Cultural patterns in personality differences between child molesters and general population

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Abstract: The study evaluated the Five Factor Model (FFM) in populations of child molesting sexual offenders from the UK and Spain, comparing these FFM-based personality traits in relation to population norms for both countries. Our objective was to study if there exists cultural patterns in personality differences between child molesters and general populations. In this study were included two groups from the general population (United Kingdom-Spain) and two groups of child molester (United Kingdom-Spain). The results showed that the differences in Neuroticism between the general population and child molesters for both countries reflect the same pattern. Whereas some personality domains (Extraversion, Openness and Conscientiousness) between general population and sex offenders against children did not show the same pattern in both countries, this may reflect cultural differences. The current study provides evidence of: 1) existence of cultural differences in FFM characteristics between general population and child molester and 2) existence of personality characteristics of sex offenders against children (as high Neuroticism) that are independent of the culture.

Key Words: Child molesters, Five Factor Model, personality traits, cultural patterns

The Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality is a descriptive system used in analyzing and classifying terms used by people to describe themselves and others [1]. The five factors in this model comprise Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C) [2-4]. N is a broad domain of negative affect, including predispositions to experience anxiety, anger, depression, shame, and other distressing emotions. E is characterized by positive emotions and the tendency to seek out stimulation and the company of others; E traits distinguish adventurous, assertive, dominant and sociable persons. O reflects a general appreciation for art, emotion, unusual ideas, imagination, curiosity, and variety of experiences. A is a tendency to be compassionate and cooperative rather than suspicious and antagonistic towards others. Lastly, C represents a tendency to show self-discipline, act dutifully, and aim for achievement [2-5].

The FFM has been used to study of antisocial behaviours and general offending [6-8]. Specifically FFM is a useful model for study personality of men who commit sexual offences. For example, Egan, Kavanagh and Blair [9] compared sexual offenders to non-sexually offending mentally disordered offenders, finding sexual offenders were higher in A and C. In relation with child molesters, Madsen, Parson and Grubin [10] found child molesters with personality disorders had higher levels of N and lower levels of A compared to child molesters without personality disorder. Dennison, Stough and Birgden [11] finding the sex offender against children were significantly higher in N and significantly lower in E and C compared to the non-offender group. Lastly, Becerra-García, García-León and Egan [12] compared child molesters who had experienced abusive childhoods to child molesters.
without abusive childhoods, finding child molesters who had experienced abusive childhoods were higher in O.

The FFM domains vary between populations of different cultures. Several major studies have found differences in FFM traits between world regions and cultures [13-15]. European cultures show patterns of personality that differ systematically from Asian and African cultures, in particular for E and O, on which Europeans score higher [16, 17]. Southern European cultures tend to score higher on N than Northern European cultures [18]. Schmitt, Allik, McCrae and Benet-Martinez [17] showed differences in the FFM traits for a variety of European regions (Western, Eastern and Southern Europe). Western (Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, United Kingdom) and Eastern Europe (Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia) were higher in A than Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain), whereas Southern Europe scored higher in N than other Europe regions. For C and O, Southern Europe showed higher (but non-significant) scores those other Europe regions. For E, scores between Europe regions are similar.

The current study integrates these two fields in the study of FFM traits. This study investigated the FFM personality traits across two European societies for the general populations and in for sex offenders who have offended against children.

The study compares FFM-based personality traits between the United Kingdom (UK) and Spanish for the general population and sex offenders of both countries. Specifically, our aim was to study if there exists cultural patterns in personality differences between child molesters and general populations.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Four different groups of men were included in the study. These groups comprised two groups from the general population (UK and Spain) and two groups of child molesters (UK and Spain). The UK general population group comprised the 802 male participants in the Egan, Deary and Austin study [19] (the mean age = 44.9 years, SD = 13.2). The Spanish general population group comprised 444 male participants in the study (mean age = 39.8 years, SD = 12.7) conducted by Manga, Ramos and Moran [20]. The UK sexual offenders against children comprised 161 men (mean age = 41.9 years, SD = 13.8) obtained from the study by Egan, Kavanagh and Blair [9]. The 33 Spanish sex offenders against children (mean age of group was 47.7 years, SD = 9.4) were collected by the first author at secure institutions in Spain.

**Measure**

The NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) [21] was used to assess the FFM of personality (N, E, O, A, and C dimensions) in all participants. The NEO-FFI comprises 60 items derived of NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R) [21]. Each score of 12 items provide an overall measure of every factor. The items rated on a five-point scale, they are "strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree or strongly disagree".

**Procedure**

We collected the obtained results in N, E, O, A, and C domains for male participants published in previous studies of Spanish and British norms for the NEO-FFI [19, 20]. For the sex offenders groups we used archival data for the NEO-FFI collected for 161 sex offenders against children (of the 200 child molesters that participated in the study of Egan, Kavanagh and Blair [9]), and obtained novel NEO-FFI data for a sample of 33 Spanish child molesters.

**Analysis**

The current study integrated novel and archival data for which raw data files was not always available; for this reason on-line statistical calculators were used for the analysis of the data (Interactive Statistical Calculation Pages-http://statpages.org/ and http://www1.assumption.edu/users/avadum/applets/applets.html). The latter site enabled calculation of a two-way factorial ANOVA from summary data (N, Mean and SD) alone. This was used to compare the mean scores for main effects and interactions by nation and sample.

**Results**

Table 1 presents a summary of the means and standard deviations for the FFM for samples of the general population, and sex offenders against children in UK and Spain. Mean scores of persons from Spain and UK were compared on all NEO-FFI total score domains (N, E, O, A and C) using a two-way ANOVA, with two between-subjects factors; Nation (UK-Spain) and Sample (general population-sex offenders against children). The statistical results of this analysis are presented in Table 2. The significance threshold for all analyses was set at p < 0.05.

As shown in Table 2, ANOVAs revealed a significant main effect of Nation for four trait dimensions: N, E, O and C. The Sample factor effect was significant for N, A and C. Lastly, the two-way ANOVAs revealed significant Nation x Sample interactions for N, E, O and C dimensions. These interactions show that the differences in N, O, and C domains between the general population and child molesters are greater in Spain than in the UK (as can
be seen in Figure 1 for the N and O scores of the two samples for both countries and in Figure 2 for the E and C scores), whereas the differences for the E domain between general population and child molesters were greater in UK than in Spain (as can be seen in Figure 2 for the E scores).

Discussion

This study examined FFM personality traits between UK and Spain populations (general population and child molesters). The results indicate that Spanish population scores were significantly higher for N, E, O and C than the UK population. Spanish populations are characterised by higher N, O and C traits relative to other nations [17, 18]. Whereas A scores were similar for both populations, and were found an unexpected difference in E for the two populations.

This study shows differences between general population and child molesters for both countries. For Spain, the differences in personality for the general population and sex offenders against children on N, O and C domains are higher than for the equivalent differences in the same UK samples. In the UK, the differences between the general population and molesters are higher for the E domain than the equivalent difference for Spanish samples. In relation with our main purpose, these results suggest that, independent of the culture, the differences in N trait

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Nation: UK vs. Spain; Sample: Population vs. Sex offenders; Interaction: Nation x Sample. * p < .01; ** p < .001.
between the general population and child molesters for both countries reflect the same pattern. Thus higher scores in N domain in child molesters are specific to offenders generally and independent of their culture. As a group, offenders are characterized by a significant degree of emotional maladjustment and predispositions to experience distressing emotions. However, differences in O, E and C domains between general population and sex offenders against children did not continue the same pattern, instead showing differences that may reflect cultural differences.

The study has a number of limitations. First, the Spanish child molesters group had fewer individuals in comparison with the British child molesters group. This relatively small sample means that it is unknown whether this group of Spanish child molesters is representative of this group in general. In the Spanish and British child molester groups participation was voluntary, it is possible that participants who self-selected to participate may represent a distinct subgroup relative to overall. Second, social desirability may affect responses. Individuals may show in their answers an unconscious positive representation of oneself, or represent oneself in a falsely positive manner (just as when child molesters answer other self-report psychological tests or interview schedules, for example when assessing cognitive distortions) [22, 23]. Self-report psychometric data (indeed, all psychological methods involving the gathering of information form a person requiring a personal disclosure) have inherent problems with accuracy, self-deception, conscious manipulation or non-compliance [24].

This study provides evidence of the existence of cultural differences in FFM characteristics between general population and child molester. It suggests that there are personality trait characteristics of sex offenders against children independent of the culture. The obtained results open new ways of research in the study of forensic samples between different cultures.

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