



The profile of a criminal offender depicted by HEXACO personality traits



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ABSTRACT

Due to the operationalization of its factors, the HEXACO personality model could have explanatory potential in describing the personality of criminal offenders. Previous data and theory have suggested that the offenders profile should be based on decreased levels of the Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness traits. This profile is tested in the present research. We explored the relations between personality traits operationalized by HEXACO-PI-R and criminal behavior measured by self-reports, ratings and biographical data in the sample of male convicts ($N = 256$). Obtained data largely supported the hypothesized profile: these four traits correlated negatively with the criteria measures gathered by self-reports and ratings; Agreeableness and Conscientiousness were negatively associated with the third criterion. Lower levels of these four traits were also related to the common variance of all three criteria measures. Regression analyses showed that low Agreeableness is the best predictor of criminal behavior, since it had independent contribution to the prediction of all criteria. The findings provide further contribution regarding the personality roots of criminal behavior.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Personality traits related to criminal offending

Criminal behavior is an important social phenomenon, because it damages society in various ways: by harming individual physical, psychological and material resources. Stable offending is especially troublesome: criminal recidivists represent a greater danger to society compared to people who break the law only once. This made criminal behavior an important target to researchers and practitioners in social sciences who try to understand both offending behavior and its causes in order to prevent it or at least to change it. Over time, actuarial instruments specifically intended for the estimation of the risk to engage in criminal behavior or reoffending have been made (Loza, 2003). However, these measures are often made a theoretically, with the only intention to predict future behavior: they do not provide the information about the potential causes of antisocial behavior. On the other hand, personality traits received much attention as dispositional constructs which can help identify individuals who are prone to criminal behavior.

Personality structure can be described and operationalized in various ways; however, among the models of personality, the five-factor/big five structure has received much attention (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008; McCrae & Costa, 2008). It is comprised of five broad and comprehensive personality dimensions: Neuroticism (emotional instability), Extraversion (sociability, activity and positive affect), Agreeableness (cooperation

and gentleness), Conscientiousness (prudence and orderliness) and Openness to experience (creativity and inquisitiveness). Research regarding the description of a criminal offender in five factor terms has been quite equivocal in its findings. The data point to the conclusion that low levels of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are the best predictors of criminal behavior (Miller & Lynam, 2001; Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011). More precisely, individuals who tend to break the law tend to be less trustful, straightforward, compliant, modest, tender-minded and altruistic (low Agreeableness) and less competent, dutiful, disciplined, deliberated, achievement striving and orderly (low Conscientiousness) (Decuyper, De Pauw, De Fruyt, De Bolle, & De Clercq, 2009). Some research suggested that higher Neuroticism can be related to criminality, because offenders are higher in hostile attitudes and impulsivity (Le Couff & Toupin, 2009).

1.2. HEXACO personality traits and delinquent behavior

More than a decade ago, a model of personality which could be especially important for our understanding of the link between personality and crime, was obtained from “emic” lexical studies. The model was labeled HEXACO because it represents an acronym of the traits it incorporates: Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, eXtraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness (Ashton et al., 2004). The reason for additional interest regarding criminal behavior is obvious: the Honesty factor is represented by characteristics such as integrity, honesty, sense of fair play, loyalty and humility while the attributes which lie on the opposite pole of this dimension are mischief, hypocrisy, arrogance, cunning and greed (Lee & Ashton, 2006). By its content, it could be plausibly

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assumed that low Honesty should be related to criminal behavior. However, low Honesty is not the only additional candidate for the profile of a criminal offender derived from the HEXACO model. Empirical data showed that low Emotionality is a reliable correlate of various amoral and antisocial behavior (Book et al., 2016; de Vries & van Kampen, 2010; Mededović & Petrović, 2015). Thus, a profile of a criminal offender derived from the HEXACO personality model should be based on low Honesty, Emotionality, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness.

However, the validity of this profile was not tested directly by predicting criminal behavior. Several studies examined the relations between HEXACO traits and workplace delinquency (de Vries & van Gelder, 2015; Lee, Ashton, & de Vries, 2005). Obtained findings largely fit the expected pattern. Two studies explored the associations between the HEXACO model and self-reported delinquency in students (Ashton & Lee, 2008; Dunlop, Morrison, Koenig, & Silcox, 2012). The results of both studies converged to the hypothesized profile: Honesty, Emotionality, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness had negative correlations with delinquency. Among all of these studies, the relation between Honesty and delinquency had the highest magnitude, suggesting that Honesty is the best predictor of criminal behavior. Finally, only one study (as far as we are aware) compared imprisoned offenders with non-offenders (Rolison, Hanoach, & Gummerum, 2013). However, the results of this study showed significant deviations from the previous ones. Prisoners did have lower scores on Honesty and Conscientiousness, which fits the profile, but they also had lower scores on Openness and Extraversion followed by higher scores on Emotionality. There were no differences regarding the Agreeableness trait.

1.3. Goals of the present study

Understanding the role of personality in criminal offending represents an important scientific goal with a clear use in psychological practice. Among all of the personality models, the HEXACO structure shows high heuristic potential, primarily because of the Honesty-Humility trait, but the Emotionality trait seems to have a role in explaining delinquency too. Other traits that are involved in criminal behavior should be the same as the ones identified by research with the five-factor/big five personality structure: negative poles of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness traits. In the present research we aimed to test this psychological profile on adult prisoners, by predicting the “magnitude” of criminal behavior. Three criteria measures were examined, collected by different methodology, which represents an advantage of the research design. All of the analyses were conducted with the same hypothesis: criminal behavior should be predicted by low Honesty, Emotionality, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

The study included 256 male convicts with a mean age of 35 years ($SD = 9.65$). Participants were selected from two penitentiary institutions in Serbia. They participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Participants' education had the following distribution: 1.2% did not attend school; 2% attended elementary school, but did not finish it; 12.1% had completed elementary school; 16.8% started high school, but did not finish it; 41.8% had completed high school; 26.2% had higher education. However, all of the subjects who participated in the study were able to read and write. The majority of the participants (51.6%) were sentenced for criminal acts which involved violence (murder and attempted murder, robbery with usage of violence, grievous bodily harm, etc.) while the rest of them committed crimes such as robbery, unauthorized production, possession and distribution of narcotic substances, fraud, etc. Most of the participants were sentenced to 1–5 years in prison (59.7%), followed by 5–10 years sentences (23.7%),

while the rest of them served sentences longer than 10 years in prison (16.6%).

The self-report measures were administrated in groups which numbered around 20 participants. It was done sequentially, so the examiner was present during the data gathering in all groups. The next stage involved individual interviews with participants, lasting approximately for 1.3 h. Finally, the third stage involved extraction of relevant information from participants' prison files.

2.2. Measures

We used HEXACO-PI-R (Lee & Ashton, 2006) to explore general personality traits. It is a self-report inventory, consisting of 100 items, 16 per personality trait: Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness.

Self-reported delinquency is measured by SRP-4 Antisocial behavior scale (Paulhus, Neumann, Hare, Williams, & Hemphill, 2016). It also has 16 items. They depict various forms of antisocial and delinquent behavior. Both instruments have a standard 5-point Likert scale for responding where 1 indicates complete disagreement with the statement while 5 stands for complete agreement with the item.

We also gathered rating measures of criminal behavior, using the Antisocial scale of the Psychopathy Check List-Revised (PCL-R: Hare, 2003). The rating is based on the structured interview. After the interview the rater provides estimations on five indicators of Antisocial behavior which can range from 0 to 2 (0 indicates the absence of a given indicator, while 2 indicates the presence of an indicator in a large degree). The scale covers various aspects of criminal behavior including antisocial behavior in childhood and adolescence and heterogeneity of criminal acts. The validity of PCL-R subscales was established in previous research (Mededović, 2015).

Finally, we used biographical data taken from the participants' prison files. Four indicators were used as a measure of criminal recidivism: the number of committed crimes, number of lawful sentences, the number of times an individual served a prison sentence and the number of disciplinary sentences obtained in the institution. We counted and summed the events for every indicator per participant. In order to construct a singular measure of recidivism we subjected these indicators to Principal Component Analysis (PCA). As expected, one latent component was extracted with an eigenvalue of 2.16 and 53.94% explained variance of original indicators. The number of sentences had the highest loading on the component (.90), followed by the number of prison sentences (.86), the number of committed criminal acts (.83) and the number of disciplinary sentences (.36). The scores on this latent component were saved as a separate variable in the database.

Since it can be expected that all the measures of criminal behavior have positive correlations amongst themselves, we added one more criterion measure which would capture the common variance of these three variables. It was obtained by PCA of three measures of criminal behavior. As expected, only one component is extracted (eigenvalue = 1.94; 64.73% of original measures variance is explained). All measures of antisocial behavior had high loadings on the extracted component: .90 for rating measure, .80 for self-report, and .74 for antisocial behavior extracted from biographical data. The new variable was labeled as *Antisocial behavior - common variance*. This variable could help establish which personality traits are related to the shared features of different measures of criminal behavior.

It should be noted that HEXACO traits and self reported Antisocial behavior are measured on the whole sample, the rated measure was obtained from 174 individuals while the data from penitentiary files was collected from a subsample of 142 participants (the reason for the attrition was the fact that the data gathering was prolonged and during that time some participants were transferred to different institution or obtained a parole).

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