



The effects of temperament, psychopathy, and childhood trauma among delinquent youth: A test of DeLisi and Vaughn's temperament-based theory of crime

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ABSTRACT

Recent interest among criminologists on the construct of temperament has been fueled by DeLisi and Vaughn's (2014) temperament-based theory of antisocial behavior. Their theory suggests that core self-regulation capacity and negative emotionality are the most salient temperament features for understanding the emergence and maintenance of antisocial and violent behavior, even among offending populations. The present study tests the relative effects of these temperamental features along with psychopathic traits and trauma in their association with violent and non-violent delinquency in a sample of 252 juvenile offenders. Results from a series of negative binomial regression models indicate that temperament was uniformly more strongly associated with violent and non-violent delinquency than psychopathic traits and childhood traumatic events. Exploratory classification models suggested that temperament and psychopathy possessed similar predictive capacity, but neither surpassed prior history of violence and delinquency as a predictor of future offending. Overall, findings are supportive of DeLisi and Vaughn's temperament-based theory and suggest temperament as conceptualized and measured in the present study may play an important role as a risk factor for violent and non-violent delinquency.

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1. Introduction

Temperament, the usual ways that an individual regulates his or her emotions and behaviors and interacts with the environment, has been utilized as a conceptual framework to study behavioral functioning across human history. In the four humours typology consisting of choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, and melancholic types developed by Hippocrates and Galen (see, Arikha, 2007; Kagan, 1998), persons who were characterized as choleric were particularly liable for antisocial behavior given their generally angry and irritable disposition. The modern study of temperament has identified several temperamental dimensions that are associated with variance in conduct problems including activity level, adaptability, responses to novelty, rhythmicity, mood quality, task persistence, and others

(Kagan and Snidman, 2004; Morizot, 2015; Rothbart, 1989, 2007). From a criminological perspective, temperamental features that relate to core self-regulation capacity and negative emotionality are likely the most salient for understanding the emergence and maintenance of conduct problems.

Drawing on an extensive review of the temperament literature, DeLisi and Vaughn (2014a) advanced a general theory of antisocial behavior and criminal justice system involvement that employed effortful control and negative emotionality as the primary determinants of antisocial conduct. According to DeLisi and Vaughn (2014a, 2014b, 2015), persons who have conduct problems manifest three foundational problems. First, they have difficulty inhibiting instinctual or emotional stimuli in favor of socially appropriate behavioral responses. These impairments in effortful control emerge during infancy and toddlerhood and when the impairments are extreme reflect relative to absolute stability across the life span. Second, they experience high levels of negative affect or emotionality particularly the "hot or red" forms of emotions such as anger, hostility, and irritability relative to "cold or blue" forms of emotions such as anxiety and depression. Their emotional life has a negative,

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irritable, upset valence. Third, effortful control and negative emotionality interact often dynamically.¹ Thus persons whose behavioral repertoires are dominated by both low effortful control and high negative emotionality are not only at significant risk for conduct problems, but also at significant risk to elicit negative reactions from others. According to DeLisi and Vaughn (2014a, p. 14),

“the interaction of these specific temperamental features enhances the likelihood that an individual will produce emotional and behavioral content that is poorly received by others. As a result, these individuals are subject to social disapproval and likely to experience informal and formal social control mechanisms. Overwhelmingly, these interactions are aversive and increase the likelihood of additional antisocial behavioral responses.”

Preliminary tests of DeLisi and Vaughn's theory have thus far been favorable. Using data from 27,712 adjudicated youth, Baglivio, Wolff, DeLisi, Vaughn, and Piquero (2016) found that effortful control and negative emotionality were associated with recidivism. Moreover, youth who evinced both low effortful control and high negative emotionality and thus had more extreme temperament profiles had among the highest recidivism and were quicker to recidivate than their peers. The temperament effects withstood controls for age, gender, race, substance abuse, antisocial peers, arrest onset age, prior violent and property felonies, residential placement history, and prior probation, redirection, day treatment, and aftercare. In a related study, Wolff, Baglivio, Piquero, Vaughn, and DeLisi (2016) found that temperamental features were linked to recidivism among juvenile offenders in the expected direction even in multilevel models that also considered community disadvantage. Across model specifications, effortful control and negative emotionality indices were significantly associated with delinquency and recidivism.

Drawing on data from 221 male violent offenders incarcerated in prison in Italy, Garofalo and Velotti (2017) found that negative emotionality was significantly associated with physical aggression, anger, and hostility. In addition, inmates that scored medium or high on negative urgency, which is the ability to control impulsive behavior when experiencing negative emotional arousal, were also significantly more physically aggressive.

Other recent studies using temperament measures that were related to effortful control and/or negative emotionality have also been linked to conduct problems among diverse populations. These include preschool children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (Ezpeleta, Granero, de la Osa, Trepato, and Domènech, 2016), preschool children in Canada (Mathesius, Lussier, and Corrado, 2016), participants in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Walters, 2014), participants in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-Child Study (Walters, 2015), and a large-scale study of >60,000 juvenile offenders in Florida (Baglivio, Wolff, Piquero, and Epps, 2015). For instance, Wolff and Baglivio (2016) examined the associations between childhood trauma, negative emotionality, and juvenile recidivism and found that nearly half the effect of childhood trauma on continued delinquency offending operated through negative emotionality suggesting that it is a powerful moderator in antisocial development. The common denominator in these studies is that effortful control and negative emotionality, particularly anger and hostility are robust risk

factors for behavioral maladjustment and diverse manifestations of antisocial behavior.

2. Current Focus

In sum, criminologists' recent forays into temperament research have shown the value of temperament constructs, and tests of DeLisi and Vaughn's (2014a) general theory have thus far been favorable. The current study sought to further test the association between effortful control, negative emotionality, and diverse forms of delinquency among institutionalized delinquents using a different measure than extant studies and including robust controls, such as psychopathy, childhood trauma, and demographics.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedures

The participants include a non-probability sample of 252 adolescent youths in one male-only ($n = 152$) and one female-only ($n = 100$) private non-profit long-term residential placement facilities for juvenile offenders in Western Pennsylvania (Shook, Vaughn, Goodkind, and Johnson, 2011). Data collection at the boys' facility occurred from June 2009 through August 2009. Criteria for boys being enrolled in the study included being between 14 and 18 years old and having been in the facility between 3 and 12 months when recruitment started. Data collection at the girls' facility occurred over a 4-month period from October 2009 until February 2010.

The boys and girls in this sample were extensively involved in diverse forms of antisocial conduct and have commensurately extensive juvenile justice histories. In terms of mean levels of delinquency and youth violence, the typical youth in the current sample committed >15 acts of delinquency and nearly nine acts of serious violence, such as gang fighting, hitting a teacher, hitting a parent, hitting other students, and attacking another person in the prior year. Approximately 70% of the sample was drug sellers (Shook et al., 2011). Overall, the characteristics of the study sample are representative of previous studies of residentially incarcerated youth with regard to the youths' offense history and psychopathology (Boduszek, Dzingra, and Debowska, 2016; Caudill and Trulson, 2016; Debowska et al., 2017; Elington et al., 2015; Fox, Perez, Cass, Baglivio, and Epps, 2015; Shaffer, McCuish, Corrado, Behnken, and DeLisi, 2015; Trulson, Haerle, Caudill, and DeLisi, 2016).

Data were collected in accordance with protocols approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pittsburgh. After the study was described by facility staff and the youth expressed interest, a supervisor provided approval for the youth to take part in the study and the youth were referred to research staff. Prior to administering the instrument, the interviewer explained the purpose of the study and received assent from each youth (consent from those 18 and 19 years old). Structured one-on-one interviews were carried out by trained graduate students using Computer-Assisted Survey Interview (CASI) techniques. Interviewers completed an intensive one-day training session and an interview editor was on-site as youth were interviewed to minimize interviewer omissions and errors.

All interviews were conducted in rooms that provided private areas where confidential interviews could be conducted simultaneously with between three to five youth. The CASI data collection procedures allowed the respondent to have each question read to them supplemented by response cards. There was an on-site data editor available during the interviews to help answer any questions and provide quality control to data collection procedures. Overall, >95% of those referred to the research team assented to and completed the interview at both facilities.

¹ Copious research has shown that effortful control and/or negative emotionality are significantly associated with externalizing behaviors across the life-course including early childhood (Murray and Kochanska, 2002; Olson, Sameroff, Kerr, Lopez, and Wellman, 2005), childhood (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Lengua, Bush, Long, Kovacs, and Trancik, 2008; Martel and Nigg, 2006; Wang, Chassin, Eisenberg, and Spinrad, 2015), adolescence (DeLisi et al., 2010; Fine, Mahler, Steinberg, Frick, and Cauffman, 2016), and adulthood (Caspi et al., 1994; Hochstetler, DeLisi, and Pratt, 2010; Morris, Carriaga, Diamond, Piquero, and Piquero, 2012; Ousey, Wilcox, and Schreck, 2015). When deficits in effortful control and emotional regulation are severe, they tend to be life-long and pathological in their behavioral implications (Caspi et al., 2016; Clark, 2005; DeLisi, 2013; Moffitt et al., 2011; Nigg, 2016; Watson and Clark, 1984).

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