manifested by individuals. Despite its notable absence in much of the criminological literature, we believe that there are several reasons criminologists should

consider its inclusion. Personality is relatively stable over time (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000), which may explain the relative stability of ASB (Loeber, 1982). In addition, despite its relative stability, there are changes in the mean levels of personality traits across development. Many of the personality domains related to ASB show age-related changes (e.g., individuals generally become more conscientious and emotionally stable as they get older; e.g., Roberts & Mroczek, 2008) that coincide with age-related changes in rates of ASB. Finally, the heritability of personality (Jang, Livesley, & Vernon, 1996; Reimann, Angleitner, & Strelau, 1997) may explain the heritability of ASB (Mason & Frick, 1994).

There is also burgeoning evidence that personality moderates the relations between certain criminological constructs and ASB. Agnew's (1992) general strain theory indicates that when individuals experience strain, one possible reaction is to engage in delinquency. An individual's underlying personality traits may help explain why some individuals react to stress by engaging in externalizing behaviors (e.g., drug use) rather than internalizing behavior (e.g., anxiety). For instance, Agnew, Brezina, Wright, and Cullen (2002) found that individuals who scored high on negative emotionality and low on constraint were more likely to engage in delinquent behavior in reaction to strain. Similarly, the study of the relations between personality and ASB has also yielded insights into why individuals living under the same criminogenic conditions may respond quite differently. For example, several studies have found that impulsive individuals are more susceptible to criminogenic neighborhood conditions (Jones & Lynam, 2009; Lynam et al., 2000; Meier, Slutsk,

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Arndt, & Cadoret, 2008; cf. Zimmerman, 2010). Furthermore, individuals with similar personality traits tend to gravitate toward one another, consistent with the notion of homophily (Matsueda & Anderson, 1998). This process may not only facilitate our understanding of peer group formation, but also provide insights into the mechanisms by which antisocial peers have an influence on other's behavior.

Despite the potential benefits of including personality traits as central constructs in our understanding of ASB, the role of personality has been largely ignored within mainstream criminology (see Caspi et al., 1994; Miller & Lynam, 2001). With the possible exception of the construct of self-control, no major criminological theory incorporates personality. Even here, the authors of the general theory (i.e., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) argue that their notion of self-control should not be considered a personality trait. This position is clearly advanced in Hirschi's (2004) revised notion of self-control in which he acknowledges that their original description of self-control resembled personality. He stated, however, that he and Gottfredson "introduced a language [we] did not understand, championed ideas contradicting our theory, and otherwise muddled the waters...[W]e can now see the errors introduced by our excursion into psychology" (pp. 541–542).

When personality is incorporated into the study of crime from a criminological perspective, it most commonly takes the form of broad, multidimensional constructs such as psychopathy and antisocial personality disorder (DeLisi, 2009; Vaughn, Howard, & DeLisi, 2008). Although these personality disorders are relatively robust correlates and predictors of ASB, crime, and violence (Hemphill, Templeman, Wong, & Hare, 1998), their multidimensional nature makes it difficult to ascertain which basic elements of these personality disorders are related to which outcomes. For instance, psychopathy can be understood as a configuration of extreme scores on general personality dimensions from the five-factor model (FFM; Lynam & Widiger, 2001; Miller, Lynam, Widiger, & Leukefeld, 2001). Specifically, psychopathy comprises extremely low scores on traits related to agreeableness and conscientiousness, as well as a mixture of high and low scores on traits related to neuroticism (e.g., high anger; low anxiety, depression) and extraversion (e.g., high assertiveness, excitement seeking; low warmth). Parsing this construct into its constituent parts may allow for a clearer delineation of the roles that these various traits play in the commission of externalizing behaviors (e.g., Lynam et al., 2011a). In what follows, we demonstrate the utility of using general personality models to study and understand ASB, and how a focus on narrower traits yields insights into the causes of ASB.

Personality and antisocial behavior from the perspective of the five-factor model

Miller and Lynam (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of four widely-used models of personality (i.e., Eysenck's P-E-N model; FFM; Tellegen's three-factor model; Cloninger's seven factor model of temperament and character) in relation to ASB, and found several traits manifested moderate effect sizes (e.g., novelty seeking, psychoticism, constraint, agreeableness, conscientiousness).¹ Although a number of different models of personality exist, there is strong empirical evidence to suggest that these various models of personality can be understood using the framework of the FFM (e.g., O'Connor, 2002; Markon, Krueger, & Watson, 2005). The FFM/Big Five is a model of personality derived from lexical studies of personality that posits five primary personality domains: *Neuroticism* (i.e., tendency to experience negative emotions such as depression, shame, stress), *Extraversion* (i.e., tendency to seek the company of others, experience positive emotions, and interact with others and the world in an approach-oriented manner), *Openness to experience* (i.e., openness to different ideas, emotions, values, and experiences), *Agreeableness* (i.e., interpersonal strategies and reactions), and

Conscientiousness (i.e., ability to delay gratification, persevere in the face of difficulty, and consider the consequences of one's behavior prior to acting).² These domains are quite consistent with domains from other prominent models of personality; for instance, Eysenck's domain of psychoticism, which is a relatively strong correlate of ASB, appears to be a blend of the FFM traits of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. Alternatively, Tellegen's domain of negative emotionality includes content related to FFM Neuroticism and the inverse of Agreeableness. In general, Miller and Lynam argued that the traits most relevant to antisocial behavior could be understood from the perspective of the FFM, particularly the domains of Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism.

It is important to note that Miller and Lynam's meta-analysis (2001) examined broad traits – referred to as domains – and not the more specific lower-order traits, called facets, that underlie these domains. In one popular operationalization of the FFM, derived from work by Costa and McCrae (e.g., 1992), each of the five domains is underlaid by six facets. For example, the domain of Agreeableness (vs. antagonism) is comprised by the following six facets: trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, and tendermindedness. An examination of the relations between these narrower personality facets and ASB is important because facets within a domain may bear differential relations to the outcome. As a result, a focus on the domain-level relations with ASB may mask relations that are apparent when these lower-order traits are used. For instance, although Neuroticism tends to demonstrate a weak positive relation to ASB (Miller & Lynam, 2001), two of the underlying facets manifest more sizable relations (i.e., angry hostility; impulsiveness; Lynam, Leukefeld, & Clayton, 2003). Similarly, certain lower-order traits of FFM Conscientiousness may be more central to the conceptualization and assessment of ASB (e.g., impulsivity captured by the facet of deliberation) than others (e.g., orderliness). In addition, it has become increasingly clear that in many cases, the use of more narrow traits provide greater explanatory power in relation to important outcomes like ASB (Paunonen & Ashton, 2001).

Despite the predictive utility of using these narrower order traits, the empirical literature linking these narrow personality traits to ASB remains rather sparse, due, in part, to the longer assessment time required to assess these 30 facets (in comparison to just assessing the 5 broader domains). In the current study we use a meta-analytic approach to review the relations between the FFM and ASB (e.g., crime, violence/aggression) at the level of the higher-order domains and the lower-order facets. For several reasons, we review these relations using measures of the FFM as it is arguably the predominant model of general personality functioning and thus has one of the largest empirical literatures from which to draw effect sizes. The FFM enjoys considerable empirical support compiled over decades. Empirical support for the FFM is seen in the form of convergent and discriminant validation across ratings (self; informants; Costa & McCrae, 1988), temporal stability (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000), cross-cultural support (Ashton & Lee, 2001; McCrae et al., 2005), and behavioral genetic support (Yamagata et al., 2006). The domains and facets of the FFM have also proven useful in their relations to important outcomes (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006), including a variety of externalizing behaviors (e.g. Flory, Lynam, Milich, Leukefeld, & Clayton, 2002; Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000; Miller, Lynam, & Leukefeld, 2003). Additionally, the FFM has been proven capable of acting as an organizing framework for the majority of general and pathological personality models. Finally, some measures of the FFM (e.g., Revised NEO Personality Inventory; NEO PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992) allow for an examination of the relations between the FFM and ASB using the five broad personality domains, as well as the 30 more specific facets.

It has been 10 years since Miller and Lynam (2001) meta-analyzed the relations between personality and ASB and much empirical work has accrued since that time, albeit primarily using the broader personality domains. For the sake of the current review, we focus on

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