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**To cite this article:** Juan Antonio Becerra-García , Ana García-León & Vincent Egan (2012) Childhood abuse history differentiates personality in sex offenders, The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology, 23:1, 61-66, DOI: [10.1080/14789949.2011.634020](https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2011.634020)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2011.634020>



Published online: 08 Dec 2011.



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## Childhood abuse history differentiates personality in sex offenders

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*(Received 6 April 2011; final version received 17 October 2011)*

This study examines the influence of abuse in childhood in the personality of Spanish adult sex offenders. Fifty sex offenders were evaluated using the NEO-Five Factor Inventory and a brief interview for the experience of childhood abuse. Sex offenders who had experienced a abusive childhood had higher scores for neuroticism and openness, and lower scores for conscientiousness, whereas child molesters who had experienced abusive childhoods were higher in openness; sex offenders against adults who had abusive childhoods had higher neuroticism than sex offenders against adults without abusive childhoods. These findings indicate that childhood experience differentiates characteristic profiles of normal personality traits in sex offenders by their offence type. The type of childhood is a more theoretically meaningful construct than the type of sex offence committed by which to infer differences in normal personality traits among sexual offenders.

**Keywords:** childhood; sex offenders; child molesters; personality; Five Factor Model

### Introduction

Sex offenders are much more likely to report having been sexually, physically and emotionally abused in childhood than non-sex offenders (Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto, 2009). Although different studies indicate the influence of childhood abuse history on personality (Maniglio, 2009), fewer studies have taken into account the study of personality in sex offenders in conjunction with their history of abuse in childhood.

The study of personality in sex offenders has been approached using the type of offence committed as a categorical differentiating variable along with psychopathological constructs of personality, but this has been unable to consistently distinguish sexual from other types of offender (Davis & Archer, 2010). Though many abused children do not show personality

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psychopathology later in life (Paris, 1998), childhood abuse may affect their personality subclinically. For this reason, studying normal personality traits in sex offenders may help clarify the effects of childhood abuse on personality.

The Five Factor Model (FFM) is a dimensional approach that describes five broad parameters of human personality: neuroticism (N); extraversion (E); openness (O); agreeableness (A) and conscientiousness (C) (Costa & McCrae, 1992). This model is applicable for studying the effect of childhood abuse on personality. For example, studies with samples from the general population have shown a relationship between abusive events occurring in childhood and FFM personality traits such as high N and high O (Allen & Lauterbach, 2007). Awareness of the FFM model has practical implications for risk management in forensic contexts. For example, low A and high N are important for predicting and differentiating types of aggression (Egan & Lewis, 2011); and high N, low A and C traits predict risk of criminal activities and arrest (Samuels et al., 2004).

This study examines the influence of childhood abuse on normal personality traits in Spanish sexual offenders, examining whether using information related to childhood abuse and victim preference differentiates personality in sex offenders. We compared FFM-based personality traits for sex offenders who have offended against adults or children, classifying them as having had abusive childhood or not.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

The sample comprised 50 male adult prisoners (age range 21–70 years; mean age  $46.00 \pm 10.08$ ) incarcerated for sexual offences in several closed prisons in Southern Spain. Of all participants, 46% had primary education, 16% had secondary education, 4% had university education and 34% had competency but did not have any qualification.

Participants were categorised by predominant prior offence history into two groups: sex offenders against adults or against children. Sixty-six per cent ( $n = 33$ ) were sex offenders against children (mean age  $47.79 \pm 9.40$ ), and the remaining 34% sex offenders against adults (mean age  $42.53 \pm 1.73$ ). Participants were advised that the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. The two groups did not differ by age ( $t_{(48)} = 1.78$ ;  $p = 0.08$ ) or educational level ( $\chi^2 = 4.66$ ;  $p = 0.32$ ).

### ***Measures***

#### ***Personality***

The NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992) is a self-report questionnaire developed to assess normal personality dimensions

based on an FFM, and comprises 60 items derived of the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Each FFM dimension is assessed by a 12-item subscale. Participants rate proposition items in relation to themselves on a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree', to 'strongly agree'. These dimensions were assessed using the Spanish NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1999). For the Spanish version, internal consistencies for the five broad domains have ranged from 0.71 to 0.82 (Manga, Ramos, & Moran, 2004).

### *History of abusive childhood*

A brief interview for the presence of a childhood history of abuse (unpublished test) was used to assess the presence of abusive events. Participants were asked whether they had suffered any abusive event in childhood, and what types of events those were. Participants were asked to respond 'yes' or 'no' to the question 'Have you suffered any abusive event in your childhood?'. Participants were told of the different types of abuse possible; sexual abuse (i.e. if they had been touched in a sexual way or were threatened physically unless performed a sexual act); physical abuse (if they had been punched or hit with an object) and emotional abuse (if they had been verbally abused or felt hated by their parents). Specific abusive events experienced and reported by participants were documented. For each participant, the presence of childhood abusive history was coded by their pointing in a list to the specific abusive event suffered. The list comprised the different types of abusive events described (sexual abuse, emotional abuse and physical abuse). If a participant indicated the presence of one or more of these events, they were coded as having an 'abusive childhood'. Persons with no self-reported abuse were defined as having a 'non-abusive childhood'. The reliability and validity of this interview were not examined.

### *Procedure*

All participants completed the NEO-FFI and were interviewed about their history of abuse in childhood. A written informed consent was completed by all subjects who participated in the study.

### *Analysis*

Scores for the five NEO-dimensions were analysed using a two-way ANOVA, with two between-subjects factors; sex offence committed (against adults or children) and type of childhood (non-abusive or abusive). *Post-hoc* unpaired *t*-tests were conducted to examine personality traits between the groups with non-abusive and abusive childhoods, and within each group of sex offenders (against children-against adults), with a Bonferroni's

correction being used to correct for multiple comparisons. All analyses were done using SPSS Statistics 17.0.

### Results

Of the total sample, 30% ( $n = 15$ ) had abusive childhoods (mean age  $44.64 \pm 11.24$ ), the remainder having had a non-abusive childhoods (70%; with mean age  $46.53 \pm 9.71$ ). The two groups did not differ by age ( $t_{(48)} = 0.58$ ;  $p = 0.55$ ) and educational level ( $\chi^2 = 4.69$ ;  $p = 0.32$ ). Of the men who had offended against children, 36.4% ( $n = 12$ ) had an abusive childhood themselves (mean age  $45.00 \pm 12.03$ ), the remainder having had a non-abusive childhood (63.6%; with mean age  $49.38 \pm 7.39$ ). The two groups did not differ by age ( $t_{(31)} = 1.30$ ;  $p = 0.20$ ) or educational level ( $\chi^2 = 5.89$ ;  $p = 0.21$ ). Of the men who had offended against adults, 18% had an abusive childhood themselves (mean age  $42.50 \pm 6.36$ ), the remainder having had a non-abusive childhood (82%; with mean age  $42.53 \pm 11.34$ ). The two groups did not differ by age ( $t_{(15)} = 0.00$ ;  $p = 0.99$ ) and educational level ( $\chi^2 = 1.88$ ;  $p = 0.39$ ).

Table 1 presents a summary of the means and standard deviations for the FFM dimensions for the cohort, broken down by offence category and abuse.

ANOVAs revealed a significant main effect of childhood abuse for one trait dimension: N ( $F_{(1,46)} = 6.59$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ). Results indicate that sex offenders with abused childhoods were significantly higher in N than the sex offenders who were not abused. ANOVAs also showed a trend to a main effect of childhood abuse leading to higher O and C domains ( $F_{(1,46)} = 3.37$ ;  $p = 0.07$  and  $F_{(1,46)} = 3.46$ ;  $p = 0.06$ , respectively). Abused sexual offenders had higher O scores than for sex offenders with non-abusive childhoods,

Table 1. Means and SDs for the FFM domains (N, E, O, A and C).

	Sex offence against adult ( $n = 17$ )		Sex offence against children ( $n = 33$ )	
	Non-abusive childhood M (SD)	Abusive childhood M (SD)	Non-abusive childhood M (SD)	Abusive childhood M (SD)
Neuroticism	26.60 (7.11)*	39.50 (2.12)*	28.33 (9.08)	32.75 (7.58)
Extroversion	32.33 (4.80)	32.00 (5.65)	33.19 (4.16)	31.08 (5.68)
Openness	32.47 (4.17)	35.01 (4.24)	31.00 (4.20)*	35.05 (5.08)*
Agreeableness	39.93 (6.33)	37.00 (2.82)	40.43 (5.63)	36.67 (5.21)
Conscientiousness	46.00 (3.56)	41.50 (3.53)	46.52 (5.59)	43.50 (4.89)

Note: \*Significant comparisons ( $p < 0.05$ ) between groups with non-abusive and abusive childhood, within each group of sex offenders.

whereas these same childhood-abused sexual offenders were lower in C than the non-abused.

Post-hoc *t*-tests found that sexual offenders victimising children who experienced abusive childhoods were significantly higher in O than child molesters with non-abusive childhoods (mean difference =  $-4.05$ ;  $t_{(31)} = -2.58$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ); this effect was significant despite of use the Bonferroni's correction,  $\eta^2 = 0.012$ .

Lastly, sexual offenders against adults who had abusive childhoods were significantly higher in N than comparable sex offenders who experienced a non-abusive childhood (mean difference =  $-12.90$ ;  $t_{(15)} = -2.48$ ;  $p = 0.02$ ); this difference again remains significant despite Bonferroni's correction.

Classifying participants by offence did not show a significant effect for any personality dimension. Nor did the two-way ANOVAs reveal significant offence  $\times$  childhood abuse interactions for the trait dimensions.

## **Discussion**

These results suggest using the FFM domains and childhood abuse as variables differentiates the personality profiles of Spanish sexual offenders, with the N domain most relevant to differentiate sex offenders according to their childhood experience of abuse; a high score for N characterises sexual offenders with abusive childhoods.

The obtained results show sex offenders with and without abusive childhoods have different personality profiles; sex offenders with abusive childhoods have higher N and a trend to higher O and lower C, whereas sexual offenders who were not abused in childhood have higher C and lower N and O. The obtained results also show different types of childhood reflect differences in personality traits for child molesters compared to sexual offenders victimising adults. The results suggest sex offenders against children who suffered abusive childhoods have higher O. Sex offenders who victimise adults and who suffered abusive childhoods have raised N relative to offenders against children.

We did not find differences in personality for sex offenders victimising adults or children. Nor was there an interaction between childhood abuse and sex offence type committed for any personality dimension of the NEO-FFI. These findings suggest personality differences between groups of sex offenders are more related to abuse they experienced as a child, rather than the type of victim they sexually offended against as an adult, despite the latter being more commonly used to explain findings (Davis & Archer, 2010).

Research of this kind makes it possible to better understand the influence of childhood abuse on non-pathological aspects of personality in sexual offenders, broadening research in this field. Combining personality and

childhood abuse as variables allowed us to differentiate sex offenders as a group, and in subgroups for those sexual offenders who victimised adults, as compared to children. This study is limited by its small sample size and the lack of a non-sexual offender criminal comparison group; for these reasons, these results must be taken as preliminary. Future studies with larger sample sizes and stronger clinical control groups are necessary to confirm these findings and ensure they are not generic to offenders as a group.

### Acknowledgement

The authors wish to give their appreciation to the 'Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias' from Spain for help in the access to prisons.

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