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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A cross-sectional study of the relationships between age and personality in sex offenders against children[☆]



J.A. Becerra-García^{a,*}, V. Egan^b

^a Department of psychology, university of Jaén, campus Las Lagunillas s/n, 23071 Jaén, Spain

^b School of psychology, forensic section, university of Leicester, 106 New Walk, Leicester LE1 7EA, UK

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Summary The Five-Factor Model of personality has been applied to study sexual offending and also been used in the study of how aging affect to personality. The main goal of this study was to study changes seen in personality domains across the life span for a cohort of convicted child molesters. The total sample comprised 169 men convicted and incarcerated for “hands-on” contact sex offences against children. The participants were categorized into three groups based their age: < 30 years, between 30–50 years and > 50 years. The NEO-Five-Factor Inventory was used to assess personality in these age cohorts. The analysis conducted showed that Extroversion and Conscientiousness differ over age, whereas Neuroticism, Openness and Agreeableness do not. These results suggest that Neuroticism, Openness and Agreeableness domains in child molesters do not varies in the age cohorts studied, whereas Extroversion and Conscientiousness domains experience similar changes to those occurring in general population according with previous studies. As conclusion, in child molesters the influence of intrinsic maturation processes can be seen more clearly for the Extroversion and Conscientiousness domains, whereas are discussed why Neuroticism, Openness and Agreeableness levels do not change across age in the direction expected in this cohort.

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Introduction

The Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality (Costa and McCrae, 1992; McCrae and Costa, 1997) argues personality comprises five gross domains: Neuroticism (N), Extroversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). Personality assessment in the forensic psychology sphere, among other disciplines, is increasingly based on the FFM. In this field FFM has been applied to study of violence, antisocial behaviours and sexual offending (Heaven, 1996; Miller et al., 2003; Egan et al., 2005; Becerra-García et al., 2012a), between others (see Egan, 2011).

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jbecerra@ujaen.es (J.A. Becerra-García).

The FFM also been used to study how aging affects normal personality with several investigations showing similarities in the age-related change of personality across cultures (Xiu et al., 1996; McCrae et al., 2000). McCrae et al. (2000), realized with participants of different cultures, was found that all domains experienced quantitative changes across life span as a result of maturation processes. Generally, maturation leads A and C to increase, and N, E and O to decrease from the age of 17 to 30. Although McCrae et al. (2000) provide few data on the absolute stability beyond age of 30 years, other works found significant differences between older and middle-aged adults relative to younger adults in the same direction that McCrae et al. (2000). In these studies older and middle-aged adults were also higher in A and C, and lower in N, E and O than younger adults (McCrae and Costa, 2003; Allemand et al., 2008; Lucas and Donnellan, 2011).

Some have suggested that crime reflects poor maturation of the brain, and the substantial age-crime decline in anti-social young men as they move into their twenties indicating late cerebral development, with pedophiles being a specific example of this cerebral developmental delay extending further into adulthood (Blonigen, 2010; Kruger and Schiffer, 2011). In studies of personality in child molesters using the FFM, child molesters have been shown to systematically present higher N and lower E in comparison to the general population and differences in O and C, depending on the study under consideration (Dennison et al., 2001; Randall et al., 2011; Becerra-García et al., 2012b).

How personality domains change across the lifespan of a child molester cohort has not studied. Previous studies have shown differences in FFM personality domains for child molesters relative to the general population, and the brain maturational theories of crime have some plausibility, and may explain both the development, decline, and persistence of offending. Normal brain ageing may lead to the characteristic changes in personality seen for adults over time, but this has not been compared to comparable cohorts of child molesters. The aim of this investigation was to study the changes in personality domains across the life span for a cohort of child molesters.

Method

This study comprised a sample of 169 participants, all men, convicted and incarcerated for “hands-on” contact sex offences against children. The mean age of the total sample was 44.44 ± 12.29 years (age range 19–77 years). In this research, we defined a contact offence as any fondling of the genitals or breasts over clothing, as well as skin-to-skin contact (including hand-to-genital, genital-to-genital, mouth-to-genital and genital-to-anus activities) (Bourke and Hernández, 2009). In relation to the criminological characteristics studied (criminal history and age of victims), 39% ($n=66$) of total sample had prior convictions, whereas 61% ($n=103$) had not been previously arrested; 30.8% of participants ($n=52$) had victims aged between 1–10 years, whereas 69.2% ($n=117$) had victims between 11–17 years.

The personality domains were assessed using NEO-Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa and McCrae, 1992). The NEO-FFI is a self-report questionnaire developed to assess

FFM personality dimensions. This inventory comprises 60 items derived from NEO-PI-R (Revised NEO Personality Inventory; Costa and McCrae, 1992) with 12 items for each of the five dimensions. The answer format is a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. The reliabilities for the personality domains range from 0.72 (O) to 0.87 (N) (Egan et al., 2000).

Prior to personality assessment, all participants were informed that the research followed ethical guidelines, and that participation was voluntary and anonymous. All subjects who participated in the study completed the assessment in a single session. These participants were categorized into three groups based their age: below 30 years (14.2%, $n=24$), between 30–50 years (53.3%, $n=90$) and over 50 years (32.5%, $n=55$). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics 17 was used for the analyses. All analyses had significance levels set initially at 0.05, with the Bonferroni adjustment being lower.

Results

Previously to examine the personality across the lifespan in this cohort of child molesters, by means of by means of Chi² (χ^2) tests were examined criminological variables. These analyses showed that different age groups did not differ by criminal history ($\chi^2=2.44$; $P=0.29$) or by age of victims ($\chi^2=4.27$; $P=0.12$). For a preliminary analysis of relationship between personality domains and age in child molesters we conducted a correlational study (by means of Pearson’s R). The correlations obtained between age and personality (and between personality scores) are detailed in Table 1. As can be seen in this Table, correlational analyses indicated that E and C domains are personality dimensions more related with age of child molesters.

Later, as cohorts of child molesters were matched in criminological characteristics, different scores on all FFM personality dimensions (as dependent variables) were studied using a one-way analysis of variance with age group (below 30 years, between 30–50 years and over 50 years) as between-subjects factor (independent variable). We used Bonferroni’s post-hoc test for examine post-hoc differences for each personality domain and η^2 as an index of effect size according to Cohen (1988). Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for the FFM personality dimensions for each age cohort.

The analyses revealed significant differences between groups for E and C domains (as can be seen in Table 1). For N, O and A, the analysis not difference across the different age groups, as shown in Table 2. Specific post-hoc effects on E were seen for the higher E in those between 30–50 years compared to those over 50 years (Bonferroni-adjusted $P=0.03$; see Table 2). For C, the difference was seen for persons below 30 years, who had a lower C score those aged 30–50 years (Bonferroni-adjusted $P<0.01$; see Table 2).

Discussion

We examined cross-sectional changes in personality across the lifespan for a group of child molesters. Related to this objective, the results show that in this sample some domains experienced changes, whereas others did not varies across

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