

Personality Correlates and Childhood Trauma Among Indian Prisoners

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Abstract: Childhood trauma has emerged as a critical determinant in shaping criminal behavior, with research indicating a strong association between early adverse experiences and later criminal behavioral tendencies. This study aimed to examine the relationship between childhood trauma and personality traits among adult prisoners in India, using the Five Factor Model (FFM) as a theoretical framework for personality. Employing a cross-sectional design, data were collected from 201 prisoner participants across two Indian prisons through purposive sampling. Standardized tools, including the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short Form (CTQ-SF) and NEO Five Factor Inventory-3 (NEO-FFI-3), were used to assess trauma exposure and personality dimensions respectively. Results of Spearman's rho correlation revealed that neuroticism was positively correlated with all forms of abuse and neglect, while agreeableness and conscientiousness were negatively associated with emotional and physical trauma. Extraversion was significantly negatively correlated only with emotional neglect, and openness showed no significant associations. These findings suggest that childhood trauma may contribute to the development of maladaptive personality traits—such as heightened emotional reactivity, reduced empathy, and poor self-regulation—which in turn may increase the risk of antisocial and criminal behavior. The study highlights the need of trauma-informed assessments and interventions in correctional settings and thus highlights the relevance of personality profiling in understanding criminal behavior within diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: Abuse, Personality, Prisoners, Trauma.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Childhood trauma represents a critical area of investigation within the field of criminology and forensic psychology, as it is increasingly recognized as a significant contributing factor to criminal behavior and recidivism. Research consistently highlights that individuals exposed to childhood trauma—whether abuse or neglect—are two to six times more likely to engage in criminal activities during adulthood compared to those without such histories (Kim et al., 2016). Notably, neglect has emerged as a more potent predictor of recidivism than abuse, maintaining significance even after accounting for variables like family dynamics, peer relationships, academic performance, mental health, and substance use. These findings have reinforced the importance of investigating early adverse experiences as potential precursors to criminal behavior [1] [2]. In addition, a growing body of research suggests that personality traits—once peripheral in criminological aspects—play a mediating

role in the trauma-offending linkage, thus opening new areas for psychological profiling and risk assessment [3].

While classical criminological theories largely overlooked personality, contemporary perspectives increasingly consider individual personality traits as vital contributors to antisocial behavior. Structural models, such as Eysenck's three-factor theory (psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism), Tellegen's dimensions of affectivity and constraint, and the Five Factor Model (FFM) by Costa and McCrae (1985, 1992), have provided the theoretical foundation for this shift. Eysenck proposed that criminal conduct is more likely among individuals who are emotionally unstable, extraverted, and high in psychoticism. This model suggests that psychoticism consistently correlates with offending, while extraversion and neuroticism show age-dependent effects.

Personality traits have been shown to predict criminal behavior across various demographic backgrounds [4]. In General Strain Theory, it has been demonstrated that individuals with high levels of negative emotionality and low levels of self-restraint are more susceptible to delinquency under strain (Agnew et al., 2002). Supporting this view, Hollist et al. (2009) demonstrated that negative emotions increased the effect of maltreatment on delinquency, and when controlled, reduced this association, emphasizing emotional states as a crucial link between trauma and criminality. Among various personality models, the Five Factor Model (FFM) has also been widely applied to examine behaviors such as aggression, antisocial tendencies, and criminal activity. Notably, low Agreeableness and Conscientiousness combined with high Neuroticism have been associated with acts of violence, vandalism, and theft [6]. Additionally, traits like Neuroticism and Openness have been linked to histories of childhood abuse in both sexual and non-sexual offenders [7].

➤ *Significance of the study*

Limited empirical studies have concurrently explored how different forms of childhood trauma interact with personality dimensions to shape offending trajectories, particularly within the Indian context. Furthermore, while the Five Factor Model has been widely applied in Western populations, its relevance and applicability in diverse cultural and socio-economic settings remain underexplored. Thus, the present study aims to examine the interrelationship between childhood trauma and personality traits in influencing criminal behavior. By integrating structural models of personality and trauma theory—especially General Strain Theory—this research seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of prisoner profiles. This has important implications not only for academic advancement but also for developing rehabilitative and therapeutic interventions within correctional settings.

II. OBJECTIVE

To determine the relationship between early childhood traumatic experiences and personality correlates among prisoners.

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ *Study Design*

It was a cross-sectional study which was conducted using purposive sampling technique.

➤ *Sample*

The study included 201 adult prisoners from two prisons of India. The details pertaining to the specific prisons from where the data was collected, has been kept anonymous in order to maintain legal protocols and confidentiality. The inclusion criteria primarily included male and female prisoners within an age group of 18-60 years, who were well-versed in Hindi language. Those below 18 years or above 60 years, with history of any neurological or psychotic disturbances, head trauma,

epilepsy, developmental disorders, were excluded from the study.

➤ *Tools Used*

Socio-demographic details including age, gender, religion, education (literate or illiterate), marital status, occupation, family type (whether nuclear or joint), substance use history were taken. Subsequently, other questionnaires were provided to the participants.

The tools were translated in Hindi language for the convenience of the participants and then back-translated to original language for accuracy.

• *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short Form*

This scale was originally developed by Bernstein & Fink (1998), including 28-item self-report measure to assess five specific types of traumas which included emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect. It is a 5 – point Likert scale with 1 being “Never true” to 5 = “Very often true” and can be administered among individuals aged 12 years and older. The scale has a significant test-retest reliability and internal consistency from 0.66 to 0.92 and convergent validity from 0.79 to 0.86 with other trauma specific assessments.

• *NEO Five Factor Inventory – 3*

The NEO-FFI-3 is a brief, 60-item version of the original NEO Personality Inventory designed to efficiently assess the five major personality dimensions as proposed by the Five-Factor Model—Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. It is appropriate for individuals aged 12 and above. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, typically ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Respondents indicate their level of agreement with each statement using options such as SD (Strongly Disagree), D (Disagree), N (Neutral), A (Agree), and SA (Strongly Agree). The internal consistency reliability of the inventory across these forms ranges from .72 to .88.

➤ *Procedure*

The research was approved by the Institute’s Ethics Committee. Permission was taken from the prison authorities followed by jail superintendent for data collection. Upon receiving the approvals, an informed consent was obtained which was prepared using WHO (World Health Organization) guidelines for clinical studies from the participants who voluntarily accepted to participate in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was maintained. The freedom to withdraw their consent at any stage during data collection was given to all the participants.

➤ *Data Analysis*

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20 was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, frequency and percentage were calculated using the software. Spearman’s rho correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between childhood trauma and personality.

IV. RESULTS

➤ Demographic Profile

The demographic characteristics of the sample showed that nearly half of the participants were young adults between 18-30 years age-group (47.4%), with male participants dominating the sample (93%). Over half of the participants were married (51.3%), and 34% were the eldest in their families with respect to birth order. Most belonged to nuclear family (55%). Substantial participants were illiterate (26%), with 60% having skilled labour jobs prior to being accused or convicted. Additionally, alcohol use (35%) emerged as the most commonly reported form of substance use.

➤ Previous Criminal Record

When examining previous interactions with the criminal justice system, around 17% of the inmates reported prior offenses, with 9.6% having committed one offense and 7.5% involved in multiple offenses. Although the majority of participants were involved with the legal system for the first time, a small yet significant segment showed signs of repeated offending, pointing to concerns around recidivism.

➤ Type of crime committed

In terms of the nature of crimes committed, majority were charged under IPC sections related to crimes against the human body (69.3%). This was followed by other IPC offenses (28.5%), POCSO Act violations (20.2%), and property crimes (12.7%). A smaller percentage of individuals were involved in financial crimes (5.7%), drug-related offenses under the NDPS Act (4.4%), and public order violations (3.1%). This highlights the dominance of violent and serious criminal charges among the sample population.

➤ Correlation Analysis

The results of the Spearman's rho correlation analysis revealed distinct associations between childhood trauma and personality traits. Neuroticism was positively and significantly correlated with emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional neglect, indicating heightened emotional instability among those exposed to early trauma. Extraversion showed a significant negative correlation only with emotional neglect, suggesting that emotionally neglected individuals may exhibit social withdrawal and limited interpersonal engagement. No significant associations were found between trauma and openness to experience, implying that this trait may be shaped more by other environmental or cognitive factors. Agreeableness demonstrated significant negative correlations with emotional abuse, physical abuse, and emotional neglect, highlighting a tendency toward distrust and antagonism in those exposed to such experiences. Lastly, conscientiousness was negatively associated with emotional abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect, suggesting that trauma-exposed individuals may struggle with impulse control, goal-directed behavior, and organizational skills—traits essential for societal functioning and desistance from crime. These patterns

emphasize the psychological effects of childhood trauma on personality development among prisoners.

V. DISCUSSION

This study builds upon previous findings by emphasizing strong connections between early traumatic experiences and the development of maladaptive personality traits among individuals involved in criminal behavior. High levels of neuroticism were positively associated with multiple forms of abuse and neglect, indicating a tendency toward emotional instability and heightened stress reactivity. Emotional neglect was linked with lower extraversion, aligning with General Strain Theory, which suggests that such individuals may internalize stress, resulting in social withdrawal. No significant correlation was found between openness and trauma, implying that this trait may be shaped more by environmental or cognitive factors. Lower levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness were significantly related to emotional and physical trauma, suggesting these early experiences may disrupt the development of empathy, trust, and self-control thus exacerbating delinquent and anti-social tendencies. The findings provide valuable insights into how early traumatic experiences may shape the adult personality traits. The findings indicating the type of personality dimensions could be possible contributing factors towards aggressive or antisocial behaviors and a greater likelihood of reoffending. Thus, future studies could benefit exploring other influential factors and expand the existing literature by conducting the study on a larger sample for better generalizability. Overall, the results also point the importance of trauma-sensitive interventions that consider individual personality profiles in prison rehabilitation programs for the better reintegration of prisoners into society.

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