

Examining the Personality Correlates of Attitudes Towards People who have Sexually Offended and Related Policies

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Although personality reliably predicts political beliefs, few—if any—studies have examined the relationship between the Big Six traits and attitudes toward people who have sexually offended. We address this oversight by examining the personality correlates of attitudes towards the rehabilitation of people who have sexually offended and support for two related policies: a three-strikes law and a public registry of persons convicted of sex crimes. Results from a nationwide random sample of adults ($N = 40,769$) reveal that Openness to Experience correlates positively, but Conscientiousness correlates negatively, with attitudes supportive of rehabilitation. Relationships between other Big Six traits and covariates are also discussed, as are the implications for increasing public support for rehabilitation policies. We thus provide the first large scale examination of the personality correlates of attitudes toward people who have sexually offended and related policies. These results demonstrate that extra-legal factors including personality impact policy support and reveal the need to frame policy options in ways that resonate with people's personality.

Key words: *Personality, HEXACO, Sex* Offend*, Punitive Policy, Rehabilitation.*

INTRODUCTION

“The observer, when he seems to himself to be observing a stone, is really, if physics is to be believed, observing the effects of the stone upon himself.”

— *Bertrand Russell (1995)*

Few issues generate as much of an emotionally charged response from the public than questions on how the justice system should ‘deal with’ people who have sexually offended. Indeed, news reports of sexual offences consistently generate heated debates in the population. The fear, disgust and, to some extent, morbid curiosity towards these crimes, combined with the emphasised innocence and helplessness of the victims, create a perfect backdrop for debate (Katz, 1987). People of all backgrounds seem to weigh in on this issue—from criminologists to politicians and the layperson alike. This interest is not only because of the shocking nature of the offence, but also due to the moral, existential, and emotional challenges to which the crime speaks (Katz, 1987). Thus, attitudes towards crime are not isolated to the illegality of the offence, but rather, reflect observers’ social, moral, and political understanding of law, order and the purpose of punishment (Pratt, 2008).

The Purpose of Punishment

Punishment can take various forms depending on one’s approach to justice. The purpose of punishment could be to deter future offences, incapacitate the person who has criminally offended, seek restitution, or ensure retribution. Western societies typically support retributive justice (Wenzel et al., 2008)—that is, the belief that people who break society’s rules should suffer (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2016). Retributive justice is premised on a ‘just desserts’

model whereby justice can only be achieved through a punishment that is as severe as the crime that was committed. In other words, the focus is on avenging an offence. Retributive justice informs punishments such as incapacitation, imprisonment and capital punishment.

Punitive approaches to justice are often pitted against the rehabilitation of the person convicted of a crime (Cullen et al, 2011; Gul, 2018) and a broader philosophy of restorative justice (Ward & Langlands, 2009). Working from the premise that crime is a violation of relationships, restorative justice aims to restore community bonds (Zehr, 1998; see also Weiner, 2006). Through this lens, rehabilitation seeks to reintegrate people into society and protect the community from recidivism. To achieve these ends, rehabilitation aims to improve the lives of people who have caused harm and, in doing so, can conflict with the goals of retributive punishment by focusing on the future of the person who has offended (see Daly, 2000).

Research has long sought to identify individual differences that correlate with these differing approaches towards justice, often focusing on political orientation. This literature reveals that liberals are more likely than conservatives to endorse a restorative approach towards justice (Farwell & Weiner, 2000; Gromet & Darley, 2011). Liberals are also more likely to attribute offending to external causes rather than internal attributions (Unnever et al., 2010). Ideological differences in approaches to justice emerge because of the shared moral foundations that underlie retributive justice and conservatism, and comparatively, restorative justice and liberalism (Silver & Silver, 2017). Whereas retributive justice and conservatism take a group-oriented, traditional stance by framing crime as a violation of the collective and its valued rules, a restorative approach views crime as the responsibility of the community. These findings suggest

that individual differences can explain differing approaches to justice.

Approaches to Punishing Sex Offences

When it comes to correctional rehabilitation, not all offences are met with equal support. Although there is no evidence of its effectiveness (see Zgoba & Mitchell, 2023), there is substantial public support for punitive action against people who have sexually offended (Pickett et al., 2013; Powell, 2010; Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). Punitive action includes Megan's Law in the US, which established publicly accessible online registries for persons convicted of sexual offences. These public databases act as a form of community notification and include the names, addresses and photos of people who have sexually offended (Bonnar-Kidd, 2010; for public perceptions, see Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009). Three-strikes laws, another punitive measure, prescribe longer prison sentences for people with three or more convictions for serious violent or sexual offences. In doing so, longer sentences aim to denounce crime, deter repeat offending, and allow the state to remove from society those who repeatedly offend (Beres & Griffith, 1998).

The current study examines correlates of attitudes toward people who have sexually offended and support for related policies. Specifically, we use data from a nationwide random sample of New Zealand adults to examine the personality correlates of attitudes towards people who have sexually offended and their reintegration back into society. We begin by summarising the current literature on personality traits as reliable predictors of socio-political attitudes. In doing so, we emphasise two specific traits that play a notable role in predicting socio-political outcomes (namely, Openness and Conscientiousness). We then introduce the current study and summarise our hypotheses.

Personality Traits Underlying Beliefs

Emotions or morals can often be more influential than facts and evidence in forming a person's stance on political issues (DeVault et al., 2016; Kunda, 1999). Although it may be convenient to attribute differing stances to the opposing moral foundations of liberals and conservatives (see Graham et al., 2009), theorists have long tried to identify individual differences that underlie such beliefs. Initial literature demonstrates that people's personality traits influence political outcomes (Carney et al., 2008; Gerber et al., 2011; Osborne et al., 2013; Sibley et al., 2012; Soto, 2019). Notably, personality traits are psychological qualities that contribute to one's enduring pattern of thinking, feeling, and behaving (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Much of the literature has focused on the Big Five model of personality, which argues that individual differences can be

captured by five broad bandwidth traits: (a) Openness to Experience, (b) Conscientiousness, (c) Extraversion, (d) Agreeableness, and (e) Neuroticism. Subsequent work by Ashton and Lee (2007) on the HEXACO model of personality introduces a sixth trait, (f) Honesty-Humility (see Table 1). Taken together, these traits provide a comprehensive lens through which to categorise personality.

Openness to Experience

Openness to Experience (Openness) captures the need to seek, enlarge and examine experiences, as well as to reflectively engage with new ideas (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Thus, Openness correlates positively with both curiosity and the tendency to question authority and conventions (McCrae & Costa, 1997). For example, a person who is low on Openness is less accepting of new experiences and ideas than those high on this trait. Recent research reveals that Openness is the strongest (negative) correlate of political conservatism (Osborne et al., 2024; Osborne & Sibley, 2012). These results are consistent with core features of the trait, especially receptiveness towards new ideas, given that resistance to change is a central feature of political conservatism (e.g., see Jost, 2006).

Given its negative relationship with intergroup hostilities (Hodson & Dhont, 2015), Openness may also correlate with attitudes toward people who have sexually offended. For example, low Openness is associated with greater levels of prejudice via increases in Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). RWA reflects a preference for traditional values and established conventions, which should undermine receptiveness to new ideas that defy tradition (Duckitt & Sibley, 2016). Consistent with this thesis, DeLuca et al. (2018) found that RWA correlated positively with perceived sexual recidivism rates and social distancing intentions. These findings further suggest that people low in Openness may oppose rehabilitation for individuals who have sexually offended because it challenges traditional ideas and erroneous stereotypes.

Table 1. Overview of the Big-Six including definitions and examples of each trait

Factor	Definition	Trait Example
Openness to Experience	Originality and complexity of ideas	Curiosity
Conscientiousness	Task and goal-directed behaviour	Attention to detail
Extraversion	Engagement with social endeavours	Leadership
Agreeableness	Prosocial and communal cooperation and tolerance	Forgiveness
Neuroticism, Emotionality	Temperament and emotionality; monitoring inclusionary status	Anxiety
Honesty-Humility	Fairness and reciprocal altruism; genuineness	Sincerity

Note. Adapted from Sibley et al. (2011, p. 144).

Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness encompasses a preference for order, goals, social norms, and striving for achievement (Roberts et al., 2009). Accordingly, Conscientiousness is associated with greater predictability and consistency, risk aversion and impulse control (Gerber et al., 2011). The preference for obedience and prevailing norms should foster opposition to progressive views that violate these norms or undermine individual effort. Consistent with this theorising, Conscientiousness correlates positively with conservatism (Carney et al., 2008; Osborne et al., 2024).

Given that sexual offences violate social rules and threaten order, Conscientiousness should correlate with hostility toward persons responsible for sex crimes. Indeed, the othering of persons convicted for sexual offences frames punitive measures as a way of maintaining social order. Consistent with this view, Xu et al. (2020) identified a link between disgust sensitivity and conservatism through one of the main aspects of Conscientiousness (namely, the preference for order). An unrelated study found that disgust sensitivity was linked to stronger support for the punitive treatment of individuals who have sexually offended via increased dehumanisation and lack of care (Stevenson et al., 2015). Indeed, one of the reasons sexual offences tend to be punished more harshly than non-sexual offences is because the individuals responsible are viewed as unclean (Rogers & Ferguson, 2010; Spencer, 2009). Lynch (2002) argues that legislation related to the punishment of sexual offences often reflects emotional concerns like disgust, fear of contamination and the preservation of purity. The othering of persons convicted for sexual offences showcases punitive measures as a way to enforce social norms and order (at times out of disgust) and, therefore, helps explain why low Conscientiousness should be associated with progressive attitudes towards rehabilitation. Taken together, Conscientiousness and Openness should be particularly influential correlates of attitudes towards individuals who have sexually offended.

The Current Study

Although research has primarily focussed on personality-based links to conservatism, there is little work investigating the relationship between personality and visceral attitudes toward sexual offending and punishment. Personality traits are also often overlooked in studies of predictors of attitudes towards individuals who have sexually offended. Only one study to date investigated the relationship between personality traits and attitudes towards individuals who have sexually offended. Specifically, Olver and Barlow (2010) found that Openness and Agreeableness correlated positively with rehabilitation-oriented attitudes. Yet, their study focused on a sample of just 78 undergraduate students and did not assess support for specific policies. By using a large, nationwide random sample, the current study seeks to explore the generalisability of these results to a broader population and extend the small amount of existing literature in this area.

Hypotheses

Given that Openness to Experience captures the preference for new ideas and the questioning of authority, we expect Openness to correlate positively with support

for the rehabilitation of people who have sexually offended (Hypothesis 1a). Moreover, we expect Openness to correlate negatively with support for public registries (Hypothesis 1b) and the three-strikes law (Hypothesis 1c). In contrast, Conscientiousness reflects preferences for order and social norms. Therefore, we hypothesise that it will correlate negatively with support for the rehabilitation of people who have broken the rules and sexually offended (Hypothesis 2a). Conversely, Conscientiousness should correlate positively with support for public registries (Hypothesis 2b) and the three-strikes law (Hypothesis 2c). Although our hypotheses focus on two traits, we included Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism and Honesty-Humility as covariates in order to identify the extent to which Openness and Conscientiousness uniquely correlate with attitudes towards people who have sexually offended.

While testing these hypotheses, we also statistically adjust for several other established covariates. Older individuals, conservatives, and those who identify with a religion tend to take a conservative position on social policies (Feather, 1979; Layman & Green, 2006; Malka et al., 2012). Lower educational attainment, higher income and ethnicity are also associated with punitive attitudes (Johnson, 2008; McGhee, 2008; Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997; Willis et al., 2013). Therefore, we control for age, political orientation, religious identification, annual income, and education. We also control for ethnicity as within the context of New Zealand, certain ethnic groups may have a non-westernised or collectivist approach to justice which may inform views on rehabilitation. In particular, minority groups may not trust the criminal justice system to appropriately address these cultural differences due to a history of systemic racism and overrepresentation in the justice system (Quince, 2007; Tauri, 2005). We also control for participants' gender given that women are more likely to be victims of sexual assault and report greater agreement with community notification compared to males (Banyard et al., 2007; Elliott et al., 2004; Kernsmith et al., 2009; Moore et al., 2010). We also control for parental status because of the prevalent moral panic around sex offences against children (Zgoba, 2004). By controlling for these covariates and using a national sample, we provide the most comprehensive examination of the relationship between personality traits and attitudes towards individuals who have sexually offended to date.

METHOD

Sampling Procedure

To ensure we have the largest sample size available, the data used in this study come from Time 10 (2018) of the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS). The

NZAVS is a nationwide longitudinal panel study that surveys participants' sociopolitical attitudes, personality, and health outcomes. The first wave of the NZAVS occurred in 2009 and included 6,518 participants who were randomly sampled from the New Zealand electoral roll. Since this initial sampling occasion, additional participants have been recruited through booster samples to increase the size and diversity of the sample. Booster sampling occurred in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016 and 2018. At Time 10, 47,948 participants completed the survey.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between the variables included in the study

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender ^a	.38	.48	---	---										
2. Age	48.83	13.58	---	.09	---									
3. Income	1.16	0.92	---	.07	-.05	---								
4. Māori ^b	.09	.29	---	-.03	-.04	-.05	---							
5. Pacific ^b	.02	.14	---	-.01 [†]	-.04	-.01 [*]	.04	---						
6. Asian ^b	.05	.22	---	-.00 ^{ns}	-.12	-.02	-.05	.01 ^{ns}	---					
7. Religious ^b	.36	.48	---	-.05	.13	-.03	.01 [*]	.07	.07	---				
8. Parent ^b	.72	.45	---	.00 ^{ns}	.44	.07	.01 ^{**}	-.01 ^{ns}	-.07	.11	---			
9. NZ Born ^b	.78	.41	---	-.03	-.01 ^{ns}	-.02	.14	-.02	-.30	-.04	.00 ^{ns}	---		
10. Education	5.43	2.70	---	-.06	-.11	.21	-.08	-.03	.10	.01 [*]	-.07	-.17	---	
11. Conservatism	3.58	1.38	---	.05	.13	-.02 ^{**}	-.01 [*]	.01 [*]	.01 [†]	.25	.13	.05	-.21	---
12. Openness	4.98	1.11	.71	.06	-.10	.05	-.01 [*]	.00 ^{ns}	-.01 ^{ns}	-.05	-.09	-.06	.20	-.26
13. Conscientious	5.11	1.05	.69	-.09	.08	.06	.00 ^{ns}	.01 ^{ns}	.02 ^{**}	.04	.08	-.02	.00 ^{ns}	.15
14. Extraversion	3.92	1.20	.76	-.06	-.02	.10	.03	.01 [*]	-.03	.02	.06	.00 ^{ns}	.02	-.06
15. Agreeableness	5.36	.98	.72	-.30	.01 [†]	.00 ^{ns}	-.04	-.01 [†]	-.03	.07	.04	-.02 ^{**}	.11	-.12
16. Neuroticism	3.47	1.15	.73	-.14	-.21	-.07	.00 ^{ns}	.01 ^{ns}	.03	-.03	-.12	-.02	-.02 [*]	-.06
17. Honesty-Humility	5.43	1.17	.75	-.12	.18	-.04	-.04	-.03	-.09	.02 ^{**}	.08	-.01 [*]	.07	-.08
18. Three-Strikes	5.37	1.86	---	-.07	.02	-.06	.03	.01 ^{ns}	.03	.07	.08	.01 ^{**}	-.23	.32
19. Registry	4.85	1.73	---	-.08	-.03	-.08	.06	.03	.07	.03	.07	.01 ^{ns}	-.21	.18
20. Rehab	3.63	1.60	---	.08	-.04	.03	-.03	.01 ^{**}	.04	.03	-.10	-.05	.21	-.21

Notes: Income was divided by \$100,000.00; ^aDummy-coded (0 = female, 1 = male), ^bDummy-coded (0 = no, 1 = yes); Unless noted, $p < .001$
^{ns} $p > .10$, [†] $p < .10$, ^{*} $p < .05$, ^{**} $p < .01$.

Table 2 (continued). Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between the variables included in the study

	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
12. Openness	---							
13. Conscientious	-.04	---						
14. Extraversion	.18	.05	---					
15. Agreeableness	.22	.11	.21	---				
16. Neuroticism	-.03	-.18	-.13	-.02	---			
17. Honesty-Humility	.06	.08	-.09	.19	-.16	---		
18. Three-Strikes	-.15	.15	.01 ^{**}	-.03	-.01 [†]	-.09	---	
19. Registry	-.10	.09	.04	-.01 [*]	.03	-.12	.43	---
20. Rehab	.12	-.08	.00 ^{ns}	.09	-.05	.07	-.34	-.39

Unless noted, $p < .001$. ^{ns} $p > .10$, [†] $p < .10$, ^{*} $p < .05$, ^{**} $p < .01$.

See Sibley (2023) for a description of the sampling procedure.

Participants

Of the 47,948 participants who completed Time 10 of the NZAVS, we focus on the 40,769 participants (i.e., 85.0% of the full Time 10 dataset) who provided partial or complete responses to the variables of interest. The mean age of the sample was 48.83 years ($SD = 13.58$), with 25,439 participants identifying as women (i.e., 62.4% of the sample). In terms of ethnicity, participants identified as New Zealand European ($N = 36,679$; 90.0% of participants), Māori ($N = 3,781$; 9.3% of participants), Pacific Peoples ($N = 803$; 2.0% of participants), and Asian ($N = 1,994$; 4.9% of participants; participants could identify with multiple ethnic groups).

Measures

Unless noted, variables were measured on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale and randomly interspersed within a larger omnibus survey.

Personality was assessed using the Mini-IPIP6 (Sibley et al., 2011) which captures Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism and Honesty-Humility. Participants were asked to rate how accurately various statements described them. Items were rated on a 1 (very inaccurate) to 7 (very accurate) scale. Openness to Experience was assessed

with the following items: “Have a vivid imagination”; “Have difficulty understanding abstract ideas” (reverse-scored); “Do not have a good imagination” (reverse-scored) and “Am not interested in abstract ideas” (reverse-scored; $\alpha = .705$). Conscientiousness was assessed with the following items: “Get chores done right away”; “Like order”; “Make a mess of things” (reverse-scored) and “Often forget to put things back in their proper place” (reverse-scored; $\alpha = .687$). Extraversion was assessed with the following items: “Am the life of the party”; “Don’t talk a lot” (reverse-scored); “Keep in the background” (reverse-scored) and “Talk to a lot of different people at parties” ($\alpha = .762$). Agreeableness was assessed with the following items: “Sympathize with others’ feelings”; “Am not interested in other people’s problems” (reverse-scored); “Feel others’ emotions” and “Am not really interested in others” (reverse-scored; $\alpha = .718$). Neuroticism was assessed with the following items: “Have frequent mood swings”; “Am relaxed most of the time” (reverse-scored); “Get upset easily” and “Seldom feel blue” (reverse-scored; $\alpha = .728$). Honesty-Humility was assessed with the following items: “Would like to be seen driving around in a very expensive car” (reverse-scored); “Would get a lot of pleasure from owning expensive luxury goods” (reverse-scored); “Feel entitled to more of everything” (reverse-scored) and “Deserve more things in life” (reverse-scored; $\alpha = .75$).

Table 3. Multiple Regression of Support for Three-Strikes, Open Registries, and Rehabilitation.

	Support for Three-Strikes			Support for an Open Registry			Support for Rehabilitation					
	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender ^a	-.085	-0.325	0.019	<.001	-.076	-0.272	0.018	<.001	.117	0.387	0.017	<.001
Age	-.053	-0.007	0.001	<.001	-.078	-0.010	0.001	<.001	.003	0.000	0.001	.529
Income	-.030	-0.060	0.010	<.001	-.052	-0.097	0.009	<.001	.001	0.002	0.009	.818
Māori ^b	.014	0.089	0.030	.003	.043	0.258	0.028	<.001	-.010	-0.053	0.026	.044
Pacific ^b	-.007	-0.093	0.061	.126	.018	0.226	0.059	<.001	.019	0.220	0.054	<.001
Asian ^b	.026	0.225	0.042	<.001	.067	0.537	0.040	<.001	.022	0.164	0.037	<.001
Religious ^b	-.004	-0.016	0.019	.400	-.011	-0.041	0.018	.022	.078	0.260	0.016	<.001
Parent ^b	.056	0.231	0.021	<.001	.085	0.328	0.020	<.001	-.080	-0.285	0.019	<.001
NZ Born ^b	-.028	-0.125	0.022	<.001	-.019	-0.080	0.021	<.001	-.001	-0.004	0.020	.854
Education	-.173	-0.119	0.003	<.001	-.173	-0.111	0.003	<.001	.156	0.092	0.003	<.001
Conservatism	.263	0.353	0.007	<.001	.131	0.163	0.007	<.001	-.172	-0.199	0.006	<.001
Openness	-.039	-0.065	0.008	<.001	-.021	-0.032	0.008	<.001	.016	0.023	0.007	.002
Conscientiousness	.102	0.180	0.008	<.001	.073	0.120	0.008	<.001	-.059	-0.090	0.007	<.001
Extraversion	.021	0.033	0.007	<.001	.043	0.061	0.007	<.001	-.027	-0.036	0.007	<.001
Agreeableness	.003	0.006	0.010	.506	.006	0.011	0.009	.223	.085	0.139	0.009	<.001
Neuroticism	-.007	-0.012	0.008	.133	.019	0.029	0.008	<.001	-.049	-0.068	0.007	<.001
Honesty-Humility	-.068	-0.108	0.008	<.001	-.087	-0.129	0.007	<.001	.046	0.062	0.007	<.001

Notes: ^aDummy-coded (0 = female, 1 = male), ^bDummy-coded (0 = no, 1 = yes)

Attitudes towards people who have caused harm were assessed using three items. The first item focussed on support for the three-strikes law: “The current ‘3 Strikes’ law for violent/sexual offences, where the maximum possible sentence must be imposed without parole upon the third conviction”. The second item focussed on support for open registries: “A publicly available online database of all convicted sex offenders in NZ”. The third item focussed on rehabilitation: “With enough support and professional help, people who have committed sexual offences can be rehabilitated to become safe members of our society”.

Covariates included demographic and political attitudes. Continuous variables included age and annual household income. Education was coded as an 11-point ordinal variable (0 = No qualification to 10 = Doctorate Degree) and political orientation was rated on a 1 (Extremely Liberal) to 7 (Extremely Conservative) scale. Categorical variables were coded accordingly: gender (Female, Male), ethnicity (Pakeha, Māori, Pacific Peoples, Asian), religious identification (Yes, No), parental status (Yes, No), and NZ-born (Yes, No).

RESULTS

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a single multiple regression analysis using *Mplus* version 8.10 (Muthen & Muthen, 1998-2017). Specifically, we simultaneously regressed all three of our outcome variables onto a set of demographic covariates and the Big Six. Missing data were addressed using Full Information Maximum Likelihood estimates (see Enders, 2022). Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are in Table 2; Table 3 displays our focal results. Two-tailed *p*-values less than .05 are significant.

Support for the Three-Strikes Law

The first set of columns in Table 3 show that women, those born overseas, and parents were more supportive of a three-strikes law than men, those born in New Zealand, and those without children, respectively ($ps < .001$). Māori ($p = .003$) and Asian ($p < .001$) participants also expressed more support than their Pākehā counterparts. As for the continuous covariates, age, income, and education correlated negatively, whereas conservatism correlated positively, with support for the three-strikes law ($ps < .001$). Religion did not correlate with support for the three-strikes law ($p = .400$). Turning to the personality correlates, Extraversion correlated positively, and Honest-Humility correlated negatively, with support for the three-strikes law ($ps < .001$). Neither Agreeableness ($p = .506$), nor Neuroticism ($p = .133$), correlated with attitudes toward the three-strikes law. After adjusting for these covariates, Openness correlated negatively, whereas Conscientiousness correlated positively, with support for the three-strikes law ($ps < .001$).

Support for a Public Registry of Persons with Convictions for Sex Crimes

The second set of columns in Table 3 reveal that women, those born overseas, and parents were once again more supportive of an open registry than men, those born in New Zealand, and those without children, respectively ($ps < .001$). Māori, Pacific Peoples and Asian participants also expressed more support than their Pakeha

counterparts ($ps < .001$). In contrast, people who identified with a religion were less supportive than those who were non-religious ($p = .022$). As for the continuous predictors, age, income, and education correlated negatively with support for an open registry ($ps < .001$). Conversely, conservatism correlated positively with support for a punitive stance towards people who have sexually offended ($p < .001$). Turning again to the personality correlates, Extraversion and Neuroticism correlated positively, whereas Honest-Humility correlated negatively, with support an open registry ($ps < .001$). In contrast, Agreeableness was not correlated with attitudes towards an open registry ($p = .223$). After adjusting for these covariates, Openness correlated negatively, whereas Conscientiousness correlated positively, with support for an open registry ($ps < .001$).

Support for the Rehabilitation of People who have Sexually Offended

The third set of columns in Table 3 reveal that women and parents showed less support for the rehabilitation of people who have sexually offended than men and those without children, respectively ($ps < .001$). Conversely, those who identified (versus did not identify) with a religion were more supportive of rehabilitation ($p < .001$). Additionally, Māori ($p = .044$) expressed less support, whereas Asian and Pacific Peoples expressed more support ($ps < .001$), than did Pākehā. As for the continuous covariates, education correlated positively, whereas conservatism correlated negatively, with support for the rehabilitation of people who have sexually offended ($ps < .001$). Birthplace, age, and income did not correlate with attitudes towards rehabilitation ($ps \geq .529$). Finally, turning to our personality correlates, Extraversion and Neuroticism correlated negatively, whereas Agreeableness and Honest-Humility correlated positively, with support for the rehabilitation of people who have sexually offended ($ps < .001$). After adjusting for these covariates, Openness correlated positively ($p = .002$), whereas Conscientiousness correlated negatively ($p < .001$), with support for the rehabilitation of people who have sexually offended.

DISCUSSION

Although past research reveals the Big Five traits correlate with support for punitive punishment (Colémont et al., 2011; Roberts et al., 2013), existing research has overlooked attitudes towards specific kinds of offending and related policies. As such, it is unclear if the results from past research generalise to attitudes towards *emotionally charged* political issues like sexual offending. The current study addresses these shortcomings by utilising a large-scale national sample to investigate the personality correlates of attitudes towards the rehabilitation of people who have sexually offended and specific policies (namely, the three-strikes law and a public registry of persons with convictions for sex crimes).

Openness to Experience

As hypothesised, our results reveal that Openness to Experience correlates negatively with support for the three-strikes law and the use of open registries, and positively with the idea that people who have sexually

offended can be successfully rehabilitated. These results extend past work showing that Openness correlates negatively with general conservatism (Carney et al., 2008; Sibley et al., 2012) by showing that individual differences in the desire to challenge conventional ideas and seek new experiences also correlate negatively with support for specific policies that emphasise retribution over rehabilitation. People high in Openness may be more willing to challenge the stereotypes around sexual offending due to their tendency to be low on prejudice (Hodson & Dhont, 2015). This desire for change could explain why those high in Openness support rehabilitation, an alternative to the traditional idea that people who have sexually offended cannot coexist in society.

Conscientiousness

Also as hypothesised, Conscientiousness correlated positively with support for the three-strikes policy and open registries. Conscientiousness also correlated negatively with the idea that people who have sexually offended can be rehabilitated to become safe members of society. These results suggest that the preference for social order and tradition undermines support for progressive rehabilitation, which may challenge long-standing assumptions that people convicted of crimes cannot be successfully reintegrated into society. Indeed, there are commonly held misconceptions about those who have sexually offended that are difficult to challenge (e.g., the idea that people who have sexually offended are more likely to reoffend than those convicted of other types of crime; Langan et al., 2003; Payne & DeMichele, 2008). These misunderstandings and a “nothing works” rhetoric lead the public to believe that it is impossible to rehabilitate people who have caused harm or express uncertainty around the efficacy of rehabilitation (Payne et al., 2010). The normalisation and prevalence of this low efficacy belief may reinforce rehabilitation as a threat to social order. Additionally, those high in Conscientiousness tend to express support for punitive policies to facilitate order and moral cohesion (Roberts et al., 2013; Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997). Mandatory sentencing may reflect the authority and power of the state to demand compliance (Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997). Conscientiousness may resonate with support for a public database because it reinforces shared morals and values by continuing the exclusion and stigma of those who transgressed societal standards (see Reed, 2017). Our results are consistent with previous understandings of Conscientiousness and its link to conservative policy preferences (Carney et al., 2008; Osborne et al., 2024).

Extraversion

Extraversion captures an energetic approach to social endeavours (Gerber et al., 2011; John et al., 2008), and is associated with sociability and assertiveness (Ashton & Lee, 2007). The current study demonstrates that Extraversion also correlates positively with support for the three-strikes law and the creation of an open registry, and negatively with the endorsement of rehabilitation. These results corroborate related work revealing that Extraversion correlates positively with tough-mindedness towards crime (McKelvie, 1983; Robbers, 2006). Those high in Extraversion may prefer longer sentences for

offences because they do not want people who have sexually offended in their community or social networks. Their tough-mindedness could translate into a pessimistic view of rehabilitation programmes. Moreover, those high in Extraversion may endorse a public database because they are prone to making new friends, and the uncertainty around people who have caused harm within their greater social circle may be concerning. Some research suggests that people high in Extraversion are more likely to be victims of crime – although it is unclear if this is the case for sexual offending (Cawvey et al., 2018). Yet those low on Extraversion are more likely to report a higher fear of crime (Klama & Egan, 2011). Therefore, the driver behind the positive relationship between Extraversion and support for punitive policy remains unclear.

Neuroticism

Despite not being a significant predictor of attitudes towards the three-strikes law, Neuroticism displayed a pattern similar to Extraversion for the remaining outcomes. Namely, Neuroticism correlated positively with support for public registries and negatively with support for rehabilitation. The similar pattern with Extraversion is unsurprising as both traits are associated with greater emotional frequency, intensity, and duration (Verduyn & Brans, 2012). Robbers (2006) found that Neuroticism correlated positively with pro-death penalty attitudes and theorised that this could be linked to a neurotic, intense emotional reaction to crime. Although the death penalty and a public registry vary considerably in terms of level of punitiveness, Robbers suggests that emotional instability may lead people to “not debate the merits of the death penalty on facts alone” (p. 213). In the context of our study, the sole focus on sexual offences in the items assessing support for a registry and rehabilitation may have resulted in a stronger reaction than the three-strikes item, which also referenced violent offences. An emotional, rather than an evidence-based, response corroborates our earlier arguments about the public having reactive attitudes towards people who have sexually offended.

Honesty-Humility

Honesty-Humility reflects a tendency toward reciprocal altruism, as well as a preference for cooperation and fairness (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Sibley et al., 2011). Therefore, the negative correlation between Honesty-Humility and support for the three-strikes law could reflect high levels of compassion and trust. This may foster the belief that, once people who have sexually offended are deemed a low risk, they should be given the chance to reintegrate into society. Thus, although those high in Honesty-Humility may be more likely to condemn those who have sexually offended, the trait’s fairness facet may not translate into support for overly punitive policies. This is consistent with the finding that Honesty-Humility correlates positively with support for rehabilitation.

Agreeableness

Given the conflicting results on the relationship between Agreeableness and punitive attitudes (Colémont et al., 2011; Mac Connell, 2001; Robbers, 2006), we made no predictions for this personality trait. Nevertheless, the current study found that Agreeableness was not

significantly correlated with support for the three strikes law ($p = .533$) or a public registry ($p = .223$). These results may capture the countervailing associations the distinct aspects of Agreeableness have with attitudes towards people who have sexually offended. Osborne and colleagues (2013) show that the politeness component of Agreeableness correlated positively with conservatism via RWA, whereas the compassion component correlated negatively with conservatism via Social Dominance Orientation. This nuance may explain how Agreeableness could foster support for punitive policies that promote order via the politeness aspect, while the compassion aspect elicits opposition to these same policies. The three-strikes law fits both explanations, as it is often seen as a tough-on-crime measure that disproportionately impacts minority groups (Oleson, 2015). Thus, the non-significant association between Agreeableness and attitudes toward people who have sexually offended could be explained by the distinct aspects of this broad bandwidth personality trait.

Implications

Interestingly, public support for reintegration may not always correspond with the efficacy of an approach (Garland, 2021). Rogers and Ferguson (2011) demonstrate that support for punitive punishments for sexual offences may not be entirely rational compared to the punishment of other crimes of similar severity – rather, attitudes are driven by “emotional and heuristic forces” (p. 410). Indeed, extra-legal factors, like stereotypes, that may be unfair and/or ineffective can influence the sentencing of people who have sexually offended (see Crime Control Theatre in DeVault et al., 2016; Rydberg et al., 2018). Harper and Harris (2017) argue that this automatic “feel first, rationalise later” response makes it difficult for legislators to garner support for progressive sexual offence policies that may increase public safety. Therefore, it becomes essential to identify the underlying factors that influence public attitudes towards the treatment of people who have sexually offended.

Public attitudes can be influential as the success of rehabilitation efforts relies on safe, supportive social and physical environments (Willis et al., 2010). For example, stable housing is associated with reduced sexual recidivism (e.g., Scoones et al., 2012; Willis & Grace, 2008; Willis & Grace, 2009), but residence restrictions (policy) and landlord's hesitancy (attitudes) may create barriers to securing stable housing (e.g., Clark, 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2005).

The current study reveals an additional domain in which people's personality is related to policy preferences. Personality traits are key predictors of major life outcomes, from educational attainment to relationship success (Bleidorn et al., 2019). Additional studies have illustrated the impact of personality traits on myriad topics including climate change beliefs (Rothermich et al., 2021) and the death penalty (Robbers, 2006). Our results demonstrate that, even in a highly emotive and nuanced subject like the rehabilitation of people who have sexually offended, attitudes are impacted by individual differences. This may be of concern given that the legitimacy of legal judgements relies on decision makers to be unbiased. Thus, the fair treatment of people who have offended

requires separation from these individual differences that could bias decision making processes. The current study showcases another domain in which practice may fall short of these lofty goals. Individual differences help explain why people support the three-strikes policy and open registries despite questionable evidence on their effectiveness (Oleson, 2015; Zgoba & Mitchell, 2023).

Although it is often assumed that people's decision-making processes are reflective and reliable, behavioural science suggests that automatic and intuitive processes also impact people's decisions (Kahneman, 2011). Thus, implicit biases and heuristics can lead to faulty reasoning and departures from rationality. This sentiment is also echoed by Harper and Harris (2017), who argue that automatic processes underlie people's moral views of people who have sexually offended. As noted, people may rely on stereotypical understandings of those who are convicted of crimes, which may lead them to oppose evidence-informed rehabilitative policies. To improve the quality of people's decisions, Kahneman (2011) suggests that the decision-making process needs to be challenged and made explicit. Our results are a step towards understanding what automatic, unquestioned processes and preferences underlie these rehabilitative-opposing stances.

Future Directions

Bleidorn et al. (2019) assert that policymakers should attend to personality traits due to their combined stability and influence on people's receptiveness to policy changes and interventions. Although traits are stable predictors of certain life outcomes and success, dynamic characteristics can be leveraged by interventions. In other words, personality can guide interventions by linking specific traits to desired outcomes. Understanding what preferences are more likely to align with punitive attitudes can help advocates for rehabilitation programmes garner support. Given that multiple traits correlated with attitudes towards sexual offending in our study, it may be useful to frame related policies in a targeted way that resonates with people's dispositions.

Our results provide the foundations for future work on the framing of policies to appeal to different personality traits. More specifically, our results suggest interventions should target those high in Conscientiousness, Extraversion and Neuroticism and tailor messages to address their fears and preferences. For example, penal populism and prevailing stereotypes about sexual offending means that discourse around rehabilitation should frame retributive justice as ineffective and unjust to victims. Presenting rehabilitative policies as a means of restoring order, rather than forgiving people who have caused harm, might increase support, particularly from individuals high in Conscientiousness. In this sense, framing rehabilitation as a way to protect the community rather than helping the transgressor may boost support for these policies. Understanding framing effects could inform how rehabilitation is discussed by professional services, presented in the media, and understood by government decision makers. Nevertheless, future research is needed to examine this possibility.

Limitations

Although our large-scale national sample allows us to

provide generalisable insights into the personality correlates of attitudes towards people who have sexually offended, our study has several limitations. For one, cross-sectional designs reflect a snapshot of attitudes at one specific time point and, thus, cannot speak to causal questions. As such, it is necessary to interpret our results with caution, and acknowledge that they do not represent causal relationships. Similarly, we only analysed data from one time point and cannot assess if attitudes change over time, nor whether they fluctuate in response to high-profile sex offences or policy changes. Nonetheless, we have identified important links that should be the focus of future research.

Another common challenge when attempting to analyse the relationship between personality and political attitudes is that it can be difficult to isolate the effects of personality and political orientation. For example, personality research has been criticised due to the construct overlap between personality scales and conservatism. Indeed, political values were originally incorporated into personality measures. For example, Openness items like, "I believe that laws and social policies should change to reflect the needs of a changing world", reflect political values (Hatemi & Verhulst, 2015). To address this concern, we used a previously-validated measure of the Big Six (i.e., the Mini-IPIP6; see Sibley et al., 2011) that does not include items that overlap with political views. We also adjusted for the effects of self-reported conservatism. These important methodological precautions increase confidence that we have isolated the independent effects of the Big Six on attitudes toward people who have sexually offended.

We also acknowledge that our three primary outcome variables were measured with single items that were designed in-house. Likewise, we estimated manifest, rather than latent, personality variables in order to keep all measures on a similar metric. Although our approach ensures that our continuous variables were on a common metric ranging from 1 to 7, the use of manifest variables does not adjust for measurement error which has a tendency to attenuate associations. As such, future research should use multi-item measures and incorporate latent variables to measure both personality and attitudes

towards rehabilitation.

Finally, the present study also does not control for participants' direct or indirect experience with sexual victimisation or exposure to people who have sexually offended. Although prior research has found mixed results, lived experiences may impact attitudes towards people who have sexually offended (see Harper et al., 2017). Moreover, this may not be limited to perceptions of sexual offending, but rather, any type of violent crime given that the three-strikes law also applies to serious, violent offences. Greater fear and anger about crime may lead to greater endorsement of harsh punitive measures (Dowler, 2003). Conversely, people who have professional therapeutic or volunteer experience working with people who have sexually offended tend to show less endorsement of prejudicial beliefs compared to the public (Hogue, 1993; Lowe, 2017; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). Although personality may be a better predictor of fear of crime than being the victim of a crime (Ellis & Renouf, 2018), future studies may benefit from including exposure to people who have sexually offended in their analyses.

Conclusion

Although separate lines of research examine the correlates of personality and attitudes towards sexual offending, the current study is the first large scale study that combines the two literatures. As hypothesised, our results demonstrate that Openness to Experience correlates positively with support for the rehabilitation of people who have sexually offended, as well as opposition to the three-strikes law and the creation of a public registry. Conscientiousness, in contrast, correlates positively with support for these same punitive policies and negatively with support for rehabilitation. Although additional work is needed to identify the underlying aspects that motivate these attitudes, we provide the necessary foundations for this important research. Indeed, our results demonstrate that personality is an untapped resource for garnering support for recidivism-reducing rehabilitation policies and provides a stepping stone for further research that seeks to identify the frames around rehabilitation that best align with underlying personality traits.

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