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(Re)Considering Personality in Criminological Research

ABSTRACT

Some individuals resort to crime; others refrain. Why is that? Different answers to this question have been proposed within criminology while paying surprisingly little attention to the concept of personality. On closer inspection, though, concepts akin to personality (e.g., criminal character, criminal propensity, self-control) run like a unifying thread through the field of criminology, including in its most prominent theories, to account for the apparent individual differences in crime. Nonetheless, there is considerable conceptual and empirical heterogeneity relating to these individual differences, and efforts to integrate different perspectives are currently lacking. I argue that the different approaches can usefully be integrated under the umbrella of the personality concept and that the field of criminology would benefit from more explicitly and systematically incorporating personality into its theories and research. Studies linking personality traits to crime, in turn, show that diverse findings can be boiled down to three key criminogenic characteristics—low morality, shortsightedness, and negative affectivity—that provide a parsimonious account of individual differences in crime. Future research should draw on the concept of personality to foster theoretical and empirical integration and eventually solve the puzzle of who engages in crime and why.

Individuals differ, and this truism holds when it comes to criminal behavior. Some people repeatedly come into conflict with the law and tend to violate moral and social rules. Others abide by it and prioritize rule-compliant

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behavior. In line with this notion, there is a substantial extent of cross-situational consistency in crime, meaning that individuals' patterns of criminal and other deviant behavior at one time predict their patterns of criminal and other deviant behavior at other times (e.g., Wilson and Herrnstein 1985; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Nagin and Paternoster 1991). Such patterns of behavioral consistency have traditionally been explained in various ways within criminology, including (un)stable social environments (Sampson and Laub 1990, 2005), social learning from criminal peers (Akers 1998, 2001), and criminal propensity/low self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990)—to name but a few prominent examples.

From a psychological perspective, however, “the assumption of cross-situational consistency is virtually synonymous with the concept of *personality*” (Bem and Allen 1974, p. 506; emphasis added). Although the concept of personality has also made its way into criminology—with many advocating the power of personality traits to contribute to the explanation of crime (e.g., Wilson and Herrnstein 1985; Caspi et al. 1994; Eysenck 1996)—“compared to numerous other constructs, personality has not been a focal concern” (Jones 2017*b*, p. 181). And yet, as I argue in this essay, the concept of personality runs like a unifying thread through the field of criminology, albeit often implicitly so. That is, much criminological research and many criminological theories have, knowingly or unknowingly, already incorporated personality and related concepts in meaningful ways. The time has come to make this involvement of personality within criminology more explicit in order to advance the understanding of individual differences in crime even further and thereby promote scientific progress in this flourishing scientific field.

Interestingly, consulting the criminological literature from the 1970s and 1980s, it seems surprising that personality has not yet become an integral part of criminology. For example, as Eysenck summarized in the second edition of *Crime and Personality*, “there is now much better evidence for a correlation between personality and criminality than there was in 1964” and, further, “future delinquency can be predicted with marked success from personality ratings of quite young children” (1977, p. 12). Likewise, Wilson and Herrnstein summarized that “there is mounting evidence that, on the average, offenders differ from nonoffenders in . . . personality” (1985, p. 27). Then again, early findings supporting a link between personality and crime have also been heavily criticized, mostly on methodological grounds. One of the key concerns repeatedly voiced

(e.g., Waldo and Dinitz 1967; Tennenbaum 1977; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) hinted at common method bias (i.e., shared variance between a dependent and an independent variable attributable to an overlap in measurement methods) resulting from some personality items directly tapping into criminal behavior. For example, one of the most commonly used personality inventories at the time, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Hathaway and McKinley 1943), contains items such as “I have never been in trouble with the law.” Evidence revealing an association between personality and crime has thus been interpreted as “the reporting of what are rightly considered ‘empirical tautologies,’ the discovery that two measures of the same thing are correlated with each other” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, p. 109). Such criticism has arguably led “most criminologists to dismiss personality as a fruitless area of inquiry” (Caspi et al. 1994, p. 165).¹

Despite this skepticism—or maybe for this very reason—recurrent calls in criminology and beyond have emphasized the need to incorporate personality and related concepts in the study of crime. As Nagin and Pateroster (1993, p. 489) state, “criminological theory must include stable individual differences in propensity to offend as a central construct.” Even more explicitly referring to personality, Jones, Miller, and Lynam (2011, p. 329) concluded that “they [personality traits] should be afforded greater theoretical and empirical attention within criminology.” Others have likewise contended that “there is a clear need for greater links between criminological theory and the contributions of personality psychology” (Romero et al. 2003, p. 84) and requested “efforts among criminologists . . . to incorporate these consequential personality differences into theories of crime” (Caspi et al. 1994, p. 189). This essay aims to lay the foundation for these efforts to fill in the blanks in our understanding of individual differences in crime.

In sum, I draw the following conclusions. Although personality and related concepts have been considered in criminological research early on, the consideration of personality within criminology remains scattered and unsystematic and suffers from great conceptual and empirical heterogeneity.

¹ Apart from such potential issues related to certain personality measures, the thorough development and validation of self-report scales is a key strength of personality psychology that may also offer useful approaches for criminological research (for a critique of measurement practices within criminology using the example of self-control scales, see, e.g., Piquero [2008]).

Ironically, several mainstream crime theories emphasize systematic individual differences in criminal behavior while neglecting personality as a concept to account for these individual differences. To foster integration and cumulative science, the field of criminology would benefit from more explicitly and systematically incorporating personality into its theories and research. Personality research has greatly advanced over the last decades, and these advancements provide a fruitful basis for criminology. Findings linking personality traits to crime, in turn, can be parsimoniously organized within three broad trait categories showing consistent relations with criminal behavior, namely, low morality, shortsightedness, and negative affectivity. Still, many open questions remain, and solving these questions can greatly enhance the understanding of crime and how to prevent it.

The essay is structured as follows. First, I define the concept of personality, elaborate on how personality interacts with situational affordances—properties of situations that allow for the expression of certain personality traits—to guide behavior, describe how personality traits can be organized according to models of basic personality structure, and delineate how the concept of personality in particular has been referred to within criminology. Second, I review several prominent theories of crime, show how these theories account for individual differences, and elaborate on how more explicit and systematic consideration of the concept of personality would enrich the theoretical landscape. Third, I provide an overview of prior evidence on the relation between personality and crime, to illustrate which personality traits exhibit the most consistent links with criminal behavior. Finally, I lay out an agenda for future research, including a call for stronger consideration of person-situation interactions and for research providing a deeper understanding of the psychological processes underlying the association between personality and crime. I also point to the potential of integrating personality research in the study of desistance from crime.

Before going into detail, let me specify how I use the term “crime.” Some definitions of crime center around lawbreaking as the key feature (Lynch, Stretesky, and Long 2015) whereas others refer to rule breaking more generally (Wikström and Kroneberg 2022). Here, I use this latter, broader definition given that “rule-breaking is what all crimes, in all places, at all times have in common” (Wikström and Kroneberg 2022, p. 187), and it allows incorporating research on other kinds of deviant or unethical behaviors that do not necessarily involve breaking the law but that do involve violating moral or social rules (e.g., aggression, exploitation, or dishonesty).

I. The Nature and Structure of Personality

A. Defining Personality

To define personality, it is useful to first define its constituents, that is, personality traits. Personality traits describe “relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that reflect the tendency to respond in certain ways under certain circumstances” (Roberts 2009, p. 140). There are at least three key aspects to this definition. First, personality traits are relatively enduring, that is, stable over time. Meta-analytic evidence based on hundreds of studies consistently supports that, from late adolescence/early adulthood onward, personality traits demonstrate a fair amount of stability across the lifespan (Roberts and DelVecchio 2000; Roberts, Walton, and Viechtbauer 2006; Bleidorn et al. 2022). At the same time, this evidence also shows that, despite their stability, personality traits can and do change. A well-established pattern of change is described by the maturity principle (e.g., Schwaba et al. 2022): traits change in ways that are functional for mastering certain developmental tasks, such as entering into employment or starting a family. Traits are thus both stable and malleable at the same time.

Second, personality traits describe individuals’ tendencies to think, feel, and act. Thus, traits manifest not only in observable behavior but also in individuals’ thoughts (e.g., beliefs, ideas) and feelings (e.g., emotions, mood). Note that these manifestations describe individuals’ tendencies only. That is, traits are probabilistic rather than deterministic: they refer to the likelihood that individuals enact certain thoughts or feelings or display certain behaviors. Thus, when we describe someone as having a high level of a certain trait, this only suggests that the person is likely to exhibit corresponding thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, rather than suggesting that the person will always exhibit those thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. By implication, “even an error-free measure of them [traits] could not perfectly predict behavior at any particular moment” (DeYoung 2015, p. 35).

Third, personality traits refer to how individuals respond under certain circumstances. Traits do not unfold in a vacuum; instead, they manifest themselves in interaction with, or response to, the environment. This feature of personality traits is well illustrated by the concept of situational affordances. Situational affordances denote properties of situations that “provide a context for the expression of motives, goals, values, and preferences” (Reis 2008, p. 316)—and thus, of personality traits. Crucially, “different situations have distinct situational affordances that allow different aspects of personality to be expressed” (De Vries et al. 2016, p. 412). For example,

spending a night at a club may provide multiple opportunities (affordances) for individuals to express their level of risk taking (e.g., by deciding whether to drink alcohol, consume drugs, flirt with a stranger). By contrast, having a movie night with one's partner at home may not afford the expression of risk taking but of sentimentality if watching a romantic movie. Overall, the assertion that personality traits affect individuals' behavior—including crime—hence by no means undermines the importance of the environment individuals live in and the situations they encounter in daily life. On the contrary, situations provide the basis for personality traits to be expressed in the first place (e.g., Kelley et al. 2003; Reis 2008; De Vries et al. 2016).

B. The Structure of Personality

Personality as a whole describes the constellation of personality traits. In principle, there are countless numbers of specific traits that can be used to describe differences between individuals, such as whether someone is more or less kind, organized, quick tempered, patient, honest, sociable, or reserved. Obviously, this list could go on forever. Exactly this variety of conceivable traits—and the long-standing lack of agreement about how to organize or structure them—was probably one of the factors contributing to the skepticism regarding the usefulness of personality for explaining crime (apart from measurement issues, as detailed above). For example, in a review of studies on personality differences between criminal offenders and nonoffenders, Tennenbaum (1977) observed that across all 251 relevant studies, including those considered in earlier reviews (Schuessler and Cressey 1950; Waldo and Dinitz 1967), 101 different personality measures were used, most of which contained the assessment of several personality traits. This abundance of concepts and corresponding measures was clearly a hindrance to integrative and cumulative science, thereby also undermining the usefulness of personality to account for individual differences in crime.

Fortunately, this situation changed dramatically with the discovery that the universe of meaningful personality traits may well be captured by five broad personality dimensions (Digman and Takemoto-Chock 1981; McCrae and Costa 1987; Goldberg 1990) commonly known as the Big Five (Goldberg 1981) and captured within the Five Factor Model of Personality (FFM; McCrae and Costa 1987): Neuroticism, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience (see table 1 for defining characteristics). These broad personality dimensions have been identified in lexical studies, which are based on the idea that the variety of relevant trait characteristics is reflected in our language and, therefore, in the lexicon (see,

TABLE 1
Common Defining Adjectives of the Big Five
and HEXACO Personality Dimensions

Dimension	Common Defining Adjectives
Big Five:	
Neuroticism	Angry, anxious, emotional, envious, fearful, moody, nervous, worrying versus calm, contented, relaxed, secure, stable
Extraversion	Active, assertive, enthusiastic, outgoing, sociable, talkative versus introverted, quiet, reserved, shy, withdrawn
Agreeableness	Agreeable, cooperative, fair, forgiving, generous, kind, soft-hearted, sympathetic, trusting, warm versus cold, cruel, hard-hearted, rude, selfish, stingy, quarrelsome
Conscientiousness	Dependable, organized, planful, precise, reliable, responsible, thorough versus careless, frivolous, irresponsible, lazy, negligent
Openness to Experience	Artistic, creative, curious, imaginative, intelligent versus simple, shallow, unimaginative
HEXACO model:	
Honesty-Humility	Faithful/loyal, fair-minded, honest, modest/unassuming, sincere versus boastful, deceitful, greedy, hypocritical, pompous, pretentious, sly
Emotionality	Anxious, emotional, fearful, oversensitive, sentimental, vulnerable versus brave, independent, self-assured, stable, tough
Extraversion	Active, cheerful, extraverted, lively, outgoing, sociable, talkative versus introverted, passive, quiet, reserved, shy, withdrawn
Agreeableness	Agreeable, gentle, lenient, mild, patient, peaceful, tolerant versus choleric, ill-tempered, quarrelsome, stubborn
Conscientiousness	Careful, diligent, disciplined, organized, precise, thorough versus absent-minded, irresponsible, lazy, negligent, reckless, sloppy
Openness to Experience	Creative, innovative, intellectual, ironic, unconventional versus conventional, shallow, unimaginative

NOTE.—Taken from Thielmann et al. (2022, p. 873), who compiled it based on Goldberg (1992, p. 31), Ashton and Lee (2007, p. 154; 2008, p. 1953), and John, Naumann, and Soto (2008, p. 128).

e.g., Ashton and Lee 2005; Saucier 2009*b*). In essence, applying the lexical approach involves identifying all personality-descriptive adjectives in the lexicon of a certain language, asking raters to describe themselves or others using these adjectives, and factor analyzing these ratings to extract the smallest number of independent factors that can capture as much of the covariance in the trait ratings (i.e., co-occurrence of traits within individuals)

as possible. The resulting factors are thus assumed to comprehensively capture the universe of meaningful personality traits within a few, largely distinct factors, each of which groups together multiple related, specific characteristics. In turn, any specific trait is supposed to be locatable within the space spanned by those broad factors, “just as latitude and longitude permit the precise description of any location on earth” (Ozer and Reise 1994, p. 361). As such, broad personality dimensions such as the Big Five can provide an organizing framework of personality traits that facilitates communication, measurement, integration of research findings, and prediction of diverse outcomes. The introduction of the Big Five—and corresponding measures, such as the NEO Personality Inventory Revised (NEO-PI-R; Costa and McCrae 1992) and the Big Five Inventory (John, Donahue, and Kentle 1991)—has thus led to a flourishing of personality science that persists not only in psychology but also in fields such as economics, medicine, and political sciences (e.g., Ozer and Benet-Martínez 2006; Almlund et al. 2011; Gerber et al. 2011; Conversano et al. 2018).

Crucially, however, more recent lexical studies across various languages—the discovery of the Big Five was mostly based on studies in English—suggest that the Big Five miss out on relevant trait characteristics and that six broad personality dimensions instead of five provide a better representation of human personality (Ashton and Lee 2001; Ashton et al. 2004; Saucier 2009a). Most prominently, this notion is featured in the HEXACO Model of Personality Structure (Ashton and Lee 2007; Ashton, Lee, and De Vries 2014), with HEXACO being an acronym for the six broad personality dimensions encompassed: *Honesty-Humility*, *Emotionality*, *eXtraversion*, *Agreeableness*, *Conscientiousness*, and *Openness to Experience* (see table 1 for defining characteristics). Despite sharing several aspects (and trait dimensions) with the Big Five, the HEXACO model incorporates noteworthy differences. The most obvious is the inclusion of an additional, sixth personality dimension called *Honesty-Humility*, capturing individual differences in morality-tinged features, such as fairness, greed avoidance, honesty, and modesty.² Although *Honesty-Humility* overlaps

² Apart from adding *Honesty-Humility*, the HEXACO model incorporates different conceptualizations of *Neuroticism* (termed *Emotionality* in the HEXACO model) and *Agreeableness* compared to the Big Five (see table 1). Specifically, *Emotionality* lacks the angry hostility aspect of Big Five *Neuroticism* (which is reflected in low HEXACO *Agreeableness*) but adds the sentimentality aspect inherent in Big Five *Agreeableness* (which is, in turn, no longer a defining characteristic of high *Agreeableness* in the HEXACO model). By contrast, *Extraversion*, *Conscientiousness*, and *Openness to Experience* are essentially the

with Big Five Agreeableness to some extent, it incorporates characteristics that are insufficiently accommodated by the Big Five (Ashton, Lee, and De Vries 2014; Thielmann et al. 2022). As a consequence, Honesty-Humility is particularly well suited—more so than any Big Five dimension—to account for individual differences in all kinds of ethical and unethical behavior, including prosocial versus selfish/antisocial behavior (Thielmann, Spadaro, and Balliet 2020; Zettler et al. 2020), dishonesty (Heck et al. 2018), counterproductive work behavior (Lee, Berry, and Gonzalez-Mule 2019; Pletzer et al. 2019, 2020), and indeed crime (Zettler et al. 2020). Thus, especially for the study of criminal and other deviant behavior, the HEXACO model offers better coverage of relevant trait content within Honesty-Humility than the Big Five.

II. Individual Differences Constructs in Criminology

In both the scientific literature and everyday language, many different concepts and terms apart from personality are used to refer to stable individual differences—an observation that also applies to criminology. Crucially, many of these concepts are closely tied or even equivalent to the concept of personality. This fact is, however, rarely explicitly acknowledged, thus bearing the risk of jangle fallacies, that is, “the use of two separate words or expressions covering in fact the same basic situation, but sounding different, as though they were in truth different” (Kelley 1927, p. 64). In what follows, I refer to four concepts that are regularly used in criminology to account for individual differences—character, propensity, attitudes, and preferences—and discuss their conceptual similarity with personality. I conclude that reliance on personality as a concept for thinking about individual differences can clarify and simplify ambiguities and redundancies and avoid tautologies in much traditional theorizing in criminology.

First, the concept of *character* is commonly referred to in legal contexts, albeit poorly defined (Anderson 2012; Redmayne 2015; Sampson and Smith 2021). As Redmayne (2015, p. 6) states: “The law of evidence . . . employs a broad definition of character: character refers to any behavioural tendency or propensity.” As such, character is defined in pretty much

same across models. For a recent meta-analysis on the relation between the Big Five and HEXACO dimensions, see Thielmann et al. (2022).

the same way as personality, with a focus on its behavioral manifestation. In the social sciences and humanities, however, character is usually conceptualized more narrowly, specifically referring to “characteristics . . . that have to do with right and wrong, as defined by moral principles” (Fleeson et al. 2014, p. 179; see also, e.g., Pincoffs 1973; Peterson and Seligman 2004; Anderson 2012). This definition aligns with philosopher John Rawls’s (1971, p. 277) assertion that a propensity to break the law is a “mark of bad character.”

The term “character” also frequently appears in criminology but regarding the more specific concept of criminal character (Sampson and Smith 2021). Synonymously, and indeed more commonly, employed is the term criminal *propensity*, which I also use here. Criminal propensity can be defined as “the generalized tendency to see crime as an option and to choose that option” (Wikström 2004, p. 13). This definition thus matches the broader, behavioral definition of character as usually used in law (Redmayne 2015) while particularly referring to criminal behavior. Critically, proposing that crime is influenced by an individual’s general tendency to engage in crime (i.e., criminal propensity) is a mere re-description of observed behavior rather than a true theoretical explanation (Gigerenzer 1998).³ In other words, explaining crime with individual differences in criminal propensity arguably reflects a “near-tautology” (Wallach and Wallach 1994). Then again, criminal propensity is also often equated with low self-control (e.g., Nagin and Paternoster 1993; Wright et al. 2004; Pogarsky 2007) as defined by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, p. 177), that is, “the tendency of individuals to pursue short-term gratification without consideration of the long-term consequences of their acts.” Although this conceptualization may hold more theoretical value than the near-tautology just mentioned, it is still problematic: it reflects a prime example of a jangle fallacy because two different terms (i.e., criminal propensity, self-control) are used interchangeably to describe essentially the same thing. In general, the usefulness of the concept

³ This criticism also applies to other narrowly defined traits describing individual differences in the tendency to show a specific type of behavior (see, e.g., Thielmann and Hilbig [2015] for a critical discussion of the concept of trust propensity). Importantly, what distinguishes such narrow traits from others is not that they refer to individual differences in behavior per se. By definition, personality traits have a strong reference to behavior (see above). Instead, what I criticize here is that these traits describing individual differences in the tendency to engage in a specific type of behavior (e.g., crime) are used to explain a certain occurrence of this specific type of behavior, which clearly has limited theoretical value.

of criminal propensity as an explanation for individual differences in criminal behavior is thus questionable.

Another concept related to individual differences that has been discussed as a determinant of crime are criminal *attitudes* (e.g., Simourd and Olver 2002; Bonta and Andrews 2016). In general, “an attitude is a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event” (Ajzen 2005, p. 3). Thus, by definition, attitudes are evaluative in nature, whereas personality traits do not necessarily involve evaluation. Moreover, attitudes are more malleable than personality traits (Ajzen 2005). Criminal attitudes, in turn, have been defined as “the constellation of criminally oriented attitudes, values, beliefs, and rationalizations” (Simourd and Olver 2002, p. 428). Thus, apart from involving some apparent circularity—defining attitudes with attitudes—the way in which criminal attitudes are conceptualized differs from how attitudes are more generally conceptualized within psychology. Criminal attitudes seem to be more akin to the concept of personality traits than to the concept of (general) attitudes. This holds at least to the extent that personality traits capture individual differences in thinking and feeling: the former is primarily captured by “beliefs” and “rationalizations” in the definition of criminal attitudes; the latter is primarily captured by “values,” which are deeply functionally connected with emotions given that threats to one’s values usually lead to strong emotional reactions (e.g., Lazarus 1991; Conte, Hahnel, and Brosch 2022). Further below, I argue that definitions as per social learning theory (Akers 1998, 2001)—which are often treated synonymously for criminal attitudes (Pratt et al. 2010)—can be considered as aspects of personality traits. By and large, criminal attitudes as conceptualized in criminology are not clearly distinct from personality traits, emphasizing the need for more conceptual clarity.

Finally, *preferences* denote individuals’ ranking of choice alternatives based on their perceived utility or, in other words, “tastes or desires that impact how one weighs subjective expectations in a decision calculus” (Thomas, O’Neill, and Loughran 2023, p. 613). Typically, three types of preferences are differentiated in the literature: (i) social preferences, also called other-regarding preferences, describing the extent to which individuals value their own versus other people’s welfare (Van Lange 1999; Fehr and Schmidt 2006); (ii) time preferences describing how individuals trade off smaller immediate benefits against greater long-term benefits (Frederick, Loewenstein, and O’Donoghue 2002); and (iii) risk preferences describing how individuals evaluate potentially higher outcomes

that occur with lower probability versus lower outcomes that occur with higher probability (Hertwig, Wulff, and Mata 2018). Importantly, preferences are generally considered to be trait-like, as also suggested by their considerable stability over time (Murphy, Ackermann, and Handgraaf 2011; Meier and Sprenger 2015; Mata et al. 2018). Research studying the relation between preferences and crime (Epper et al. 2022; Thomas, O'Neill, and Loughran 2023) may thus profit from integration with research studying the relation between personality traits and crime, given that both lines of research essentially pursue the same goal: “understanding who commits crime and why” (Epper et al. 2022, p. 1).

Taken together, concepts tapping into individual differences are widespread in criminology. To fully reap the benefits of these different lines of research targeting individual differences in crime, drawing on their common denominator—personality—is worthwhile. As implied by their strong conceptual overlap with personality, the concepts used to refer to individual differences in criminology may be streamlined to increase parsimony and precision in accounting for individual differences in crime. For example, future work may simply differentiate between personality traits and attitudes while dispensing with concepts such as criminal character and criminal propensity. Such an approach will not only prevent tautologies and conceptual inconsistencies but also allow for stronger integration with related research in the social and behavioral sciences, particularly psychology.

III. The Role of Personality in Theories of Crime

Several criminological theories acknowledge the role of individual differences. Others largely neglect them and claim that the situation is the key driver of criminal behavior. An example of this latter group is the rational choice perspective (Cohen and Felson 1979; Cornish and Clarke 2016), which proposes that individuals are deliberate decision makers who prefer crime when the benefits outweigh the potential costs in a given situation. Increasing the benefits or decreasing the potential costs of crime (e.g., sanction severity or probability) should thus generally increase individuals' willingness to engage in crime, suggesting that “all people are capable of crime if the price is right” (Hirschi 2017, p. 109). Critically, such notions overlook that there are consistent individual differences in crime and related behaviors that influence criminal decision-making beyond situational influences, rendering these notions incomplete from the outset.

By contrast, most mainstream criminological theories do acknowledge that individuals differ in their willingness to commit crimes and suggest that these individual differences can be accounted for by relatively stable person factors. In what follows, I provide brief and nonexhaustive summaries of some theories emphasizing meaningful individual differences variables and delineate how these theories conceptualize individual differences. In so doing, I mainly focus on those aspects of the theories that are relevant for the discussion of individual differences rather than provide comprehensive introductions.

A. Self-Control Theory

Self-control theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) is one of the most popular and influential theories of criminal behavior (Pratt and Cullen 2000; Burt 2020). At its heart, it proposes low self-control as the key underlying determinant of crime and analogous behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, smoking, and gambling, with crime being defined as “acts of force or fraud undertaken in pursuit of self-interest” that “tend to be short lived, immediately gratifying, easy, simple, and exciting” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, pp. 14–15). Self-control, in turn, is conceptualized in close reference to the defining characteristics of crime as “the tendency of individuals to pursue short-term gratification without consideration of the long-term consequences of their acts” (p. 177). Gottfredson and Hirschi further distill different elements of self-control, describing individuals low in self-control as impulsive, risk seeking, short-sighted, physical (as opposed to mental), negligent, and self-centered. These elements—and self-control more generally—are proposed to be relatively stable once developed in early childhood through ineffective child rearing, thus falling “well within the meaning of ‘personality trait’” (p. 109).

Strikingly, the way self-control is conceptualized “is at odds with decades of research on the structure of personality” (Marcus 2004, p. 38; for similar reasoning, see Van Gelder et al. [2020]). That is, the characteristics defining low self-control are captured by different basic personality traits as per the Big Five and HEXACO models, which are supposed to be largely independent of each other. Correspondingly, self-control exhibits meaningful correlations with several Big Five (Marcus 2003; Romero et al. 2003) and HEXACO (De Vries and Van Gelder 2013; Jones 2017a) dimensions. Evidence also suggests that the characteristics proposed to be elements of self-control cannot be considered aspects of a unidimensional

construct, as suggested by self-control theory (Piquero, MacIntosh, and Hickman 2000; Romero et al. 2003; Forrest et al. 2019).⁴ Thus, it is neither justified at a conceptual level nor implied from an empirical point of view that the different trait elements captured by self-control “come together in the same people” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, p. 91).⁵ All this criticism aside, the fact that a trait-like construct forms the centerpiece of one of the main theories within the field of criminology demonstrates the vital significance of personality for the understanding of crime.

B. Situational Action Theory

Situational action theory (Wikström 2004, 2006; Wikström and Treiber 2007) likewise gives credit to the idea that (more or less stable) individual differences affect crime. It proposes that any kind of action, including criminal behavior, can be conceptualized as a two-step process. The first step entails the perception of alternatives for action, which is a function of both characteristics of the individual and characteristics of the situation. As Wikström (2004, p. 6) argued, “different persons in the same setting may pay attention to different aspects of what goes on in the setting . . . [meaning that] people may perceive different alternatives for action.” If an individual perceives one or several alternatives for action, the second step involves making a choice. Here, individuals are proposed to form an intention to pursue a particular action (e.g., an act of crime), based on their motivation (i.e., desires and beliefs, or commitments), and to ultimately act on this intention. However, given that perception precedes the process of choice, “action (inaction) is always an outcome of an individual’s evaluation and processing of the environmental input” (Wikström 2006, p. 85); thus, “to choose to commit a crime one must first see crime as an alternative” (Wikström 2004, p. 7).

Based on this reasoning, the crucial question thus is: What makes an individual perceive crime as an alternative—and to further act on this perception? According to situational action theory, the key individual

⁴ As described by Hirschi (2004), the authors of self-control theory later admitted errors in their original conceptualization of the self-control concept and clarified that the elements of self-control proposed earlier should not be considered defining features of the concept or of any measure of it.

⁵ For further criticism on self-control theory apart from the issues raised here, see, e.g., Akers (1991), Marcus (2004), Goode (2008), Burt (2020), and Van Gelder et al. (2020).

factor influencing whether individuals perceive crime as an alternative is morality. Morality is defined as “an evaluative function of events in the world based on values about what is right and wrong to do” that “does not only include the person’s beliefs about what is right and wrong to do, but also how much he or she cares about doing the right thing (moral commitment) and the strength of the feelings of guilt and shame (moral emotions) that may be associated with not doing the right thing” (Wikström 2004, p. 15). By definition, the concept of morality thus strongly converges with the concept of a personality trait. The vital significance of morality for crime is, in turn, mirrored in how crime is defined, namely, as “acts of moral rule breakings defined in law” (Wikström and Treiber 2007, p. 241). Correspondingly, situational action theory proposes that “an individual’s morality . . . is the most important individual characteristic influencing an individual’s engagement in acts of crime” (p. 258). Thus, by considering morality as an individual-level characteristic that affects how individuals make decisions across contexts, the theory essentially gives priority to a personality trait as the main driver of crime—even though never explicitly declaring morality a personality trait.

Situational action theory also gives a home to another (familiar) person-level variable, namely, self-control. In contrast to self-control theory, however, self-control in situational action theory is of secondary importance as it should only come into play if individuals perceive crime as an alternative in the first place and actively deliberate about whether to engage in it. Situational action theory also incorporates an alternative conception of self-control as compared to self-control theory, namely, “the extent to which the individual is able to make choices in accordance with his or her moral [judgments] when faced with temptations or provocations” (Wikström 2004, p. 16). Of note, Wikström and Treiber (2007, p. 243) explicitly distinguish self-control from a personality trait, contending that “self-control is best analysed as a situational concept” and that it “is part of the process of choice, not an individual trait.” This is because, they argue, “self-control is something we do . . . rather than something we are” (p. 243). However, as explained above, a tendency describing an individual’s typical behavior (i.e., what we do) falls well within the boundaries of a personality trait. It follows that self-control as per situational action theory fulfills the criteria of a trait.

Situational action theory thus incorporates at least one, and arguably two, individual-level concepts—morality and self-control—that are closely tied to the meaning of personality traits. Moreover, the idea that individuals

differ in how they construe situations—specifically, in the tendency to see crime as an alternative for action—and that these individual differences in construal are a key driver of subsequent behavior corresponds to theoretical notions and empirical evidence on how personality manifests itself (e.g., Rauthmann et al. 2015; Funder 2016; Gerpott et al. 2018). In sum, personality is de facto deeply entrenched in situational action theory.

C. *General Strain Theory*

General strain theory (Agnew 1992) focuses on strains resulting from negative relationships or experiences with others, such as the death of a loved one, unfair treatment by someone, or being insulted by others, as a determinant of crime. Strains are proposed to increase the likelihood that individuals will experience negative emotional states, particularly anger. These negative emotional states, in turn, create pressure for corrective action to reduce those states—with delinquency being one possible reaction, for example, through seeking revenge.

Crucially, “virtually all strain theories . . . acknowledge that only *some* strained individuals turn to delinquency” (Agnew 1992, p. 66), suggesting that certain person factors—traits—may account for crime by influencing how individuals cope with strains. However, research on “the factors that condition the effect of strain on delinquency . . . has neglected what may be the most important set of conditioning variables: the personality traits of the individual” (Agnew et al. 2002, p. 45). In his formulation of general strain theory, Agnew (1992) therefore included self-efficacy—individuals’ beliefs about their capabilities to act in ways that are necessary to achieve certain goals (Bandura 1994)—as a key personality trait affecting individuals’ reactions to strain. Agnew (1992, p. 71) proposed that “individuals high in self-efficacy are more likely to feel that their strain can be alleviated by behavioral coping of a nondelinquent nature,” which was later supported by corresponding evidence (Agnew and White 1992).

Further extending general strain theory, Agnew and colleagues (2002) considered two additional broad traits conducive to the explanation of individual differences in reactions to strains, namely, negative emotionality and constraint as conceptualized within Tellegen’s (1985) three-factor model of personality. Whereas “individuals high in negative emotionality are much more likely than are others to experience events as aversive, to attribute these events to the malicious behavior of others,

to experience intense emotional reactions to these events—particularly the key emotion of anger—and to be disposed to respond to such events in an aggressive or antisocial manner . . . individuals low in constraint . . . are impulsive, are risk-taking/sensation-seeking, reject conventional social norms, and are unconcerned with the feelings or rights of others” (Agnew et al. 2002, p. 46). Thus, strain should particularly lead to crime among those high in negative emotionality and low in constraint. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the chronic experience of strains may foster increases in negative emotionality over time (Agnew and Brezina 2010). Taken together, general strain theory makes a strong case for personality as a key driver of criminal conduct, also offering insights into how personality may operate in this relationship: as a factor influencing the perception of and coping with strains.

D. Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory (e.g., Akers 1973, 2001; see Pratt et al. [2010] for a meta-analysis) maintains that criminal behavior is the result of a learning process fostered through association with others who engage in or approve of crime. This is because “such a pattern of association provides more criminal than non-criminal role models, greater reinforcement of criminal than conforming behavior, and the shaping of more pro-crime than anti-crime attitudes” (Akers 2010, p. 22). Social learning theory thus suggests that crime is first and foremost driven by an individual’s social environment, whereas trait characteristics are not explicitly taken into account as contributing factors.

Crucially, however, social learning theory offers at least two points of contact for personality to come into play. First, a key concept within social learning theory—definitions—shows clear conceptual overlap with personality traits. Definitions denote “orientations, rationalizations, definitions of the situation, and other evaluative and moral attitudes that define the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified” (Akers 2001, p. 195). For example, neutralizing definitions—those that most commonly promote crime—“acknowledge the general improbability of an act yet furnish justification or rationalization for engaging in the act nonetheless” (Akers 2010, p. 25). In general, definitions are thus part of an individual’s belief system. Now, recall that personality traits as commonly defined are closely tied to individuals’ beliefs: they essentially incorporate individuals’ general

tendency to think, next to their tendency to act and feel. A prime example demonstrating the entrenchment of beliefs in personality traits is the so-called dark factor of personality, which denotes “the general tendency to maximize one’s individual utility—disregarding, accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others—, *accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications*” (Moshagen, Hilbig, and Zettler 2018, p. 657; emphasis added). By definition, justifying beliefs—which essentially represent neutralizing definitions—are thus an inherent aspect of this personality trait. Indeed, high levels on the dark factor typically go along with various justifying beliefs (Hilbig et al. 2022), including distrust-related beliefs (e.g., “eat or be eaten”), hierarchy-related beliefs (e.g., “the ends justify the means”), and relativism-related beliefs (i.e., “there are always shades of gray”), and these justifying beliefs, in turn, have been shown to underlie the consistent link between high levels on the dark factor and unethical behavior (Hilbig et al. 2022). By implication, neutralizing definitions, and justifying beliefs more generally, are to some extent rooted in personality and not only learned through association with criminal peers. Such findings should be accommodated within social learning theory in the future.

Second, individuals will likely differ in their tendency to surround themselves with criminal others. Research in personality psychology consistently shows that personality affects the selection of friends (Back et al. 2023), particularly during adolescence and early adulthood (Wrzus and Neyer 2016), in the sense that birds of a feather flock together. Although such peer selection processes have been theorized (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) and empirically shown (TenEyck and Barnes 2015; Gallupe et al. 2020) in criminology, “the factors that contribute to how individuals actually select friends are surprisingly understudied” (McGloin and Thomas 2019, p. 256). Instead, selection effects have been primarily treated as bias (Sampson 2013) or “some nuisance that must be addressed either methodologically or statistically” (McGloin and Thomas 2019, p. 256). This view, however, necessarily limits what can be learned about the development and maintenance of crime, simply because systematic individual-level variance is treated as unsystematic error. Future research on social learning processes may thus profit from incorporating theories and research from personality psychology about how personality influences peer selection and vice versa (e.g., Caspi and Roberts 2001; Reitz et al. 2014; Wrzus and Neyer 2016).

E. Summary

As Miller and Lynam (2001, p. 784) observe, this review of selected influential theories of crime has shown that “the construct of personality is complementary, not antithetical, to many theories of crime.” All the reviewed theories allude to systematic individual differences that are compatible with the involvement of personality in crime, which often remains implicit. There is great potential in making the entrenchment of personality in criminological theories more explicit, thereby satisfying recurrent calls for stronger theoretical integration within criminology (e.g., Bernard and Snipes 1996; Krohn and Eassey 2014). As Krohn and Eassey (2014, p. 5) noted, “the quest for unifying the ideas contained in theories of crime shows no sign of abating.” The concept of personality could provide such a basis for unification that can promote theoretical progress through integration. At the same time, drawing on the concept of personality provides an important basis for theory competition because it will allow explicitly spelling out where two or more theories converge and where they diverge when it comes to individual differences in crime. Overall, explicitly integrating concepts and ideas from personality psychology within crime theories will thus advance criminological research in many critical ways.

IV. Personality Traits Related to Crime

Paradoxically, although personality is not prominently featured in crime theories, studies linking certain personality traits to crime and analogous behavior abound, dating back to the first half of the nineteenth century (Schuessler and Cressey 1950). Early research, however, has been criticized for relating a huge variety of supposedly different traits to crime (Schuessler and Cressey 1950; Waldo and Dinitz 1967; Tennenbaum 1977), which can plausibly be attributed to a lack of consensus on personality structure and its measurement at the time. With the widespread adoption of the Big Five and the HEXACO frameworks as models of basic personality structure, that has changed. A key advantage of these models is that they allow any one trait to be located within the personality universe, thus providing a basis for integration of research relying on different traits (for a prime example using the Big Five framework, see Miller and Lynam [2001]). In the following summary of research on the association between personality traits and crime, I therefore resort to basic personality models as a frame of reference.

To illuminate which personality traits are consistent predictors of crime, research has pursued two different approaches. The first involves investigating the correlation between personality traits and indicators of crime or other deviant behavior (e.g., aggression, counterproductive behavior at work/school, unethical decision-making). This research usually draws on samples from the general population. The second approach involves studying mean-level differences in certain personality traits between offenders and nonoffenders. This builds on the notion that certain personality traits may differentiate between those who are more versus less likely to commit crimes.

Table 2 provides an overview of studies offering insights into which personality traits can account for individual differences in crime. It is by no means comprehensive but instead geared toward providing a representative sample of relevant research findings focusing on more recent evidence to tap into recent advances in the understanding of personality structure and measurement. At large, the overview shows that traits revealing consistent links to criminal and other deviant behavior can broadly be grouped into three categories capturing individual differences in the following key aspects: (i) disregard of ethical principles and other people's welfare (i.e., low morality); (ii) impulsivity, immediate gratification, and disregard of future consequences of one's actions (i.e., shortsightedness); and (iii) experience and expression of negative emotional states, most prominently anger (i.e., negative affectivity). In what follows, I elaborate on these three key categories capturing criminogenic characteristics.

A. Low Morality

Crime is usually at odds with ethical and social norms and inflicts harm on others or society at large. In other words, "crimes are behaviors that disadvantage others by preventing them from maintaining their health and livelihood" (Lynch, Stretesky, and Long 2015, p. 170). One class of individual differences variables consistently showing up as predictors of criminal conduct thus pertains to low morality, defined as the dispositional tendency to disregard and violate ethical principles (e.g., honesty, fairness) and devalue others' welfare.

Within basic personality models, morality is best represented by HEXACO Honesty-Humility, which captures individual differences in sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty (high levels) versus dishonesty, unfairness, greed, and boastfulness (low levels; see table 1). Several

studies have shown a negative link between Honesty-Humility and crime (table 2), suggesting that individuals scoring lower on this trait are more likely to engage in criminal behavior than those scoring higher (e.g., Dunlop et al. 2012; Van Gelder and De Vries 2014; Jones 2017*a*). Likewise, offenders typically exhibit lower levels on Honesty-Humility than nonoffenders (e.g., Rolison, Hanoch, and Gummerum 2013; Ścigała et al. 2022). According to a recent meta-analysis, the association between Honesty-Humility and crime corresponds to a medium-to-large negative effect (Zettler et al. 2020). Among the Big Five, in turn, morality is best captured by Agreeableness. For Agreeableness, too, studies have shown a negative association with crime (e.g., Heaven 1996; Barlas and Egan 2006; Wilcox et al. 2014) and that offenders tend to score lower than nonoffenders (e.g., Le Corff and Toupin 2009; Eriksson, Masche-No, and Dåderman 2017; but see Dennison, Stough, and Birgden 2001). In line with these findings, meta-analyses also consistently found HEXACO Honesty-Humility and Big Five Agreeableness to account for individual differences in other deviant behaviors, such as aggression and antisocial behavior (e.g., Miller and Lynam 2001; Jones, Miller, and Lynam 2011; Vize et al. 2019), counterproductive work or academic behavior (e.g., Pletzer et al. 2019; Cuadrado, Salgado, and Moscoso 2021; Ellen et al. 2021), and unethical decision-making (Heck et al. 2018; Zettler et al. 2020). Effects for HEXACO Honesty-Humility are, however, generally stronger and more robust than effects for Big Five Agreeableness.

Morality is also captured by other more specific traits that have been consistently linked to criminal conduct. Most prominently, this holds for various so-called dark personality traits, which, by definition, have a strong conceptual association with low morality. The most well-known dark traits are the dark triad—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus and Williams 2002)—accompanied by sadism to form the dark tetrad (Paulhus 2014). What is common to these dark traits is that “all four traits conceptually share the feature of callousness . . . , whereas a high sense of grandiosity is specific to narcissism, Machiavellians in particular are manipulative, sadists specifically enjoy cruelty, and psychopathy represents a blend of impulsiveness and manipulateness in addition to callousness” (Schreiber and Marcus 2020, p. 1022).⁶ Despite these idiosyncrasies,

⁶ Psychopathy is closely associated—and often treated interchangeably—with antisocial personality disorder (Hare 1996), for which a link to crime has likewise been theorized and shown (e.g., Kosson, Lorenz, and Newman 2006; Fridell et al. 2008; Bonta and Andrews 2016).

TABLE 2
 Overview of Empirical Studies on the Relation between Personality Traits and Crime

Study	Sample	Outcome	Personality Trait	Zero-Order Effects of Traits
Armenti, Sneed, and Babcock (2018)	135 males	Juvenile detention (self-report)	Trait anger	Trait anger (+)
Azizli et al. (2016)	464 students	Misconduct behavior (self-report)	Dark triad	Psychopathy (+), Machiavellianism (+), narcissism (+)
Bader et al. (2021), study 2	1,853 adults	Aversive civic behavior, criminal and analogous behavior, vandalism, violence	Dark factor of personality	Dark factor of personality (+)
Barlas and Egan (2006)	121 adolescents	Delinquency (self-report)	Big Five	Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-)
Beaver et al. (2017)	15,701 adolescents	Criminal involvement, delinquency (self-reports)	Psychopathy	Psychopathy (+)
Becerra-García et al. (2013)	58 male sexual offenders, 31 male nonsexual offenders, 42 male controls	Offending (sexual and nonsexual)	Big Five	Neuroticism (+), Extraversion (-)
Burt and Simons (2013)	712 adolescents	Delinquency (self-report)	Thrill-seeking, self-control	Thrill-seeking (+), self-control (-)
Caspi et al. (1994), sample 1	862 adolescents	Delinquency (self-report and official records)	Tellegen's three-factor model of personality	Negative emotionality (+), constraint (-)
Caspi et al. (1994), sample 2	430 adolescents	Delinquency (self-report)	Tellegen's three-factor model of personality	Negative emotionality (+), constraint (-)
Chatzimike Levidi et al. (2022)	601 adults	Intention to commit crime (in vignettes)	HEXACO, self-control	Honesty-Humility (-), Conscientiousness (-); self-control (-)

Cunha, Braga, and Gonçalves (2021)	152 batterers	Intimate partner violence (self-report)	Psychopathy	Psychopathy (+)
DeLisi et al. (2018)	252 juvenile offenders	Delinquency (self-report)	Temperament (deficits in effortful control and negative emotionality), psychopathy	Temperament (+), psychopathy (+)
Dennison, Stough, and Birgden (2001)	64 male offenders, 33 male controls	Sex offense	Big Five	Neuroticism (+), Extraversion (-), Conscientiousness (-)
De Vries and Van Gelder (2013), study 1	133 students	Delinquency (self-report)	Big Five, HEXACO, self-control	Big Five Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-), Openness (-); HEXACO Honesty-Humility (-), Emotionality (-), Conscientiousness (-); self-control (-)
De Vries and Van Gelder (2013), study 2	709 adults	Delinquency (self-report)	Big Five, HEXACO, self-control	Big Five Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-); HEXACO Honesty-Humility (-), Emotionality (-), Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-), Openness (+); self-control (-)
Dunlop et al. (2012)	150 students	Delinquency (self-report)	HEXACO, Eysenck's three-factor personality model	Honesty-Humility (-), Emotionality (-), Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-); psychoticism (+)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Study	Sample	Outcome	Personality Trait	Zero-Order Effects of Traits
Edwards, Albertson, and Verona (2017)	493 adult offenders	Crimes against property, crimes against persons, drug-related crimes (all self-reports and official records)	Psychopathy, narcissism, borderline personality features	Psychopathy (+), narcissism (+) only for property and drug-related crime), borderline features (+, only for property crime)
Eriksson, Masche-No, and Däderman (2017), study 1	46 male convicts, ~800 male controls	Serious or repeated offenses	Big Five	Extraversion (-), Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-), Openness (-)
Eriksson, Masche-No, and Däderman (2017), study 2	46 male convicts, 45 prison guards, 32 students	Serious or repeated offenses	Big Five	Extraversion (-), Agreeableness (-)
Eriksson, Masche-No, and Däderman (2017), study 3	131 convicts, 137 controls	Serious or repeated offenses	Big Five conscientiousness facets	Order (+), self-discipline (+)
Failde-Garrido et al. (2022)	334 male convicts, 179 male controls	Offenses against road safety or other offenses	Zuckerman-Kuhlman alternative five-factor model, sensation seeking	Aggression-hostility (+), impulsivity-sensation seeking (+), neuroticism-anxiety (+), activation (+), sensation seeking (+)
Ferguson et al. (2008)	355 students	Violent crime (self-report)	Big Five, aggression	Aggression (+)
Flexon et al. (2016)	397 students	Delinquency (self-report)	Dark triad, self-control	Dark triad (+), self-control (-)
Haden and Shiva (2008)	155 male forensic psychiatric inpatients	Criminal charges	Impulsivity	Impulsivity (+)
Heaven (1996), study 1	216 adolescents	Violence, vandalism (self-reports)	Big Five	Neuroticism (+), Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-)

Author(s) and Year	Sample	Violence, vandalism (self-reports)	Big Five facets	Findings
Heaven (1996), study 2	90 students	Violence, vandalism (self-reports)	Big Five facets	Extraversion—excitement seeking (+) Agreeableness—trust, altruism, compliance (-), Conscientiousness—self-discipline (-, only for vandalism)
Jones (2017a), sample 2	172 students	Crime and analogous behavior (self-report)	HEXACO, self-control	Honesty-Humility (-), Emotionality (-), Conscientiousness (-); self-control (-)
Le Corff and Toupin (2009)	48 juvenile offenders	Delinquency (convicted)	Big Five	Neuroticism (+), Agreeableness (-)
Lee and Kim (2022)	1,354 juvenile offenders	Aggressive offending, marijuana use (self-reports)	Psychopathy	Psychopathy (+)
Mededović (2017)	256 male convicts	Aggregate of delinquency (self-reports + expert ratings) and criminal recidivism (prison files)	HEXACO	Honesty-Humility (-), Emotionality (-), Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-)
Mededović, Kujačić, and Knežević (2012), study 1	113 male offenders	Criminal recidivism	Big Five, disintegration, psychopathy	Extraversion (+), Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-); disintegration (+), psychopathy (+)
Mededović, Kujačić, and Knežević (2012), study 2	112 male offenders	Criminal recidivism	Big Five, disintegration, psychopathy	Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-); disintegration (+), psychopathy (+)
Moffitt et al. (2000)	1,037 young adults	Delinquency (self-report)	Positive emotionality, negative emotionality, restraint	Negative emotionality (+), restraint (-)
Pailing, Boon, and Egan (2014)	159 adults	Violence (self-report)	Dark triad, HEXACO, impulsivity	Psychopathy (+), Machiavellianism (+), narcissism (+); Honesty-Humility (-), Extraversion (-), Agreeableness (-); impulsivity (+)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Study	Sample	Outcome	Personality Trait	Zero-Order Effects of Traits
Pechorro et al. (2022)	567 adolescents	Delinquency (self-report)	Dark triad, self-control	Machiavellianism (+), psychopathy (+), narcissism (+), self-control (-)
Rolison, Hanoch, and Gummerum (2013)	45 male offenders, 46 male controls	Offense against another person or property	HEXACO	Honesty-Humility (-), Emotionality (+), Extraversion (-), Conscientiousness (-), Openness (-)
Ručević (2010)	706 adolescents	Delinquency (self-report)	Psychopathy	Psychopathy (+)
Ščigala et al. (2022)	117 male offenders, 4,579 controls	Delinquency (convicted)	HEXACO Honesty-Humility	Honesty-Humility (-)
Van Gelder and De Vries (2012)	495 adults	Intention to commit crime (in vignettes)	HEXACO, self-control	Honesty-Humility (-), Agreeableness (-), Conscientiousness (-); self-control (-)
Van Gelder and De Vries (2014), study 1	153 students	Intention to commit crime (in vignettes)	HEXACO, self-control	Honesty-Humility (-), Emotionality (-), Conscientiousness (-); self-control (-)
Van Gelder and De Vries (2014), study 2	129 students	Intention to commit crime (in vignettes)	HEXACO, self-control	Honesty-Humility (-), Emotionality (-), Extraversion (+), Agreeableness (+), Conscientiousness (-); self-control (-)

Van Gelder et al. (2020)	1,197 adolescents	Police contact, delinquency (self-reports)	Self-control	Self-control (-)
Van Gelder et al. (2022)	176 male students	Intention to aggress (in virtual reality scenario)	HEXACO Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Agreeableness	Honesty-Humility (-), Agreeableness (-)
Van Sintemaartensdijk et al. (2022)	181 offenders (burglars), 172 students	Burglary	HEXACO, self-control	Honesty-Humility (-), Emotionality (-), Extraversion (-), Conscientiousness (+), Openness (-), self-control (-), Egoism (+)
Weigel, Hessing, and Elffers (1999)	375 students	Intention to sexually offend (in vignettes)	Egoism	
Weulen Kranenburg et al. (2023)	521 crime suspects, 512 controls	Suspected cybercrime or offline crime	HEXACO	Honesty-Humility (-), Emotionality (-), Extraversion (+), Openness (-)
Wilcox et al. (2014)	2,220 adolescents	Delinquency (self-report)	Big Five Agreeableness, Conscientiousness	Agreeableness (-)
Wright et al. (2017)	1,000 adolescents	Delinquency (self-report)	Dark triad, self-control	Dark triad (+), self-control (-)

NOTE.—+ = positive zero-order effect; - = negative zero-order effect.

the commonalities of dark traits prevail, as evidenced by the finding that they can all be traced back to the same underlying dispositional tendency (Moshagen, Hilbig, and Zettler 2018). Higher levels on all dark traits have been consistently associated with an increased likelihood to engage in crime (e.g., Lyons and Jonason 2015; Wright et al. 2017; Bader et al. 2021). This also holds for another concept in the realm of immoral tendencies primarily considered in earlier research, namely, psychoticism (Eysenck and Gudjonsson 1989; Eysenck 1996), which combines characteristics such as being egocentric, antisocial, unemphatic, cold, aggressive, and impulsive (Eysenck 1970). Taken together, all these findings suggest that low levels of dispositional morality are a key driver of criminal conduct.

B. Shortsightedness

Crime usually entails immediate, short-term benefits (e.g., acquisition of monetary or material goods, satisfaction of sexual needs, pleasure), whereas the potential costs of crime, such as legal sanctions or social stigma, are delayed (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Thus, “crimes occur . . . when the delayed costs do not motivate perpetrators to refrain” (Nagin and Pogarsky 2004, p. 296). Conversely, refraining from crime requires forgoing immediate benefits in the anticipation of potential long-term costs. In line with these notions, the second class of personality traits emerging as consistent predictors of crime refers to dispositional shortsightedness, defined herein as the tendency to focus on immediate benefits and gratification while neglecting the long-term costs of one’s actions.⁷

Within basic personality models, shortsightedness is best captured by the low pole of Conscientiousness.⁸ A key feature associated with low levels of Conscientiousness is the tendency to act on one’s impulses and, thus, without thorough reflection, whereas high levels of Conscientiousness are associated with the tendency to deliberate carefully before making a decision (see table 1). Correspondingly, as summarized in table 2, several studies reported negative correlations between Conscientiousness and crime (e.g.,

⁷ Closely related to shortsightedness, the concept of short-term mind-sets has been introduced as an important driver of crime (Van Gelder et al. 2018, 2020), describing “an orientation towards the here-and-now at the expense of considering the future” (Kübel et al. 2023, p. 1). However, short-term mind-sets are arguably more malleable than dispositional (trait) shortsightedness, given that they may readily change over time as a function of exposure to environmental factors such as victimization, parenting styles, and sanctions.

⁸ Conscientiousness is similarly conceptualized within the Big Five and the HEXACO personality models and can essentially be considered equivalent (Thielmann et al. 2022).

Barlas and Egan 2006; Van Gelder and De Vries 2014), and there is also evidence showing that offenders score lower on Conscientiousness than nonoffenders (Dennison, Stough, and Birgden 2001; Rolison, Hanoch, and Gummerum 2013; but see Eriksson, Masche-No, and Dåderman 2017).⁹ Of note, however, effect sizes linking Conscientiousness to crime are typically smaller than corresponding effect sizes for morality-related traits. For example, in the meta-analysis by Zettler et al. (2020), the effect of Conscientiousness on crime was only half the size of the corresponding effect of Honesty-Humility (i.e., $\hat{\rho} = -.21$ vs. $-.39$). A similar pattern emerged in meta-analyses linking the Big Five to aggression and antisocial behavior, consistently showing descriptively stronger negative relations for Agreeableness (capturing high morality) than Conscientiousness (Miller and Lynam 2001; Jones, Miller, and Lynam 2011; Vize et al. 2019). A potential reason for the somewhat weaker impact of Conscientiousness on crime may be that only some aspects of Conscientiousness tap into shortsightedness whereas other aspects—such as diligence and orderliness—do not and may hence dilute corresponding effect sizes.

Studies relying on traits other than those from basic personality models also support shortsightedness as a main class of characteristics accounting for individual differences in crime. Most prominently, shortsightedness is subsumed in low self-control, for which ample evidence supports its involvement in crime.¹⁰ Closely related, impulsivity—which is often equated with low self-control (De Ridder et al. 2012)—has been positively linked to crime (Haden and Shiva 2008; Shin et al. 2016), as has psychopathy (e.g., Ručević 2010; Beaver et al. 2017), of which impulsivity is a key defining characteristic (e.g., Hare and Neumann 2008; Jones and Paulhus 2014). Additional traits capturing shortsightedness that have been linked to crime are risk and sensation seeking (Burt and Simons 2013; Forrest

⁹ The negative relation between Conscientiousness and crime also fits nicely with earlier studies resorting to Tellegen's (1985) model of personality, showing that Tellegen's dimension of constraint (Church 1994)—which bears strong overlap with Conscientiousness—yields a consistent negative relation to crime (Caspi et al. 1994; Moffitt et al. 2000) and antisocial behavior more generally (Miller and Lynam 2001).

¹⁰ Note that the various studies linking self-control to crime are not explicitly captured in the overview in table 2. For one, this evidence has repeatedly been meta-analyzed (Pratt and Cullen 2000; De Ridder et al. 2012; Vazsonyi, Mikuška, and Kelley 2017); thus, the respective references can be found elsewhere in a much more comprehensive manner than would be possible here. In addition, whereas the vast majority of research investigating self-control's association with crime has relied on Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) conceptualization and the corresponding operationalization (Grasmick et al. 1993), this conceptualization is problematic for several reasons, as discussed in Sec. III.A.

et al. 2019; Van Gelder et al. 2020).¹¹ Taken together, several of the apparent personality-crime associations can be broken down to individual differences in shortsightedness as a key individual difference underlying crime.¹²

C. *Negative Affectivity*

Criminal acts often occur in the spur of the moment, triggered by negative emotional feelings such as anger (e.g., Agnew 1992; Davey, Day, and Howells 2005). As a result, “criminal decisions may actually be heavily infused with affect” (Van Gelder 2013, p. 747). By implication, individuals who are more likely to experience such negative affective states—those high in trait negative affectivity (Watson and Clark 1984)—should be prone to engage in criminal behavior, with negative affectivity encompassing many negative affective states, including, but not limited to, anger, contempt, fear, and disgust (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988).

In line with this proposition, several studies reported significant positive relations between crime and Big Five Neuroticism (e.g., Caspi et al. 1994; Becerra-García et al. 2013), a concept closely tied to negative affectivity (see table 1; see also Anglim et al. 2020).¹³ Likewise, Big Five Neuroticism emerged as a consistent predictor of aggression and antisocial behavior in meta-analyses (Miller and Lynam 2001; Jones, Miller, and Lynam 2011; Vize et al. 2019). However, corresponding effect sizes were relatively small ($r \sim .10$) and differed as a function of the outcome under scrutiny (Vize, Miller, and Lynam 2018; Vize et al. 2019), suggesting that certain types of crime and related behavior are better accounted for by Neuroticism than others or that the effect of Neuroticism may hinge on other moderators, such as situation construal (see below).

¹¹ Within basic personality models, risk and sensation seeking can be considered “interstitial,” meaning that they reflect blends of two or more trait dimensions rather than mapping onto a single trait dimension. For example, in terms of the HEXACO model, risk and sensation seeking are characterized by high Openness to Experience, high Extraversion, low Conscientiousness, low Honesty-Humility, and low Emotionality (De Vries, De Vries, and Feij 2009; Zettler et al. 2020). Although risk and sensation seeking can thus not be uniquely mapped onto Conscientiousness—the basic trait most strongly capturing shortsightedness—both constructs reflect individual differences in the willingness to take risks in the pursuit of exciting behaviors despite potential long-term costs and, thus, shortsightedness.

¹² Further support for this link comes from studies using behavioral (i.e., preference) measures of shortsightedness, i.e., time discounting (Åkerlund et al. 2016; Epper et al. 2022).

¹³ Caspi et al. (1994) relied on Tellegen’s (1985) three-factorial model of personality; thus, their findings refer to negative emotionality, which strongly resembles Big Five Neuroticism (Church 1994).

The notion that negative affectivity is a relevant individual characteristic explaining individual differences in criminal behavior also converges with the observed negative associations of HEXACO Emotionality and Agreeableness with crime (see table 2; both meta-analytic $\hat{\rho} = -.15$; Zettler et al. 2020). Within the HEXACO personality model, aspects of negative affectivity are comprised in (high) Emotionality, capturing fearfulness and anxiety, and (low) Agreeableness, capturing anger and hostility (Anglim et al. 2020).¹⁴ By implication, the two dimensions should operate via different emotional pathways to diminish crime: Whereas (high) Emotionality should go along with greater fear of getting caught, thus amplifying the perceived costs of crime, (low) HEXACO Agreeableness should be accompanied by feelings of anger, thus fostering affect-based actions in defiance of their potential costs (Van Gelder and De Vries 2012; see also Van Gelder 2013). Although theoretically plausible, corresponding evidence on the underlying affective mechanisms driving the influence of HEXACO Emotionality and Agreeableness on crime is largely missing (for an exception involving Emotionality, see Van Gelder and De Vries [2014]). Finally, evidence showing a relation between trait anger and crime (Mazerolle, Piquero, and Capowich 2003; Armenti, Snead, and Babcock 2018) likewise supports the notion that negative affectivity is a relevant dispositional basis of crime engagement.

D. Summary

Taken together, a multitude of personality traits have been shown to account for individual differences in crime. Although being potentially overwhelming at first glance, these personality traits can be grouped into only three key trait categories: low morality, shortsightedness, and negative affectivity. The most consistent and strongest effects seem to be apparent for traits related to (low) morality, followed by traits related to

¹⁴ In addition, negative affectivity shows a medium-to-large negative correlation with HEXACO Extraversion (Anglim et al. 2020). This is attributable to the fact that HEXACO Extraversion emphasizes social self-esteem, which is also inherent in low negative affectivity. However, given that this emphasis is idiosyncratic for HEXACO Extraversion rather than applying to Extraversion more generally (Thielmann et al. 2022)—and also because social self-esteem does not seem to be relevant in accounting for crime (Weulen Kranenbarg et al. 2023)—I do not discuss this link further. Also, note that although HEXACO Emotionality is closely related to Big Five Neuroticism (Thielmann et al. 2022), the two trait dimensions show reversed correlations with crime. This can likely be attributed to anger being associated with high levels of Big Five Neuroticism whereas it is captured by low Agreeableness, not Emotionality, in the HEXACO model.

shortsightedness. Relations of traits related to negative affectivity, in turn, appear more volatile and dependent on the specific crime context.

These findings are compatible with one of the basic premises of situational action theory that crime engagement is first and foremost a matter of individuals' morality (Wikström 2004, 2006; Wikström and Treiber 2007). The primary role of low dispositional morality in accounting for crime is also theoretically plausible. All kinds of crime involve violating legal or social rules, which is typically considered immoral. By contrast, crimes may differ with regard to the magnitude of their projected short-term benefits and long-term costs, the extent to which they involve immediate (impulsive) reactions, and the extent to which they trigger certain affective states. This may explain the comparatively weak relations of traits capturing negative affectivity in particular. That said, we lack studies systematically pitting traits from the three categories against each other to investigate the unique predictive validity of different criminogenic characteristics. Future research is thus needed to illuminate whether traits capturing low morality are indeed unconditionally linked to crime, whereas traits capturing shortsightedness and negative affectivity may be more conditionally so.

V. A Future Research Agenda

Studies linking various aspects of personality to crime offer crucial insights into the dispositional basis of criminal behavior. Yet, many open questions and unresolved issues surrounding the personality-crime link remain. Here I discuss the most pressing questions and issues that need to be tackled at the intersection of criminology and personality psychology. These are (i) stronger implementation of the personality concept within crime theories, (ii) developing and testing theories of the personality-crime link while considering person-situation interactions and the psychological processes involved, and (iii) adopting a longitudinal perspective to inform crime development over time as well as desistance interventions.

First, theories of crime would benefit from explicitly incorporating personality as a fundamental person characteristic. Although several crime theories acknowledge stable individual differences as germane to the explanation of crime—most prominently through the notion of criminal propensity (Sampson and Smith 2021)—only rarely is the concept of personality explicitly credited as a key determinant of crime engagement (Agnew et al. 2002; Van Gelder and De Vries 2012). Closely related, stable

individual differences are referred to in many different ways within criminology, resulting in conceptual ambiguity and terminological heterogeneity. To address these issues, I propose to incorporate the personality concept more explicitly and consistently into criminological theory. Others have made similar calls (Caspi et al. 1994; Romero et al. 2003; Jones, Miller, and Lynam 2011), leading me to hope that constant dripping will wear the stone eventually.

A second priority concerns theorizing and systematic investigation of person-situation interactions in crime research. In the above summary, I have exclusively focused on the main effects of certain personality traits (i.e., zero-order correlations and mean differences between offenders and nonoffenders) but essentially neglected situational influences. Personality, however, does not unfold in a vacuum but rather finds expression in interaction with the environment; traits become manifest only when the situation affords their expression (e.g., Endler and Magnusson 1976; Fleenor and Jayawickreme 2015; Rauthmann 2020). This perspective has forged ahead in criminology under the name of “opportunity.” Most prominently, self-control theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) proposes that crime occurs when propensity (i.e., low self-control) coincides with opportunity (see also Hay and Forrest 2008). Others have picked up on this idea, too, for example, Wikström in his situational action theory (Wikström 2004, 2006; Wikström and Treiber 2007), according to which situational temptations and provocations serve as “causal mechanisms . . . that link environmental stimuli to individual action (acts of crime)” (Wikström 2004, p. 20), and Osgood et al. (1996, p. 635) in their extended routine activity perspective, proposing that “unstructured socializing with peers in the absence of authority figures presents opportunities for deviance.”¹⁵ By implication, relevant personality traits should be activated to influence crime only in the presence of a respective opportunity.

The concept of situational affordances—that is, properties of situations that allow certain person factors to be expressed—offers a useful basis for corresponding theory development and theory-driven testing of person-situation interactions. The three criminogenic trait characteristics identified here—low morality, shortsightedness, and negative affect—can

¹⁵ Whereas a temptation denotes “a perceived option to satisfy a particular desire (need, want) in an unlawful way,” a provocation is defined as “a perceived attack on the person’s (or his or her significant others), property, security or self-respect that generates anger or similar emotional states that may instigate an unlawful response” (Wikström 2004, p. 20).

be mapped onto unique situational affordances providing different opportunities for crime (for a similar approach concerning prosocial behavior, see Thielmann, Spadaro, and Balliet [2020]). For example, traits capturing shortsightedness may particularly account for criminal behavior when the situation affords generating considerable short-term benefits through crime, such as an immediate material gain. Conversely, traits capturing negative affectivity may particularly account for criminal behavior when the situation involves being provoked by someone, thus affording the expression of anger. This logic also implies that different types of crime may be accounted for by different personality traits. Indeed, evidence suggests that different groups of offenders (e.g., suspected cyber vs. offline offenders) feature different personality profiles (Weulen Kranenbarg et al. 2023). Distinct personality correlates have also been found for violent versus nonviolent offenses (Varley Thornton, Graham-Kevan, and Archer 2010; Boccio and Beaver 2018). Taken together, the idea that “there is principally no difference in explaining the causal processes that make a person hit someone, lie to someone or steal someone’s belongings” (Wikström and Treiber 2009, p. 78) and that one mechanism can explain “all crime, at all times” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 117) appears fundamentally misguided. Instead, different people may be susceptible to crime under different circumstances as a function of situational affordances provided. However, systematic investigations of such person-situation interactions are missing—something that future research needs to illuminate (Miller and Lynam 2001; Van Gelder and De Vries 2012). For example, meta-analyses may examine the type of crime and corresponding affordances as a moderator of the personality-crime link. Moreover, tailored experiments may be designed to test the above propositions about which traits should relate to crime in the presence of which affordances.

In addition to systematically illuminating person-situation interactions in the context of crime, future research should consider person-situation transactions, that is, how person and environment shape each other over time (Caspi and Roberts 2001; Rauthmann 2021). Individuals “are not merely passively or randomly ‘exposed’ to situations, but also shape and define them” (Rauthmann and Sherman 2016, p. 12). For example, individuals may differ with regard to how they perceive situations (construal), which reactions they evoke in others (evocation), and which situations they seek out in daily life (selection; Buss 1987). Such person-situation transactions thus describe mechanisms that can explain why certain person factors relate to crime. To illustrate, whereas an anger-prone individual

may perceive a small provocation as an assault—and, in turn, react aggressively—a less anger-prone individual may perceive the same provocation as completely inoffensive and thus act peacefully.¹⁶ Likewise, anger-prone individuals may seek out situations allowing them to express their anger, for example, by actively provoking a fight, whereas less anger-prone individuals may avoid such situations, therefore usually staying out of fights.¹⁷ Person-situation transactions are thus a key determinant of behavioral consistency across contexts and time (e.g., Emmons and Diener 1986; Sherman, Nave, and Funder 2010), which should also apply to the consistency of crime and analogous behavior. Future research should investigate this possibility in empirical studies examining the personality correlates of construing, evoking, and selecting situations that provide opportunities for crime.

In a similar vein, more research is needed to understand the psychological processes underlying the personality-crime link, that is, “how ... traits get outside the skin” (Hampson 2012, p. 316). To fully grasp the association between personality and crime, it is essential to go beyond knowing *that* a certain trait accounts for individual differences in criminal behavior to also understand *how* this relation comes about. Correspondingly, calls for more research at the process level abound within personality psychology (e.g., Hampson 2012; Möttus et al. 2020; Back et al. 2023), and they have also been voiced repeatedly within criminology (Miller and Lynam 2001; Van Gelder and De Vries 2012; Van Gelder et al. 2022). Taking up on these calls, research in criminology has started to look into the proximal variables acting as an intermediary between personality traits and crime. For example, Van Gelder and colleagues (2022) investigated the mediating influence of state affect (i.e., anticipated shame/guilt, fear, and anger) and cognitions (i.e., perceived risk) on the relation between relevant personality traits (i.e., HEXACO Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, and Agreeableness) and intentions to aggress in a virtual bar

¹⁶ This idea is akin to situational action theory’s proposition that individuals may differ in their perception of alternatives for action (e.g., Wikström 2004, 2006). However, situational action theory suggests that this construal process is mainly driven by an individual’s morality, whereas a personality psychological perspective implies that different traits will influence construal in different contexts, depending on whether the context affords the expression of the trait.

¹⁷ The notion of situation selection is also compatible with peer selection processes, with findings showing that crime-prone individuals are more likely to select crime-prone friends (e.g., TenEyck and Barnes 2015; Gallupe et al. 2020).

fight scenario. Results were largely in line with the authors' predictions, showing that the traits under scrutiny influenced behavior through different pathways (e.g., whereas Honesty-Humility operated mostly through its influence on anticipated shame/guilt, Emotionality operated mostly through its influence on fear). Future research is needed to extend these efforts to other traits or mediating factors (e.g., beliefs, motivations, information processing) to ultimately gain a systematic understanding of how different traits influence crime. This will also provide deeper insights into differential deterrability (e.g., Wikström, Tseloni, and Karlis 2011; Thomas, Loughran, and Piquero 2013) as a function of personality traits.

Finally, more longitudinal research on the personality-crime relation is needed to uncover to what extent changes in personality coincide with changes in crime and how strongly personality at an earlier age influences crime later in life (Caspi et al. 1994). Both these issues tap into the causal influence of personality on crime engagement. The former issue in particular will provide vital insights into how personality research can inform desistance interventions. As proposed by the identity theory of desistance (Paternoster and Bushway 2009, pp. 1108–9), “desistance from crime involves important changes in a person’s identity, tastes, values, and preferences.” Identity, in turn, is “intimately tied to personality processes and personality development” (McAdams et al. 2021, p. 16). By implication, desirable changes in individuals’ personality may be an effective means to prevent future crime from happening. Emerging findings in personality psychology demonstrate that individuals can change their personality in desirable ways when assisted by tailored trait change interventions (Stieger et al. 2018, 2021). Developing interventions that specifically tap into increasing individuals’ morality and decreasing their shortsightedness and negative affectivity thus represent highly promising ways forward in the fight against crime.

VI. Conclusion

“Personality has consequences” (Ozer and Benet-Martínez 2006, p. 401), and crime is one prominent outcome area where this shows. The current state of research stands in stark contrast to earlier assertions that “the evidence for personality differences between offenders and nonoffenders beyond self-control is, at best, unimpressive” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, p. 109). In fact, there is considerable evidence consistently linking different personality traits to criminal behavior. These personality traits

can, in turn, be boiled down to three key classes of criminogenic characteristics that allow a parsimonious account of individual differences in crime: low morality, shortsightedness, and negative affectivity. Mirroring the apparent value of personality for the explanation of crime, many criminological theories incorporate concepts and ideas compatible with a trait perspective. And yet, much more can and should be done in the future to systematically integrate personality concepts and theories within crime theories and research. Such an integrative approach has huge potential for complementing the understanding of criminal behavior, particularly in consistently observed individual differences. Thus, I agree with Daniel Nagin who, when asked about the future of human behavior research, recently observed that “the big unsolved challenges in criminology will require cooperation among all of the social and behavioural sciences” (quoted in Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2022, p. 16). Personality research is one of these areas that offers promising ways forward for criminology.

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