PERSONALITY DISORDERS IN DETENTION: APPLIED RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: *This study examined the relationship between personality disorders and inmates' adaptive functioning within the prison environment. The research aimed to identify how maladaptive personality traits relate to institutional behaviors, including rewards, disciplinary measures, participation in activities, and sentence length. A sample of 83 incarcerated individuals was assessed using a structured clinical interview for personality disorders and institutional file analysis. Statistical procedures included correlation analysis, group comparisons, and linear regression. The results showed that personality disorders were primarily associated with maladaptive behaviors, particularly a higher frequency of disciplinary measures, while adaptive indicators such as rewards and work-credit days were influenced mainly by institutional factors. Inmates serving longer sentences exhibited a significantly higher number of personality disorders compared to those with shorter sentences. Regression findings indicated that personality disorders significantly predicted disciplinary outcomes, although the effect size was modest. Overall, the study highlights that maladaptive personality traits hinder adaptation to incarceration and increase the likelihood of behavioral noncompliance. These findings underscore the need for early psychological screening, individualized interventions, and structured rehabilitative programs aimed at enhancing emotional regulation, interpersonal functioning, and institutional adjustment among incarcerated individuals.*

Keywords: personality disorders; prison adaptation; inmate behavior; disciplinary measures; rehabilitation programs.

1. Introduction

Adaptation to the prison environment represents a complex process shaped by psychological, social, and contextual factors. The carceral setting is frequently associated with stressors such as social isolation, loss of autonomy, and exposure to rigid institutional rules—elements that significantly impact the emotional and behavioral functioning of incarcerated individuals (Loeffler & Nagin, 2022).

Within this context, personality traits and personality disorders may play a central role in how individuals adjust to imprisonment, influencing the likelihood of conflict, non-compliance, and difficulties in emotional regulation (Blackburn, 2007). The presence of personality disorders is associated with substantial impairments in emotional regulation and behavioral control, factors that may hinder adherence to institutional norms and increase the risk of impulsive or disruptive behaviors.

Personality disorders are defined by persistent, inflexible, and maladaptive patterns of thinking, affect, and behavior that substantially interfere with social and interpersonal functioning (Huprich & Hopwood, 2013). In the prison context, these rigid traits may exacerbate adjustment difficulties and are often associated with an elevated risk of conflicts, disciplinary sanctions, and recidivistic behaviors (Warren, Burnette & South, 2004). Additionally, situational factors such as access to rewards, participation in work activities, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and sentence length can influence adaptive functioning, directly shaping prosocial behaviors and post-release reintegration.

The high prevalence of personality disorders within correctional settings underscores the importance of systematic screening and assessment as part of psychological management and intervention processes (Saradjian, Murphy & McVey, 2013; Fazel et al., 2016; Dahlenburg, Bartsch & Gilson, 2024). Recent studies indicate that the social climate of the prison - including the quality of relationships with staff and other inmates—directly affects psychological adaptation and the likelihood of prosocial conduct (Dovidio et al., 2017; Marinucci et al., 2025).

Factors such as security level, access to structured activities, and availability of psychological support may moderate the impact of personality traits on institutional behavior, facilitating or hindering adaptation.

In recent years, the literature has emphasized the need for an integrated approach that combines clinical assessment of personality disorders with interventions aimed at developing coping skills and reducing behavioral vulnerabilities specific to the prison environment.

2. Methodology

The present study aimed to explore the relationships between personality disorders and the capacity to adapt to the prison environment, analyzing variables such as rewards, disciplinary sanctions, participation in productive activities, and sentence length. The main objective of the research was to investigate the correlations between the presence of personality disorders and inmates' adaptive functioning within the penitentiary setting.

Through this investigation, we sought to examine the mechanisms through which personality disorders influence behavior and adjustment during incarceration, thereby contributing to the development of more effective psychological and rehabilitative interventions. This research is relevant not only for deepening the understanding of psychological dynamics in correctional environments but also for improving psychological and psychotherapeutic interventions targeting incarcerated individuals. The findings have potential implications for post-release reintegration and for reducing recidivism—objectives that remain central to the mission of the penitentiary system.

According to the provisions of the Order of the Ministry of Justice no. 1322/C/2017, which regulates the organization and implementation of educational, psychological, and social assistance programs in Romanian correctional facilities, rehabilitative interventions must be carried out in accordance with the principle of increasing the chances of social reintegration after release. Thus, investing in the rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals represents not only an immediate means of improving their psychosomatic functioning but also a long-term strategy that supports their reintegration into society. Scientific research in this context provides essential evidence for assessing the effectiveness of such interventions and for informing institutional decision-making.

The study was carried out between September and October 2024 in Bucharest-Jilava Penitentiary (Romania) and was conducted in three stages. The research methodology included survey methods, observational techniques, psychological testing, and document analysis of penitentiary files. Following data collection, statistical analyses and the formulation of evidence-based recommendations were conducted during November - December 2024.

In the first stage, 83 incarcerated individuals were selected after obtaining institutional approval and informed consent from all participants. The sample consisted of adults between 21 and 65 years of age, all serving legally final sentences. Selection was conducted in accordance with the legislation governing psychological activities in penitentiaries. The sample included inmates with varying sentence lengths, which allowed for comparison between groups. Of the total sample, 25 individuals had sentences shorter than five years, while 58 had sentences longer than five years. This distribution enabled testing hypotheses related to the association between personality disorder severity and sentence length, as well as differences in adaptive functioning.

In the second stage, inmates granted permission for researchers to access their penitentiary files in order to extract information regarding their legal status and execution trajectory. In the third stage, the SCID-5-PD personality assessment questionnaire was administered. The instrument was applied in paper-pencil format and required a maximum of 60 minutes to complete. SCID-5-PD was distributed to all 83 participants. Cochran (1977) provides methodological guidelines for determining sample size, emphasizing the importance of identifying acceptable error limits for essential survey items. Based on an estimated prevalence of personality disorders of 75% in penitentiary populations, the sample of 83 individuals reflects an approximate confidence level of 92% and an 8% margin of error.

In the final stage, results were interpreted and correlations between personality disorders and adaptation to the carceral environment were examined.

Three primary categories of assessment tools

were used in the study: standardized psychological instruments, survey-based methods, and document analysis of institutional records. The assessment of personality disorders was conducted using SCID-5-PD (Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-5 Personality Disorders), a widely used clinical tool for identifying personality disorders according to DSM-5 criteria. SCID-5-PD allows for a structured diagnostic process and provides a detailed profile of maladaptive personality traits, making it suitable for institutional contexts such as correctional settings. The interview was administered individually, in paper-pencil format, with an approximate duration of 60 minutes.

Document analysis was used to extract institutional adaptation indicators from inmates' penitentiary files. Variables collected included: number of work-credit days, participation in psychological and productive activities, rewards received, and disciplinary sanctions. Data were recorded in accordance with confidentiality procedures and current penitentiary legislation. Together, these instruments enabled a multidimensional evaluation of the relationship between personality disorders and adaptation to

H3. It is anticipated that the number of personality disorders present in inmates is positively correlated with the number of disciplinary sanctions received during incarceration.

H4. It is hypothesized that inmates serving sentences longer than five years exhibit, on average, a higher number of personality disorders compared to those serving sentences shorter than five years.

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (IBM Corp.), employing descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficients, independent samples t-tests, and simple linear regression models in accordance with the aims of the study.

3. Results

The structure of maladaptive personality was operationalized in this study through the number of diagnosed personality disorders. To test the first hypothesis, which posited that the number of personality disorders influences both sentence length and the number of work-credit days earned, a Bonferroni test was employed (Figure 1).

Multiple Comparisons (Zile_castig)						95% Confidence Interval	
	(I) Family	(J) Family	Mean Difference (I - J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Bonferroni	1	2	-10.51	3.83	.007	-18.13	-2.90
	2	1	10.51	3.83	.007	2.90	18.13
Multiple Comparisons (Recompense)						95% Confidence Interval	
	(I) Family	(J) Family	Mean Difference (I - J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Bonferroni	1	2	-96.67	39.63	.017	-175.51	-17.83
	2	1	96.67	39.63	.017	17.83	175.51

Fig. 1. Bonferroni Test

incarceration, combining subjective psychological data with objective behavioral indicators from the penitentiary system.

The following hypotheses were formulated:

H1. It is assumed that the level of maladaptive personality traits (personality disorders) is associated with sentence length and the number of work-credit days earned by inmates.

H2. There is a significant relationship between the presence of personality disorders, sentence length, and key indicators of adaptation to the prison environment (work-credit days, participation in activities, rewards, and disciplinary measures).

The comparative analysis indicated the presence of statistically significant differences between inmate groups based on the number of diagnosed personality disorders. Individuals with no personality disorders or with only one disorder recorded significantly more work-credit days compared to inmates presenting between two and four personality disorders. A similar pattern emerged for the number of rewards, which were significantly more frequent among inmates with a less maladaptive personality profile.

These findings suggest that both the presence and severity of personality disorders exert a negative impact on adaptive behaviors within the

prison environment, influencing the accumulation of work-credit days as well as the likelihood of receiving institutional rewards.

In the present study, adaptation to the prison environment was operationalized through four behavioral indicators: number of work-credit days, participation in psychological activities, number of rewards, and number of disciplinary measures. To test the second hypothesis—which proposed significant relationships between personality disorders, sentence length, and these adaptation indicators—the Pearson correlation coefficient was employed. This correlational analysis allowed for the examination of the strength and direction of associations between psychological and institutional variables, with results presented in Figure 2.

Correlations between rewards and institutional and psychological variables

The number of rewards showed a very strong and statistically significant positive correlation with the number of work-credit days (r = .963, p < .001) and with the number of days served (r = .795, p < .001), suggesting that engagement in productive activities and extended exposure to the institutional environment increase the likelihood of receiving rewards. Rewards were also moderately correlated with sentence length (r = .523, p < .001) and weakly correlated with participation in psychological activities (r = .216, p = .050). The correlation with personality disorders was not significant (r = .159, p = .150), indicating that rewards are not directly influenced by inmates' personality profiles.

Correlations between disciplinary measures and the analyzed variables

Disciplinary measures were positively correlated with work-credit days (r = .241, p = .028) and participation in activities (r = .458, p < .001), which may reflect increased exposure to

		TP	Sentence Length	Work-Credit Days	Psychological Activities	Rewards	Disciplinary Measures
TP	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.192	.135	.218ᵃ	.159	.294ᵃ
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.082	.225	.048	.150	.007
	N	83	83	83	83	83	83
Sentence Length	Pearson Correlation	.192	1.000	.559ᵃ	.138	.523ᵃ	.361ᵃ
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.082		.000	.213	.000	.001
	N	83	83	83	83	83	83
Work-Credit Days	Pearson Correlation	.135	.559ᵃ	1.000	.071	.963ᵃ	.241ᵃ
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.225	.000		.524	.000	.028
	N	83	83	83	83	83	83
Psychological Activities	Pearson Correlation	.218ᵃ	.138	.071	1.000	.216	.458ᵃ
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.048	.213	.524		.050	.000
	N	83	83	83	83	83	83
Rewards	Pearson Correlation	.159	.523ᵃ	963ᵃ	.216	1.000	.258ᵃ
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.150	.000	.000	.050		.019
	N	83	83	83	83	83	83
Disciplinary Measures	Pearson Correlation	.294ᵃ	.361ᵃ	.241ᵃ	.458ᵃ	.258ᵃ	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.001	.028	.000	.019	
	N	83	83	83	83	83	83

Fig. 2. Pearson Correlation

social interaction or supervisory contexts. Moderate and significant correlations were also observed between disciplinary sanctions and personality disorders (r = .294, p = .007), as well as with sentence length (r = .361, p = .001) and days served (r = .543, p < .001). These findings suggest that both psychological factors and institutional conditions contribute to the likelihood of sanctionable behavior.

Correlations between personality disorders and adaptation indicators

Personality disorders showed a moderate, significant correlation with disciplinary measures (r = .294, p = .007), indicating that a more maladaptive personality profile is associated with a higher frequency of noncompliant behaviors. A weak but significant correlation was also found with participation in activities (r = .218, p = .048) and days served (r = .250, p = .023). No significant relationships were identified between personality disorders and rewards (r = .159, p = .150), work-credit days (r = .135, p = .225), or sentence length (r = .192, p = .082).

Correlations between sentence length and institutional behaviors

Sentence length was significantly correlated with rewards (r = .523, p < .001), disciplinary measures (r = .361, p = .001), and work-credit days (r = .559, p < .001), suggesting that the duration of incarceration influences both adaptive and maladaptive institutional behaviors. A very strong correlation was found between sentence length and days served (r = .769, p < .001), reflecting the natural progression of custodial time. No significant relationships were detected with participation in activities (r = .138, p = .213) or personality disorders (r = .192, p = .082).

Overall, the results indicate that personality disorders are primarily associated with maladaptive behaviors, such as an increased frequency of disciplinary measures. In contrast, adaptive indicators—namely rewards and work-credit days—are influenced predominantly by institutional variables, including length of incarceration, participation in work activities, and time served.

To test the third hypothesis, which proposed that personality disorders significantly predict the frequency of disciplinary measures, a simple linear regression model was employed. The regression analysis aimed to evaluate the extent to which the number of personality disorders contributes to the variability in disciplinary measures. The results of the model are presented in Figure 3.

A simple linear regression model was used to examine the extent to which personality disorders predict the frequency of disciplinary measures applied to inmates. The model summary indicated a positive but weak association between the variables (R = .29), with personality disorders explaining approximately 9% of the variance in disciplinary measures (R^2 = .09). Although the R^2 value is modest, such effect sizes are common in psychological research, where behavior is influenced by multiple interacting variables.

The ANOVA analysis confirmed that the model was statistically significant ($F_{(1, 81)}$ = 7.69, p = .007), suggesting that personality disorders contribute meaningfully to the

Model Summary (MD)

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.29	.09	.08	2.00

ANOVA (MD)

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	30.68	1	30.68	7.69	.007
Residual	323.13	81	3.99		
Total	353.81	82			

Coefficients (MD)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-.16	.46	.00	-.36	.721
TP	.58	.21	.29	2.77	.007

Fig. 3. Linear regression

explanation of variability in disciplinary sanctions. At the coefficient level, the predictor—the number of personality disorders—showed a significant contribution to the model (B = 0.58, SE = 0.21, t = 2.77, p = .007). This indicates that each additional personality disorder is associated with an average increase of 0.58 disciplinary measures. The intercept was not statistically significant (p = .721), suggesting that it does not carry interpretative value in the absence of the predictor.

Overall, the model demonstrates that personality disorders exert a significant influence on maladaptive behaviors within the prison environment, reflected in the frequency of disciplinary sanctions. Although the predictive strength is moderate, the results support the hypothesis that a more maladaptive personality profile is associated with a higher likelihood of noncompliant behavior, underscoring the need for tailored psychological interventions targeting this vulnerability.

To test hypothesis H4 - which stated that inmates with sentences shorter than five years would exhibit significantly fewer personality disorders compared to those serving longer sentences - an independent samples t-test was employed. The statistical analysis compared the mean scores of the two groups, and the results are presented in Figure 4.

To examine the differences between inmates serving sentences shorter than five years and those serving sentences longer than five years in terms of the number of personality disorders, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The descriptive analysis showed that inmates with longer sentences exhibited, on average, a higher number of personality disorders (M = 2.09, SD = 1.03) compared to those with shorter sentences (M = 1.52, SD = 1.00). The variability of the two groups was similar, and Levene's test indicated equality of variances (F = 0.12, p = .726), supporting the use of the 'equal variances assumed' output.

The t-test results revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups, t(81) = -2.31, p = .023. The observed mean difference (-0.57) indicates that inmates serving longer sentences presented, on average, approximately half a personality disorder more than those serving shorter sentences. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference (-1.05, -0.08) did not include zero, confirming the robustness of this effect.

These findings support the hypothesis that the severity of personality disorders is higher among inmates with longer sentences, suggesting a potential association between the gravity of criminal behavior and the presence of a more maladaptive personality profile.

4. Discussion

The findings of the study suggest that a coherent, predictable, and transparent reward system represents an essential component in facilitating adaptive behaviors among incarcerated

Group Statistics

Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviations	S.E. Mean
TP	Sentences under 5 years	25	1,52	1,00	,20
	Sentences over 5 years	58	2,09	1,03	,14

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-Test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
TP	Equal variances assumed	,12	,726	-2,31	81,00	,023	-,57	,24	-1,05	-,08
					46,66	,024	-,57	,24	-1,05	-,08
	Equal variances not assumed			-2,34						

Fig. 4. Independent Samples t-Test Results

individuals. The consistent implementation of reward mechanisms may enhance intrinsic motivation for institutional compliance and strengthen prosocial strategies for adapting to the prison environment.

Based on these findings, the results highlight the need for structured psychological interventions aimed at reducing dysfunctional behaviors associated with personality disorders. Cognitive-behavioral interventions may help decrease impulsivity, aggression, and emotional dysregulation, whereas dialectical behavior therapy is particularly beneficial for inmates with borderline personality disorder, offering strategies for managing intense emotions and improving interpersonal relationships. Group psychotherapy may also facilitate the development of social skills and constructive conflict-resolution strategies, which are essential within the institutional context.

With regard to the educational and occupational dimension, extended access to work activities and educational programs serves as a central factor in supporting adaptation to the prison environment. Such programs not only reduce time spent in inactivity but also help develop skills that are useful for post-release reintegration. Additionally, expressive programs - such as art therapy or creative writing - may offer effective means of emotional expression and tension reduction.

Another finding emerging from the data pertains to the psychological vulnerability specific to inmates serving long-term sentences. These individuals may face elevated risks of emotional deterioration associated with prolonged isolation, which indicates the need for targeted psychological support programs designed to strengthen resilience, prevent adaptive decline, and maintain long-term mental health.

The results of the current study are consistent with international literature indicating that personality disorders constitute a significant risk factor for maladaptive behaviors within correctional settings. Previous studies have shown that individuals with antisocial, borderline, or paranoid personality disorders have an increased likelihood of displaying impulsive behaviors, hostility, and difficulties in their interactions with staff. The present findings corroborate these patterns, showing that the severity of maladaptive personality traits is associated with a higher incidence of disciplinary measures and a poorer overall adaptive profile.

Furthermore, it is plausible that the relationship between personality disorders and adaptation to the prison environment is influenced by additional factors not included in the present model, such as the availability of social support among inmate groups, the quality of interactions with correctional staff, trauma history, or prior incarceration experiences. Recent literature underscores the significant role of organizational climate in shaping behaviors during incarceration—a factor that may contribute to the unexplained variance observed in this study.

From a practical standpoint, these findings highlight the necessity of strengthening psychological screening programs upon prison entry, to ensure early identification of inmates with personality disorders and referral to specialized interventions. Predictable and equitable systems of rewards and sanctions may serve as important behavioral shaping tools, particularly for individuals with difficulties in emotion regulation.

Several limits should be acknowledged. First, the use of a sample drawn from a single correctional facility limits the generalizability of the findings to other institutional contexts. Second, assessing personality disorders using self-report instruments may be influenced by response biases, such as socially desirable responding. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow for causal inferences regarding the relationships between variables.

Future research would benefit from larger and more diverse samples, as well as from the inclusion of multi-informant assessment methods for evaluating personality disorders. Longitudinal studies may help clarify how maladaptive traits evolve throughout incarceration and how they influence post-release reintegration. Moreover, examining the role of institutional climate and psychological interventions in moderating the relationship between personality characteristics and institutional behavior would constitute a valuable direction for further investigation.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight a clear relationship between personality disorders and inmates' capacity to adapt to the prison environment. Inmates presenting a higher number

of personality disorders are at increased risk for maladaptive behaviors, reflected in a higher frequency of disciplinary sanctions and difficulties in managing institutional demands. These findings confirm the hypothesis that maladaptive personality profiles negatively influence compliance with correctional norms.

The significant differences identified between inmates serving shorter versus longer sentences further suggest that the severity of personality disorders is associated not only with the gravity of criminal behaviors but also with heightened psychological vulnerabilities during incarceration. This association underscores the necessity of integrating personality assessment into institutional risk-management strategies.

From an operational perspective, the results emphasize the importance of implementing structured psychological programs focused on reducing impulsivity, enhancing self-regulation, and developing interpersonal skills.

Cognitive-behavioral interventions, dialectical behavior therapy, and group-based conflict-resolution programs emerge as valuable tools for improving adaptation and reducing sanctionable behaviors. Additionally, predictable reward systems and consistent access to educational and occupational activities may serve as major protective factors within the correctional environment.

The study supports the development of institutional policies grounded in early psychological screening, individualized intervention planning, and continuous monitoring of adaptive progress.

Such measures can contribute to reducing the risk of recidivism, enhancing institutional compliance, and improving the overall organizational climate.

In conclusion, personality disorders represent a meaningful predictor of problematic behaviors in prison settings, and addressing these vulnerabilities through specialized interventions constitutes a central component in creating an effective, rehabilitation-oriented correctional system

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