



## Pathological personality traits and criminogenic thinking styles



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### ABSTRACT

The present research investigated associations between pathological personality traits and criminogenic thinking styles. Study 1 examined the associations between pathological personality traits and criminogenic thinking styles among 122 community members, whereas Study 2 examined these associations among 299 incarcerated male offenders. Negative affectivity and detachment each had unique positive associations with cognitive immaturity, and antagonism was positively associated with the desire to control others across both studies. Disinhibition had unique positive associations with control and cognitive immaturity among incarcerated offenders in Study 2, whereas psychoticism was positively associated with cognitive immaturity and egocentrism across both studies. The results of these studies suggest important connections between pathological personality traits and criminogenic thinking styles that may shed light on some of the difficulties that often accompany personality pathology.

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Criminogenic thinking refers to characteristic cognitive styles or belief systems that tend to precede criminal activities and other forms of antisocial behavior (e.g., Walters, 1990; Yochelson & Samenow, 1976). The construct of criminogenic thinking can be helpful for understanding how and why individuals engage in criminal behavior, and most of the prominent theories of criminal behavior acknowledge the importance of criminogenic thinking (e.g., Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Marcus, 2004; Maruna & Copes, 2005; Sutherland, 1947; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Yochelson & Samenow, 1976). The role of criminogenic thinking in most of these theories involves the manner in which it permits offenders to rationalize their criminal behavior and minimize their perceptions of the negative consequences associated with criminal acts (e.g., perceiving many crimes as being “victimless”; Tangney, Mashek, & Stuewig, 2007; Tangney et al., 2012). Research from psychology and criminology has supported the important role that criminogenic thinking plays in contributing to both the onset and continuation of criminal behavior (e.g., Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Maruna & Copes, 2005; Palmer, 2007; Walters, 1995, 1996, 2009).

Given the potential importance of criminogenic thinking for understanding criminal behavior, it is not surprising that multiple instruments have been developed to measure this construct. Examples include the Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles (Walters, 1990, 2002), the Criminal Sentiments Scale-Modified (Shields & Simourd, 1991), the Measure of Criminal Attitudes and

Associates (Mills, Kroner, & Forth, 2002), the Texas Christian University Criminal Thinking Scales (Knight, Garner, Simpson, Morey, & Flynn, 2006), the Criminogenic Cognitions Scale (Tangney et al., 2012), and the Criminogenic Thinking Profile (Mitchell & Tafra, 2012). These instruments have provided insight into criminogenic thinking but they generally neglect the noncriminal maladaptive thinking styles posited by cognitive theorists such as Beck (1976), Ellis (1992), and Young (1995). Mandracchia, Morgan, Garos, and Garland (2007) argued that it is important to include noncriminal thinking errors (e.g., automatic thoughts, irrational beliefs) in the conceptualization of criminogenic thinking because these noncriminal thinking errors are likely to indirectly promote criminal behavior. The failure to account for these non-criminal thinking errors may prevent a comprehensive understanding of criminogenic thinking.

Mandracchia and colleagues (Mandracchia & Morgan, 2011; Mandracchia et al., 2007) developed the Measure of Offender Thinking Styles in order to address the role that noncriminal thinking errors may play in criminogenic thinking. This instrument focused on the specific cognitive patterns described by Yochelson and Samenow (1976), Walters (1990), Beck (1976), and Ellis (1992). The present studies employed the Measure of Criminogenic Thinking Styles (MOCTS; Mandracchia, 2013) which is a slightly revised version of the Measure of Offender Thinking Styles - Revised that captures three aspects of criminogenic thinking: *control* (i.e., the desire for power and control over the self, others, and the environment), *cognitive immaturity* (i.e., thinking that is lazy, focused on ineffective shortcuts, and self-pitying in nature), and *egocentrism* (i.e., a sense of self-importance and entitlement).

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The MOCTS (inclusive of its predecessors) has been used to explore how criminogenic thinking may develop, apply to different populations, and relate to maladaptive characteristics and experiences. More specifically, this instrument has been used with undergraduate samples to demonstrate that criminogenic thinking may develop, in part, due to how a person was parented (Gonzalez, Mandracchia, Dahlen, & Nicholson, 2014), play an important role in the relationship between exposure to violent media and aggression (Wagar & Mandracchia, 2016), be associated with psychopathology (i.e., depression, anxiety, stress; Mandracchia & Pendleton, 2015), and contribute to problem behaviors (e.g., risky sexual behavior, criminal behavior, academic misconduct; Mandracchia & Pendleton, 2015). In studies that have utilized this instrument with incarcerated prisoners, it has been shown that criminogenic thinking may be fostered by associating with other offenders (Whited, Wagar, Mandracchia, & Morgan, in press), be predicted by a range of demographic, mental health, and offense-related variables (Mandracchia & Morgan, 2010, 2012), and be a particularly salient feature of psychopathic personality traits (Mandracchia, Gonzalez, Patterson, & Smith, 2015).

## 1. Personality and criminogenic thinking

The connections between criminogenic thinking and personality traits have been examined in previous studies. These studies revealed that criminogenic thinking is negatively associated with broad personality dimensions such as agreeableness (e.g., Egan, McMurrin, Richardson, & Blair, 2000). In addition, research has shown that criminogenic thinking is positively associated with antisocial personality disorder (e.g., Bulten, Nijman, & van der Staak, 2009) as well as certain pathological personality features (e.g., psychopathy; Mitchell & Tafra, 2012). The present studies sought to extend what is known about the connections between criminogenic thinking styles and personality by examining the broad array of pathological personality traits described in Section III (“Emerging Measures and Models”) of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013)*. This alternative model of personality pathology is focused on the following pathological personality traits: *negative affectivity* (i.e., the tendency to experience an array of negative emotions and associated behaviors), *detachment* (i.e., characterized by avoidance, social isolation, and anhedonia), *antagonism* (i.e., aggressive tendencies accompanied by assertions of dominance, callousness toward others, and grandiosity), *disinhibition* (i.e., impulsivity and sensation seeking), and *psychoticism* (i.e., a disconnection from reality and a tendency to experience illogical thought patterns and behaviors; Krueger, Derringer, Markon, Watson, & Skodol, 2012). It is important to note that the pathological personality traits captured by this model are maladaptive variants of the Big Five personality dimensions of emotional stability (negative affectivity), extraversion (detachment), agreeableness (antagonism), conscientiousness (disinhibition), and openness (psychoticism; Thomas et al., 2013). Research concerning these pathological personality traits is still in its early stages; however, these traits have been shown to be associated with a wide range of phenomena, including interpersonal functioning (Southard, Noser, Pollock, Mercer, & Zeigler-Hill, 2015; Williams & Simms, 2016; Wright et al., 2012, 2015), moral judgments (Noser et al., 2015), mate retention behaviors (Holden, Roof, McCabe, & Zeigler-Hill, 2015), emotion regulation difficulties (Pollock, McCabe, Southard, & Zeigler-Hill, 2016), humor styles (Zeigler-Hill, McCabe, & Vrabel, in press), resting-state neural network properties (James, Engdahl, Leuthold, Krueger, & Georgopoulos, 2015), gambling disorder (Carlotta et al., 2015), psychopathy (Anderson, Sellbom, Wygant, Salekin, & Krueger, 2014), and aggression (Hopwood et al., 2013). Although it is quite likely that these pathological personality traits may eventually be found to have an important role in forensic psychology (see Hopwood & Sellbom, 2013, for an extended discussion), few studies have directly examined these traits in forensic contexts (e.g., Wygant et al., 2016).

## 2. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present studies was to examine the connections between pathological personality traits and criminogenic thinking styles in a community sample (Study 1) and an incarcerated offender sample (Study 2). We predicted that pathological personality traits would be associated with criminogenic thinking because personality is intimately connected with how individuals process information about their social environments and often has implications for the values, motives, and goals that individuals adopt (e.g., McAdams, 1995). It has been argued that the pathological personality traits assessed by the Personality Inventory for DSM-5 (PID-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Krueger et al., 2012) represent major adaptive systems that have evolved because of their survival value (Harkness, Reynolds, & Lilienfeld, 2014). Specifically, negative affectivity corresponds to short-term danger detection (i.e., attention to imminent danger and injury), detachment corresponds to resource acquisition (i.e., arousal evoked by attaining and consuming resources), antagonism corresponds to agenda protection (i.e., focusing energy and concentration on overcoming obstacles in order to achieve goals), disinhibition corresponds to long-term cost-benefit analysis (i.e., consideration of the long-term costs and benefits of one's behavior), and psychoticism corresponds to reality modeling for action (i.e., construction and storage of mental representations of the social environment that are used in planning behaviors). Each of the psychological systems represented by these pathological personality traits would seem to have possible connections with criminogenic thinking. Thus, we hypothesized that individuals with high levels of negative affectivity (short-term danger detection), detachment (resource acquisition), and disinhibition (a lack of long-term cost-benefit analysis) would report thinking styles characterized by cognitive immaturity in both community members and incarcerated offenders. Additionally, we expected that individuals with high levels of antagonism (agenda protection) would report thinking styles characterized by control and egocentrism in both community members and incarcerated offenders due to their lack of concern for the needs and desires of others (e.g., Noser et al., 2015). Finally, we expected individuals with high levels of psychoticism to report elevated levels of each of the three criminogenic thinking styles in both community members and incarcerated offenders because psychoticism captures a tendency to experience a broad array of cognitive distortions.

## 3. Study 1: community sample

Most studies concerning criminogenic thinking have focused on offenders, but Walters (1990) argued that criminogenic thinking should also be examined in nonoffenders even if the levels of criminogenic thinking are lower than what is observed in offender samples. It is important to note that the relatively low levels of criminogenic thinking that Walters (2007) found in nonoffenders may still be important because these cognitive distortions could increase the probability that individuals will engage in problematic behaviors. Criminogenic thinking among nonoffenders has been found to be associated with various antisocial behaviors (e.g., aggression, property crimes; McCoy et al., 2006; Ragatz, Anderson, Fremouw, & Schwartz, 2011). Consequently, the purpose of Study 1 was to examine the associations between pathological personality traits and criminogenic thinking in a sample of community adults.

### 3.1. Method

#### 3.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 129 community adults from the United States who were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. Participants were asked to complete measures concerning pathological personality features and criminogenic thinking styles – along with other measures

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