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Personality and crime: Mediating the agreeableness–offending and conscientiousness–offending relationships with proactive and reactive criminal thinking

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the personality dimensions of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are linked to future offending by way of criminal thinking. Participants were 1294 (1115 boys, 179 girls) adjudicated delinquents from the Pathways to Desistance study. The Agreeableness and Conscientiousness scales of the NEO-PI-SF served as the independent variables in this study, proactive (moral disengagement) and reactive (cognitive impulsivity) criminal thinking served as mediator variables, and the total offending variety score from the Self-Reported Offending (SRO) scale served as the dependent variable. Contrasting target (Agreeableness → moral disengagement → offending; Conscientiousness → cognitive impulsivity → offending) and control (Agreeableness → cognitive impulsivity → offending; Conscientiousness → moral disengagement → offending) pathways, it was determined that proactive but not reactive criminal thinking mediated the Agreeableness–offending relationship and that reactive but not proactive criminal thinking mediated the Conscientiousness–offending relationship.

The five-factor model of personality holds that a person's character can be meaningfully studied and described using five broad personality dimensions or domains: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. [Costa and McCrae \(1985\)](#) created the NEO Personality Inventory (PI) to assess the five-factor model. Research conducted with the NEO-PI and other measures indicate that low scores on two of the dimensions, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, are the most commonly encountered personality correlates of antisocial, aggressive, and offending behavior ([Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011](#); [Ruiz, Pincus, & Schinka, 2008](#)). The next question that needs to be answered is how do these dimensions achieve their criminogenic effect? One way would be through mediation. [Wilcox, Sullivan, Jones, and van Gelder \(2014\)](#) examined this possibility by studying the effects of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness on delinquency using situational opportunity as a mediator. Although they found evidence of a mediated effect, all variables are not equally capable of fulfilling the role of mediator variable ([Wu & Zumbo, 2008](#)). Situational opportunity (defined by [Wilcox et al., 2014](#) as exposure to deviant peers and access to alcohol, drugs, and guns), in fact, would seem to be better suited to serving as a moderator variable than as a mediator variable (e.g., crime is most likely to occur when low Agreeableness/Conscientiousness is accompanied by moderate to high levels of opportunity).

An alternate mediational model was tested in the current study. The control and moral systems of criminal lifestyle theory ([Walters, 2017](#)) are an outgrowth of a developmental progression in which temperament gives rise to early behavioral patterns and supporting cognitive styles. The early behavioral patterns serve as independent variables and the cognitive styles serve as mediators in the evolution of subsequent behavioral patterns like crime and delinquency. In the control model, disinhibition is the temperament style, low self-control or behavioral impulsivity is the early behavioral pattern, and reactive (impulsive, irresponsible) criminal thinking or cognitive impulsivity is the principal cognitive style. In the moral model, fearlessness is the temperament style, callous-unemotional (CU) traits serves as the early behavioral pattern, and proactive (planned, calculated) criminal thinking is the principal cognitive style. Through a process known as correlated novelties or expanding adjacent possibilities ([Tria, Loreto, Servedio, & Stogatz, 2014](#)), each developmental model evolves as it incorporates new information that lies adjacent to current and existing knowledge. It is speculated that personality traits like agreeableness and conscientiousness are correlated novelties that evolve from the early behavioral patterns of CU traits and low self-control, respectively. If true, then agreeableness and conscientiousness should also serve as independent variables in predicting delinquent behavior and have their effects mediated by proactive and reactive criminal thinking.

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1. The present study

The current study sought to improve on the previously mentioned Wilcox et al. (2014) investigation. First, a stable dynamic risk factor (i.e., criminal thinking) that more clearly satisfies the basic criteria of a good mediating variable by being both malleable and stable (Wu & Zumbo, 2008) was selected as the intervening variable in this study. Second, instead of examining the *a* and *b* paths of the indirect effect separately, the current study tested the total indirect effect (*ab*) using a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure designed to account for the non-normal nature of indirect effects (Hayes, 2013). The hypothesis evaluated in this study held that target pathways consistent with the moral and control models of criminal lifestyle development (Wave 4 Agreeableness → Wave 5 Proactive Criminal Thinking → Wave 6 Offending; Wave 4 Conscientiousness → Wave 5 Reactive Criminal Thinking → Wave 6 Offending) would be significant, control pathways incongruent with the moral and control models (Wave 4 Agreeableness → Wave 5 Reactive Criminal Thinking → Wave 6 Offending; Wave 4 Conscientiousness → Wave 5 Proactive Criminal Thinking → Wave 6 Offending) would be non-significant, and the differences between the target and control pathways would be significant.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The current sample was comprised of 1294 (1115 boys, 179 girls) members of the 1354-member Pathways to Desistance study (Mulvey, 2012). The 60 excluded members of the Pathways study were removed because they were missing data on all five main variables (two independent variables, two mediator variables, and one dependent variable). Each member of the Pathways study had been adjudicated delinquent or convicted of a felony in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania or Maricopa County (Phoenix), Arizona. The ethnic breakdown of the sample was 20.8% Caucasian, 40.7% Black, 33.8% Hispanic, and 4.7% other. Participants were 16 to 21 years of age at the time of the Wave 4 interview, which is the point at which the current study began, and 17 to 22 years of age at the time of the Wave 6 interview, which is the point at which the current study ended.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Independent variables

Measures of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness taken from the 120-item NEO-Five Factor Inventory-Short Form (NEO-PI-SF; McCrae & Costa, 2004) served as independent variables in the current investigation. Each item on the NEO-PI-SF is rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 5 = *agree strongly*) and then summed to create scores for the five broad personality dimensions and several sub-dimensions. Higher scores on the two NEO-PI-SF scales employed as independent variables in this study (i.e., Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) represented higher levels of that trait. In the Pathways study the 14-item Agreeableness (NEO-A) scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.62 and the 13-item Conscientiousness (NEO-C) scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85.

2.2.2. Mediator variables

There were two mediator variables included in the current investigation: moral disengagement and cognitive impulsivity. Moral disengagement was assessed with the 32-item Moral Disengagement scale (MD; Bandura, Barbarnelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Each item on the MD scale is scored on a three-point Likert-type scale (1 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*) and an average score computed. Higher MD scores indicate greater moral disengagement and proactive criminal thinking. The internal consistency of the MD score at Waves 4 and 5 of the Pathways study, the waves used in the current investigation, was

excellent ($\alpha = 0.92$; Mulvey, 2012).

Cognitive impulsivity (CI) was assessed with the reverse coded score of the Impulse Control scale of the 84-item Weinberger Adjustment Inventory (WAI; Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990). Each WAI item is rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *false*, 5 = *true*), with higher scores indicating better impulse control. These scores were reverse coded in order to be consistent with the MD score (i.e., higher score = greater criminal thinking). The 8-item CI measure demonstrated adequate internal consistency at Waves 4 and 5 of the Pathways study ($\alpha = 0.78$ – 0.80 ; Mulvey, 2012). MD and WAI-IC have been validated against proactive and reactive latent factors, respectively (Walters & Yurvati, 2017).

2.2.3. Dependent variable

Given the statistical advantages variety scores have over frequency counts and dichotomies (Sweeten, 2012), the total offending variety score from the Self-Reported Offending scale (SRO; Huizinga, Esbensen, & Weiher, 1991) was employed as the dependent variable in this study. The SRO variety score represents the portion of crime categories, out of 22, the respondent acknowledges engaging in during the recall period (i.e., last six months in the current study). The 22 crime categories used to calculate the total offending variety score were as follows: damaged property, set fire, broke in to steal, shoplifted, bought/received/sold stolen property, used check/credit card illegally, stole car or motorcycle, sold marijuana, sold other drugs, carjacked, drove drunk or high, been paid by someone for sex, forced someone to have sex, killed someone, shot someone, shot at someone, took by force with a weapon, took by force without a weapon, beat up someone with serious injury, in a fight, beat someone as part of a gang, and carried a gun. The one-year test-retest reliability of the total offending variety score was 0.48.

2.2.4. Control variables

Six control variables were included in the current investigation. Three of the control variables were basic demographic measures: age (in years), sex (1 = male, 2 = female), and race (1 = White vs. 2 = Non-white). One of the three non-demographic control variables was peer delinquency as measured by the Rochester Youth Survey-Peer Delinquent Behavior scale (RYS-PDB; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994). The average item score across all 19 items represented peer delinquency in this study. The internal consistency of this scale during Wave 4 of the Pathways study was excellent ($\alpha = 0.92$).

The other non-demographic control variables were CU traits, the early behavioral pattern from the moral model, and low self-control, the early behavioral pattern from the control model. The only time these two variables were measured was at baseline. CU traits were assessed with Factor 1 of the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL: YV; Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003) rated on a three-point scale (0 = absent, 1 = partially or possibly present, 2 = present) and summed to produce a score that could range from 0 to 20 ($\alpha = 0.76$; intraclass correlation coefficient = 0.79). Low self-control was assessed with a five-point early onset of behavior problems index developed specifically for the Pathways study (“in trouble for cheating before age 11;” “in trouble for disturbing class before age 11;” “in trouble for being drunk/stoned before age 11;” “in trouble for stealing before age 11;” “in trouble for fighting before age 11”). One point was awarded for each problem acknowledged and the points summed to produce a score that could range from 0 to 5 (mean inter-item $r = 0.20$).

Because the independent and mediator variables were not randomly assigned it was necessary to control for prior levels of these variables by including precursor measures of each outcome as covariates in their respective regression equations. Accordingly, a precursor to Wave 5 MD (i.e., Wave 4 MD) and a precursor to Wave 5 CI (i.e., Wave 4 CI) were included in the regression equations predicting MD-5 and CI-5, respectively. In addition, a precursor to the dependent variable in the form of Wave 4 offending behavior was included in the regression

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