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Short Communication

Predicting adult involvement in crime: Personality measures are significant, socio-economic measures are not

Cáit O'Riordan, Michael O'Connell *

School of Psychology, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Comprehensive research into criminal careers along with the growing consensus around the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality traits have re-established personality measures as important predictors of criminal activity. A number of studies of specialist groups have concluded that agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and extraversion are linked to crime. Data were drawn from the National Child Development Study. Experiencing a criminal justice sanction in mid-adulthood was regressed on FFM traits, Agreeableness, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Intellect and Emotional Stability (Neuroticism), as well as socio-economic variables linked by criminologists to crime. Results indicated that significant predictors in this representative sample of 7205 adults, were four of the five personality traits (but not Intellect), gender, experience of school problems, but none of the socio-economic measures. This is consistent with the evidence that social class has only a minor role in predicting criminality, contrary to previous assumptions.

1. Introduction

1.1. The rise and fall of personality and criminality research

Personality traits were once a legitimate source of explanation for some of the individual differences in criminal behaviour. Hans Eysenck's 'Big Three' model of criminal behaviour represented a temporary peak of interest in the role of personality in crime in the 1970s. But the personality model fell into disfavour and was neglected.

Andrews and Bonta (2010) have argued convincingly that the key factor in the neglect of personality in theories of criminal causation was that criminologists simply disliked it on political grounds. Despite substantial reviews of studies examining variables predicting criminality that showed that personality effects were about twice the size of social class background effects (Schuessler & Cressy, 1950; Tennenbaum, 1977; Waldo & Dinitz, 1967), social class, poverty and inequality remained central to mainstream theories of crime causation, e.g. "social inequality is the main cause of crime" (DeKeresedy & Schwartz, 1996, p. 463), or "the linkage of poverty and crime is inexorable, despite the inability of researchers to establish it at the individual level" (Short, 1991, p. 501). As Andrews and Bonta (2010, p. 186) noted, the continuing "dominance of class of origin in mainstream criminology ... was not based on evidence" but on political ideology.

It should be noted that the resistance to personality as predictive of criminal activity held true for what was regarded as dimensions of the normal personality. There has been a wide acceptance of the idea that at least a minority of criminals had abnormal or pathological personalities. DSM-IV and DSM-V include the category of Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD), characterised by lack of empathy and impulsivity. Hare (1990) proposed a checklist for characteristics of psychopathy such as glibness and parasitic lifestyle. Both APD and psychopathy are thought to be predictive of criminal behaviour, general recidivism and violent recidivism. However, they are conceptualised chiefly as personality disorders rather than as dimensions of the typical personality.

1.2. Research into the Five Factor Model and criminal activity

Ozer and Benet-Martínez (2006) have argued that the research consensus achieved around the five higher-level dimensions (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness) of the normal personality proposed in McCrae and John's (1992) Five Factor Model (FFM) has been vital in making inroads into the prediction of different types of outcomes associated with personality structure. However, Farrington and Welsh (2007, p. 45) noted that "because of its newness, the Big Five personality model has rarely been related to offending." Pioneering studies have tended to focus on atypical samples such as students

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +353 1 716 8499; fax: +353 1 716 1181.
E-mail addresses: Caitlin.o-riordan.1@ucdconnect.ie (C. O'Riordan), Michael.f.oconnell@ucd.ie (M. O'Connell).

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and prisoners (e.g. Wiebe, 2004), or on certain types of specialist offending such as aggression (Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011); these have found Agreeableness (−), Conscientiousness (−), Neuroticism (+) and Extraversion (+) to be linked with offending behaviour.

1.3. The aim of this study

The aim of this study was to examine the association between personality traits and the receipt of Criminal Justice Sanctions in a large, nationally representative sample. Specifically, the intention was to include the FFM traits in a multivariate analysis, while also entering the socio-demographic variables traditionally identified by criminologists as risk factors for criminal involvement: educational attainment, school problems, background social class, occupational status, birth weight, and family size (see Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2007, chap. 2). The analysis concludes by arguing that personality traits are much *more* important than most socio-demographic, and all socio-economic, variables in the prediction of criminal justice involvement.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This research draws from the National Child Development Study (NCDS), a longitudinal study of all the 17,634 people born in one week in March, 1958, in England, Scotland and Wales. The NCDS gathers information on the physical, educational, social, and psychological development of participants. The sample thus has the desirable features of being both large, and representative of a national population. However, there was attrition in the sample size at each of its sweeps and this attrition is non-random. Predictors of non-response in subsequent sweeps of the NCDS are male gender, poor reading and writing skills, experience of unemployment and high job turnover, and living with parents in mid-adulthood (Hawkes & Plewis, 2006). While these are also the variables often implicated in crimogenic behaviour, and may mean the NCDS underestimates the proportion of offenders in the general population, the effects of their under-representation here are benign, since they impact upon the dependent variable, while the focus of the paper is on the independent variables or predictors, which should be similarly affected by the non-response bias.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Dependent measure

In NCDS sweep 6, participants – aged 42 – were asked a series of questions about whether they had received any criminal justice sanctions in the previous decade. Specifically there were asked if they had received a police warning, a caution (a formal warning which, while not a criminal conviction, does form part of a person's criminal record), had been arrested, or had been found guilty in court of any criminal offence. A respondent answering yes to any of these questions was assigned a value of '1' on a measure called CJS (criminal justice sanction, i.e. any formal penalty applied to an individual by some branch of the criminal justice system ranging from a police warning to a custodial sentence. These can include non-minor traffic offences.) while those who answered 'no' were assigned a value of '0.' Of a sample of 8549 respondents who answered, 14.0% were returned with a CJS score of 1, of whom 71.8% (n = 862) were male and 28.2% (339) were female.

2.2.2. Independent measures

2.2.2.1. Personality measures. The International Personality Item Pool Representation of the NEO PI-R™ (IPIP, Goldberg et al., 2006), was administered in sweep 8 (2008, cohort aged 50) and used 50 questions to assess personality traits. The responses to these 50 items were summed and the NCDS dataset provided derived scores for the 'Big Five' factors, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Emotional Stability (or Neuroticism), and Intellect (rather than 'Openness'), ranging from 10 to 50. Only the composite or derived personality measures are provided in the NCDS dataset so it is not possible to calculate measures of reliability. However, Gow, Whiteman, Pattie, and Deary (2005, p. 325) in a detailed analysis of their psychometric properties reported that "the 5 IPIP scales have high internal consistency". While there are claims that Big Five personality factors are stable over the course of the lifetime (Terracciano, Costa, & McCrae, 2006), a competing view is that there are consistent changes in young adulthood linked to increases in social dominance, conscientiousness and emotional stability (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005). However the assumption of broad personality stability between the ages of 42 and 50 made here is still reasonable – both because change is associated with younger cohorts, but also because the change that does occur "is linked to the universal tasks of social living in young adulthood" (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006, p. 18) and thus should be broadly consistent for most respondents.

2.2.2.2. Sex. From sweep 0, at birth, the sex of the respondent was obtained, along with their birth weight, expressed in ounces.

2.2.2.3. Family background. From sweep 2 – aged 11 – family size was derived, as well as the social class of male head of household recorded in a 7 point ordinal scale based on his occupation (with lower values indicating higher social class).

2.2.2.4. Social status of respondent. From sweep 5 – aged 33 – the social status of the respondent based on the Cambridge classification of their occupation was obtained. With this measure, higher status occupations were allotted higher scores in a possible range from 0 to 100. This sweep was chosen as the period to assess social status based on occupation as the respondent was asked to recall any criminal justice sanctions in the interval between sweep 5 and sweep 6.

2.2.2.5. School problems. From sweep 6 – aged 42 – the respondent was asked to recall any educational sanctions they had experienced in school. Common minor school sanctions in the UK include detention after school or a letter to parents and these were not assessed. However more serious sanctions were assessed. A school principal may suspend a child who has broken important school rules for up to 45 days in a school year. Those students who are deemed to have displayed highly and consistently disruptive behaviour in class can be permanently excluded (expelled) from the school by the school's governing board. Those answering yes to either suspension or expulsion were assigned a value of '1' on a measure labeled 'School Problems', while those answering no to both were assigned a score of '0.'

2.2.2.6. Highest educational qualification. From sweep 8 – aged 50 – the respondent's highest academic qualification was identified and coded by NCDS researchers into a 0–6 ordinal scale, ranging from no academic qualifications to postgraduate and higher qualifications.

To recap, the dependent variable assessed whether a respondent had received a criminal justice sanction aged between 33 and 42. The independent variables included both personality measures (the 'Big Five', assessed at age 42), as well as a number of socio-demographic measures typically included in key criminological literature as predictive of (higher) criminal involvement – (male) sex, (low) birth weight, (low) paternal social status, (larger) family size, (more) school problems, (low) occupational status aged 32, and (few) academic qualifications. Of a maximum possible