

Everyday Unethical Behaviour (EUB): The Role of Personality (Big Five), Self- Control, and Morality in Low-Severity Misconduct

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Everyday Unethical Behaviour (EUB) vs. White Collar Crime (WCC)

- The idea behind this research is to examine whether the psychological characteristics of offenders identified in the literature as influencing criminal behaviour, particularly white-collar crime, remain the same regardless of:
 - the **severity** of the offence; and
 - the **context** in which it occurs — whether in a professional setting or in everyday life.

Everyday Unethical Behaviour (EUB) vs. White Collar Crime (WCC)

- Low-severity individual unethical behaviour not related to a job or a profession **(everyday unethical behaviour—EUB)** is very common in society and typically carries no formal sanction, but it entails high social disapproval (Bersoff, 1999).
- *EUB and WCC* (considered in a broad definition such as that of Helmkamp, Ball & Townsend, 1996, which includes illegal acts and unethical behavior):
 - non-violence
 - being concealed under an appearance of normality
 - being aimed at personal advantage or gain
- *Differences*
 - it does not occur within a professional context
 - normally it does not involve offenses subject to formal legal sanctions
 - it is generally considered a low-severity form of misconduct

Everyday Unethical Behaviour (EUB) vs. White Collar Crime (WCC)

- White-collar offenders are more frequently male, older, and more highly educated than both conventional offenders and the general population (Benson & Simpson, 2009; Ribeiro, Guedes, & Cruz, 2019; Pusch & Holtfreter, 2020).
- WCC literature suggests that is so because:
 - older age and education reflect the time and skills required to reach positions of responsibility
 - higher prevalence of men reflects the greater difficulty that women face in reaching top positions in organizations (Holtfreter, 2015)
- ***Thus, no significant association is expected between sociodemographic variables (age, education, and gender) and the propensity to engage in EUB (that is not associated to professional context).***

EUB and Personality – Five Factors Model (Big Five)

- Research on Five Factors Model of personality has produced remarkably consistent findings for both conventional crime and WCC.
 - Big Five Model (McCrae & Costa, 1987): openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism
- Previous studies consistently show that offenders tend to display **lower agreeableness** and **lower conscientiousness** (Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011; Lynam & Widiger, 2001; Miller & Lynam, 2006; O’Riordan & O’Connell, 2014; Turner, 2014).
- ***Accordingly, we expect these two traits to be negatively associated with the propensity to engage in EUB.***

EUB and Self-control

- Self-control refers to an individual's ability to regulate behaviour in pursuit of long-term goals (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).
- Evidence from both conventional crime (*Pratt & Cullen, 2000*) and WCC (*Contreras, Pontell, & Liu, 2025; Craig & Piquero, 2016; Ribeiro, Guedes, & Cruz, 2019*) consistently shows that lower self-control is associated with a higher likelihood of offending.
- ***Accordingly, a negative relationship between self-control and EUB is expected.***

EUB and Morality

- Previous research consistently shows that individuals with stronger moral values are less likely to engage in offending (*Bachman, Paternoster, & Ward, 1992; Hirtenlehner & Hardie, 2016; Svensson, Pauwels, & Weerman, 2010*).
- The same pattern has been observed for several forms of WCC (*Paternoster & Simpson, 1996; Schoepfer & Piquero, 2006*) and for everyday unethical behaviour (*Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Hofman et al., 2014; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008; Zhao et al., 2025*).
- **Accordingly, a negative relationship between morality and the propensity to engage in EUB is expected.**

Empirical study - Hypotheses

- **H1** – Individuals who exhibit lower levels of agreeableness are more likely to engage in EUB.
- **H2** – Individuals who exhibit lower levels of conscientiousness are more likely to engage in EUB.
- **H3** – Individuals who exhibit lower levels of self-control are more likely to engage in EUB.
- **H4** – Individuals who exhibit lower levels of morality are more likely to engage in EUB.

Sampling and data collection

- This study adopted a quantitative design based on an online questionnaire administered to a heterogeneous convenience sample.
- Propensity to engage in EUB was measured through scenario-based questions.
- Participants were initially recruited at the University of Porto and subsequently through social media. Data were collected between 14 February and 21 March 2021. The study received approval from the local Ethics Committee.

Participants

- The final sample comprised 735 participants (31% male; 69% female), with a mean age of 32.64 years ($SD = 13.64$).
- Most participants were single (63%), students (43.1%), and held either a bachelor's degree (37.1%) or secondary/vocational education (35.4%).
- The sample was predominantly Portuguese (93.6%).

Scenarios of EUB

- **Scenario 1** – *a case of someone jumping a waiting list by calling a friend with the power to open up a place.*
- **Scenario 2** – *a case in which a claimant attempts to have the insurer cover of a small pre-existing scratch on the vehicle's paintwork located close to the area damaged in the accident.*
- **Scenario 3** – *a case of someone giving a friend's address to obtain a place at a school in a locality different from the one where one lives.*

Variables

- **EUB propensity** was measured using three scenario-based questions rated on a five-point Likert scale - *to indicate the likelihood that they would behave in the same way as the individual described.*
- **Personality** was assessed with the Portuguese version of the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (*Magalhães et al., 2014*).
- **Self-control** was measured using Grasmick et al.'s (1993) 24-item scale.
- **Morality** was assessed by asking respondents how morally wrong they considered each behaviour.

Data analysis

To analyse the association between quantitative variables, correlation coefficients were computed. After assessing the normality of the distributions, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used.

For categorical variables with two categories, independent samples t-tests were conducted, while for variables with more than two categories, analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed.

The quantitative data obtained in this study were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics software.

Correlations between EUB Propensity and Personality, Morality, and Self-Control

Variable	EUB Propensity
Neuroticism	.056
Extraversion	.068
Openness to Experience	-.076*
Agreeableness	-.159**
Conscientiousness	-.116**
Morality	-.510**
Self-control	-.206**

Note. $p < .05$. $p < .01$.

Results

- **Personality**

- EUB propensity is negatively and significantly correlated with **agreeableness** ($r = -.159, p < .001$), **confirming H1**, and with **conscientiousness** ($r = -.116, p = .002$), **confirming H2**.

- **Self-control**

- **Self-control** is negatively correlated with the propensity to engage in EUB ($r = -.206$), and this correlation is statistically significant ($p < .001$), **confirming H3**.

- **Morality**

- Morality, is negatively correlated with EUB propensity ($r = -.510$), and this relationship is statistically significant ($p < .001$), **confirming H4**.

- As expected, none of the sociodemographic variables (age, gender, and level of education) showed a statistically significant relationship with the propensity to engage in EUB.

Conclusions

- The findings reveal **substantial similarities** between EUB and other forms of offending, including WCC, regarding personality, self-control, and morality.
- Overall, the results support the view that **common psychological mechanisms** underlie unethical and criminal behaviour **across different levels of severity and different contexts**.

- **Policy implications**

- Policies promoting ethical behaviour should focus on **early socialisation within families and schools**.
 - Strengthening self-control, moral development, and ethical decision-making from an early age

- **Limitations**

- The study relies on hypothetical scenarios, which may not fully capture real-life behaviour.
- Future research should examine the interaction between morality and self-control —highlighted in prior research (e.g., Hirtenlehner et al., 2022) - and employ broader measures of moral reasoning, such as the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2013)

Thank You