



# Personality traits of prisoners as compared to general populations: Signs of adjustment to the situation?



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## ABSTRACT

Two recent studies have challenged the well-established belief that offending behaviors are inversely related to the personality trait of conscientiousness. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore prisoners' levels of traits according to the Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality compared to control groups, with a focus on conscientiousness. Two separate samples of inmates in Swedish high-security prisons were investigated in three studies. Inmates and non-inmates completed a Swedish-language translation of Goldberg's (1999) International Personality Item Pool questionnaire (IPIP-NEO, Bäckström, 2007). Male inmates ( $n = 46$ ) in Studies 1 and 2 scored higher on conscientiousness than non-inmates (norm data based on approximately 800 males, and a students' sample), which conflicts with previous results. Study 3 further explored the conscientiousness differences on the facet level. Male and female inmates ( $n = 131$ ) scored higher on order and self-discipline (even after an adjustment for social desirability) than students ( $n = 136$ ). In conjunction with previous findings, these differences are interpreted as being either temporal or enduring adjustments to the prison environment. It is suggested that researchers and clinical teams should cautiously interpret the FFM factor of conscientiousness (and its facets) when planning the further treatment of inmates.

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## 1. Introduction

The search for the “criminal personality” is not new (e.g., Lombroso, 1876, cited after Thiry, 2012). Antisocial behavior has sometimes been “explained” tautologically by an antisocial personality, implying that stable traits predict the antisocial behavior. For example, Clower and Bothwell (2001, p. 234) argued for low levels of conscientiousness and openness as causes of a criminal way of life, although they had measured prison inmates' personality *after* their most recent conviction. However, it has been shown that even global traits can change due to life circumstances. For example, the level of conscientiousness increased in German high school students just before the final examinations, especially among those who had not shown much achievement behavior before (Bleidorn, 2012). Thus, particular personality characteristics among convicted criminal offenders are not necessarily causes of their criminal behaviors, but may be explained in other ways, for example as an adaptation to their prison environment.

A comprehensive taxonomy of personality traits is the Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality (McCrae & Costa, 2008; Widiger & Costa,

2012), which consists of the dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. These five traits are composed of six facets each. The strongest and most consistent associations with criminal and antisocial behaviors have been found for agreeableness and conscientiousness. Two prospective studies found that low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness predicted juridical sanctions (Möttus, Guljajev, Allik, Laidra, & Pullmann, 2012; O'Riordan & O'Connell, 2014). Likewise, two meta-analyses revealed an inverse relation of agreeableness and conscientiousness with offending behaviors (Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011; Miller & Lynam, 2001). Even when comparing white-collar professionals with white-collar criminals, thereby comparing similar groups in terms of education and intelligence, they differed on a discriminant function composed of characteristics of conscientiousness and agreeableness (Collins & Schmidt, 1993). Thus, delinquency is associated with and can be predicted by low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness.

Criminal behavior can even be linked with the FFM via psychopathy, which, by definition, is associated with norm-breaking and remorseless behaviors, including criminal acts, and is theoretically related to low agreeableness and to some degree even to low conscientiousness (Decuyper, De Pauw, De Fruyt, De Bolle, & De Clercq, 2009; Miller, 2012; Ross, Benning, Patrick, Thompson, & Thurston, 2009). Approaches to define and measure psychopathy range from the clinical entity of

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antisocial personality disorder (DSM-5, Section II, [American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#)) over clinical dimensions (DSM-5, Section III, see also [Watson, Stasik, Ro, & Clark, 2013](#)) to one- and multi-dimensional psychopathy measures of varying content (see [Lilienfeld, Watts, Smith, Berg, & Latzman, 2014](#)). Despite this conceptual variety, findings converge in that psychopathy predicts criminal offences and is associated with low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness, thereby linking them with criminal behaviors. For example, rates of antisocial personality disorder in prison populations have been estimated to be 70% and higher, in contrast to 0.2–3.3% in the general population ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#)). The psychopathy scale PCL-R has predicted reoffending both in a recent meta-analysis ([Mokros, Vohs, & Habermeyer, 2014](#)) and in a sample of released life-time prisoners ([Sturup, Karlberg, Fredriksson, Lihoff, & Kristiansson, 2015](#)).

With respect to psychopathy–FFM associations, meta-analytic findings reveal strong associations of antisocial personality disorder with low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness ([Saulsman & Page, 2004, 2005](#); see also [Widiger & Costa, 2012](#)). The same holds for the dimensional definition of psychopathy according to DSM-5 Section 3 ([Crego, Gore, Rojas, & Widiger, 2015](#); [Watson et al., 2013](#)). Although psychopathy as a personality trait has been defined and measured in various ways, the findings converge in links between psychopathy and low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness ([Decuyper et al., 2009](#); [Lilienfeld et al., 2014](#)). Thus, research on psychopathy corroborates the notion that low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness are associated with criminal behavior.

In contrast, the personality trait of openness appears to be unrelated to criminal behaviors. Neither did it predict justice sanctions ([Möttus et al., 2012](#); [O’Riordan & O’Connell, 2014](#)) nor did meta-analyses reveal any associations with antisocial behaviors ([Jones et al., 2011](#); [Miller & Lynam, 2001](#)). Theoretically, no ([Decuyper et al., 2009](#)) or only a few associations between psychopathy and facets of openness are expected ([Miller, 2012](#); [Ross et al., 2009](#)), and, empirically, the associations were negligible ([Crego et al., 2015](#); [Decuyper et al., 2009](#); [Saulsman & Page, 2004, 2005](#)).

The findings for neuroticism and extraversion have ranged between the extremes of relatively consistent associations with low agreeableness and low conscientiousness and no association with openness. Two longitudinal studies were able to predict justice sanctions from high levels of neuroticism ([Möttus et al., 2012](#); [O’Riordan & O’Connell, 2014](#)). High extraversion predicted justice sanctions in one study ([O’Riordan & O’Connell, 2014](#)), but not another ([Möttus et al., 2012](#)). Meta-analyses revealed significant, but tiny, associations between neuroticism and offending behaviors, and extraversion was not significantly associated ([Jones et al., 2011](#); [Miller & Lynam, 2001](#)). This sparseness of findings may be theoretically explained by opposite associations of single facets and the sub-dimensions of psychopathy ([Miller, 2012](#)). Confirming this explanation, associations of antisocial personality disorder and psychopathy with neuroticism and extraversion were generally negligible overall, and were composed of heterogeneous associations on the levels of facets, sub-dimensions, or single studies in meta-analyses ([Crego et al., 2015](#); [Decuyper et al., 2009](#); [Ross et al., 2009](#); [Saulsman & Page, 2004, 2005](#)). In summary, delinquents tend to score low on agreeableness and conscientiousness, average on openness, and might show either elevated, low, or average levels of neuroticism and extraversion, depending on which facets of these factors and which sub-dimensions of psychopathy and antisocial behaviors are measured.

However, the results showing that low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness are linked to criminal behavior have been challenged by two recent studies conducted in the European countries of Belgium and Croatia, respectively ([Thiry, 2012](#); [Trninić, Barančić, & Nazor, 2008](#)). In both studies, prisoners scored higher on conscientiousness than students and a normative sample, respectively, and they scored higher on agreeableness than the normative sample. In [Thiry’s \(2012\)](#) sample, the prisoners provided data in the hope to be released from prison early; thus, social desirability and dissimulation might be an

issue. However, inmates did not score higher than a normative sample on a scale of positive presentation management and low on the positively evaluated trait of openness. Moreover, the findings are in accord with [Trninić et al.’s \(2008\)](#) study, although the latter assured confidentiality to its participants. However, the student participants in the latter study might not be entirely representative of a general population. Further studies are needed to investigate the ways in which prisoners’ personality traits differ from the average population in more normative samples.

This article compares imprisoned populations with various normative samples in three studies, using various methods of measurement. For the sake of completeness, neuroticism, extraversion, and openness were explored in Studies 1 and 2, but given previous findings, no particularly high or low levels were expected for these factors. According to most previous research, low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness would be expected in inmates. If higher levels were revealed instead, as in the studies by [Thiry \(2012\)](#) and [Trninić et al. \(2008\)](#), these results would be at odds with research in the context of psychopathic traits and antisocial personality disorder. In this case, we aimed at exploring this issue further and providing a tentative explanation for this discrepancy to the majority of findings.

The aim of Study 1 was to examine the differences in FFM scores between inmates and non-inmates. Study 2 explored these findings further by comparing inmates with two specific comparison groups. Finally, Study 3 investigated the differences in conscientiousness at the facet level in a new sample.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Methods

#### 2.1.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from the inmate population of a maximum security prison in the southern part of Sweden. All of the participants ( $N = 46$ ) were men,  $M = 34.6$  years,  $SD = 11.6$ . The length of sentence ranged from four years to life imprisonment and averaged approximately 20 years. All participants had been convicted for serious and/or repeated crimes, such as murder, robbery, and dealing drugs.

The control group consisted of [Bäckström’s \(2007, 2010\)](#) Swedish norm data ( $N = 2021$ ,  $M = 29.8$  years,  $SD = 9.9$ , range: 18–84 years). Only the male data, composed of approximately 800 men, were used. Approximately 60% of the participants in the normative sample had some form of college education. Thus, the general population is more highly educated than the population of prison inmates, among which higher education is the exception. Most inmates who study during their imprisonment attempt to complete elementary school (9 years) or high school (12 years), and only a few participate in higher education.

#### 2.1.2. Measures

A Swedish version ([Bäckström, 2007](#)) of the IPIP-50 inventory ([Goldberg, 1999](#)) was used. This inventory measures the factors of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness by ten items each, on a five-point Likert-scale, ranging from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*. The internal consistencies for the factors in this study were good (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .87, .86, .89, .84$ , and  $.82$ , resp.). These reliability estimates are comparable to those reported by [Bäckström \(2007\)](#).

#### 2.1.3. Procedure

After invitation by another inmate serving a life sentence, the inmates received the questionnaire in envelopes with pre-paid postage, just before evening lock-down. They filled out the questionnaire individually and did not receive any compensation.

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