



## Do personality traits affect responsiveness of juvenile delinquents to treatment?



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The aim of the present study was to examine the moderating role of Big Five personality traits in short and long term effectiveness of MultiSystemic Therapy (MST) for serious and persistent juvenile delinquents.

**Method:** Data of a randomized controlled trial ( $N = 256$ ) were used to examine the research question.

**Results:** Extraversion, Emotional Stability and Openness did not moderate short term effectiveness of MST, but Conscientiousness and Agreeableness did: MST was most effective for highly conscientious and highly agreeable juvenile delinquents. Personality did not moderate the effectiveness of MST on aggression or the long-term effectiveness of MST.

**Conclusion:** This study shows the importance of personality traits for short-term treatment outcomes, effectiveness of MST differs for high/low Agreeableness and Conscientiousness.

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## 1. Introduction

As juvenile delinquency is a costly problem for societies, it is crucial to identify effective treatments for delinquent youths. MultiSystemic Therapy (MST) is an intensive, ambulant, multimodal treatment for severe and persistent antisocial juvenile delinquents (Henggeler et al., 1986). MST is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological model and focuses both on the juvenile, and on the systems in which the juvenile functions, for example by supporting parents in improving their parenting skills (e.g., Clingempeel & Henggeler, 2002). Several studies have shown that MST is effective in reducing symptomatology (e.g., Henggeler, 2011). However, the effect size for reduction of delinquent behavior tends to be small (Van der Stouwe, Asscher, Stams, Deković, & Van der Laan, 2014). Although this may indicate that the effectiveness of MST is rather limited, Kraemer, Frank, and Kupfer (2006) pointed out that while treatment effectiveness for the total, often heterogeneous group of participants may be low, some homogeneous subgroups may be identified for whom

treatment is much more effective. The focus of studies then shifts from: "Does it work?" to "For whom does it work?" (Roth & Fonagy, 2006).

Many studies examining treatment for juvenile delinquents have included potential moderators of treatment effectiveness (e.g., Henggeler, Clingempeel, Brondino, & Pickrel, 2002). These research efforts have been mostly limited to ad hoc investigations of moderators that were simply available, such as demographic characteristics of the juvenile. However, as Kazdin (2007) emphasized, it is important that moderators are selected based on theoretical assumptions regarding their associations with the outcome under study, rather than simple availability. Choosing moderators based on theory increases insight into the applicability of treatments for specific groups, thereby improving effectiveness, and at the same time reduces the likelihood of 'chance' findings.

Personality, the core of individual differences in ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling, that is relatively stable across time and situations (Shiner & Caspi, 2003), has been relatively neglected in studies of treatment effectiveness. However, it is a central concept in several theoretical accounts of the etiology of behavior problems (Tackett, 2006), with the most influential model positing that personality as a stable, dispositional factor represents an individual vulnerability that makes some individuals more likely than others

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to develop behavior problems. In this study, we use the Big Five model to assess personality, describing personality along five dimensions or traits: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional stability (vs Neuroticism), and Openness-to-experience. Agreeableness and Conscientiousness can be expected to be associated to behavioral problems such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and Conduct Disorder (CD), as individuals who are low on Agreeableness are easily angered and lack empathy, and low Conscientiousness indicates low constraint and a tendency to act impulsively. A meta-analysis has shown that low Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are indeed most strongly linked with antisocial behavior and aggression in adults (Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011). Low Emotional stability was also associated with both antisocial behavior and aggression, whereas lower Extraversion and Openness were uniquely associated with aggression. In a study of children, De Haan, Prinzie, and Deković (2010) also reported associations between both rule-breaking and aggressive behavior and low Benevolence (the child trait most related to adult Agreeableness), and Conscientiousness. Low Emotional stability and high (rather than low) Extraversion were especially linked to aggression.

Although personality may be a vulnerability factor for problem behavior, theoretical accounts have also stressed the importance of the context in this association. Thomas and Chess (1977) posited that a goodness-of-fit between children's characteristics and the environment is important in determining whether problems will eventually develop. Children with certain temperament traits, which can be considered a precursor of later developing personality traits, may be especially likely to develop problems when they experience harsh and inconsistent parenting behavior for instance.

Although theoretically compelling, relatively few studies have provided evidence of these interactive effects between child personality and parenting. Child conscientiousness and benevolence (the child trait most related to agreeableness in adults) have been found to predict externalizing problems especially in the context of negative parenting (Van Leeuwen, Mervielde, Braet, & Bosmans, 2004). In another study, children who were low on Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to experience were more likely to become aggressive when they experienced overreactive parenting (De Haan et al., 2010). Low Agreeableness has been linked with physical aggression in the context of negative parenting, whereas low Extraversion and Openness were related to relational aggression (Smack, Kushner, & Tackett, 2015). As some personality characteristics leave children especially vulnerable to negative environmental factors, these same personality characteristics may lead children to benefit especially from an intervention aimed at ameliorating this environment.

In addition to the importance of a person-environment fit, O'Connor and Dvorak (2001) have pointed attention to the fact that some personality characteristics may leave children unaffected by their environment. For these children there does not appear to be a (parenting-) environment that would fit their personality in such a way that they do not exhibit problem behavior. Although this type of interaction was very rare, when it did occur, it indicated that children (especially boys) low on Conscientiousness and Agreeableness displayed problems regardless of whether they experienced a positive or a negative parenting environment (O'Connor & Dvorak, 2001). This type of effect was more often found for rule-breaking than for aggression.

Although Big Five personality traits are rarely included as moderators of treatment effectiveness, a notable exception is the study of Stoltz et al. (2013), showing that less conscientious children indeed benefited less from an intervention targeted at reducing externalizing problems. However, they did not find an effect for Agreeableness. Rather, children who were high on Extraversion

also benefited less, indicating that high, rather than low Extraversion may indeed be linked to aggression in children.

Somewhat more studies have considered psychopathic traits as moderators of treatment effectiveness, which can be considered a combination of extremely low Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Emotional stability, with additional associations to high Extraversion (Lynam et al., 2005). Several of these studies have found evidence for the notion of psychopathic traits leaving children unaffected by intervention efforts. For example, Hawes and Dadds (2005) found that boys who scored higher on callous-unemotionality were less responsive to disciplining within a parent-training intervention than boys who were lower on this trait. In terms of decreasing violent behavior however, Skeem, Monahan, and Mulvey (2002), concluded that patients with high scores on psychopathic traits were as likely to benefit from treatment as those with lower scores. In a previous investigation of MST, Asscher et al. (2013) found that MST was more effective than Treatment As Usual (TAU) in decreasing externalizing problems for juveniles scoring lower on callous-unemotional and narcissistic traits, but not for more callous-unemotional and narcissistic juveniles. In sum, competing predictions can be made regarding effectiveness of MST for youth with a vulnerable personality type; on the one hand, MST may be less effective for them as their problems are so strongly determined by their personality, that focusing on ameliorating negative contextual factors may not make much difference for them. On the other hand, their vulnerable personality type may also make them especially vulnerable to the negative effects of these contextual factors, and they may be especially likely to benefit from intervention efforts aimed at ameliorating these. The present study aims to examine empirically whether, and how juveniles' personality traits moderate the effectiveness of MST in reducing behavior problems. The findings of this study may help program providers to adjust intervention efforts to subgroups of juveniles with different personality characteristics.

In previous publications, we showed that MST was effective in changing self- and parent reported externalizing behavior problems (Asscher et al., 2013, see also Table 3). However, MST was not effective in reducing official delinquency data (Asscher et al., 2014), and the effect sizes for changes in externalizing behavior problems were only moderate ( $d$ s ranged from 0.06 to 0.36, depending of the type of externalizing problem behavior assessed and the source of information). The current study focuses on the moderating effects of personality traits on the short-term effectiveness of MST for serious and persistent juvenile delinquents in decreasing symptoms of behavior problems. We focus both on symptoms of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Conduct Disorder (CD) representing the categorical classification of behavior problems of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, as well as on the conceptualization of behavior problems in terms of aggression and rule-breaking behavior, as differentiated in the dimensional approach posited by Achenbach (1991). These outcomes represent distinct subtypes of externalizing problems (Frick & Nigg, 2012), and each of these types of problems may show unique profiles of associations to personality traits (Jones et al., 2011). For example, given the associations of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness with antisocial behavior and aggression, one can expect differential effectiveness for juveniles low on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness in reducing symptoms of aggression, rule-breaking behavior, ODD and CD. For other personality traits the expectations were less clear. Emotional Stability may also be linked to ODD, CD, aggression or rule-breaking behavior, albeit less strongly. Extraversion and Openness to experience may be related to ODD and rule-breaking behavior only. Additionally, we investigate whether MST has long-term effects on official delinquency data for children with certain personality characteristics. Children

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