



Social exclusion mediates the relationship between psychopathy and aggressive humor style in noninstitutionalized young adults

Keita Masui^{a,*}, Hiroshi Fujiwara^b, Mitsuhiro Ura^a

^a Graduate School of Integrated Arts and Science, Hiroshima University, Japan

^b Faculty of Integrated Arts and Science, Hiroshima University, Japan

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ABSTRACT

Previous research indicates a positive relationship between psychopathy and various negative humor styles. The purpose of the present study was to investigate social exclusion as a possible mediator of the association between psychopathy and negative humor styles in noninstitutionalized young adults. One hundred and thirty-nine university students participated by responding to questionnaires that assess psychopathy, the experience of exclusion from friends, and four humor styles (self-enhancing, affiliative, aggressive, and self-defeating). There was a significant positive association between psychopathy, social exclusion, and aggressive styles of humor, and a negative association between psychopathy and affiliative styles of humor. Moreover, the results of a mediation analysis indicated that the association between psychopathy and aggressive humor style is completely explained by the experience of social exclusion. These results suggest that high psychopathic participants who are socially excluded use an aggressive humor style more often than low psychopathic individuals. The present study provides further insights into the role played by social environmental factors in the links between psychopathy and associated interpersonal characteristics.

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1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a constellation of traits that includes affective, emotional, interpersonal, and behavioral characteristics such as egocentricity, irresponsibility, shallow emotions, lack of empathy, guilt, or remorse, pathological lying, manipulateness, and impulsive behavior (Hare, 1998). There are two related but distinct subtypes of psychopathy: Primary and secondary. The former is characterized predominantly by interpersonal and affective problems such as cruelty, manipulateness, and lack of fear or empathy, while the latter is characterized by behavioral features such as impulsive behavior, sensation seeking, and deficits in behavioral inhibition (e.g., Hare, 2003; Hare, Harpur, Hakstian, Forth, & Hart, 1990; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995).

Psychopathy is clearly associated with adversarial responses to other people. For example, there is a positive relationship between psychopathy and aggressive behavior, as well as an association between the former trait and brain dysfunction related to aggressive behavior in clinical samples (for a review, see Blair, 2010). A positive relationship between psychopathy and both direct and

indirect aggressive behavior has also been revealed in non-clinical samples (Coyne & Thomas, 2008; Warren & Clabour, 2009). Furthermore, previous studies have shown that psychopathy in nonclinical samples is associated with hostile and maladaptive humor styles (Martin, Lastuk, Jeffery, Vernon, & Veselka, 2012; Veselka, Schermer, Martin, & Vernon, 2010). Previous work has demarcated various positive and negative humor styles (Martin, 2007). Positive humor styles include the self-enhancing style, which involves an ability to maintain a humorous perspective when faced with stressful situations, and the affiliative style, which involves using humor to facilitate interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, negative humor styles include an aggressive style characterized by humor used to ridicule and express contempt for others, and a self-defeating style, which involves use of self-denigrating humor as a form of ingratiation (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, & Weir, 2003). Prior work has identified positive relationships between psychopathy and both aggressive and self-defeating humor styles in noninstitutionalized young adults (Martin et al., 2012; Veselka et al., 2010). In addition, Martin et al. (2012) found a positive relationship between both primary and secondary psychopathy and negative humor styles. However, the impact of social environmental factors on the relationship between psychopathy and negative humor styles in the general population has yet to be clarified. The present study investigated the potential effect of one such social environmental factor, social exclusion, on the

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Human Sciences, Graduate School of Integrated Arts and Science, Hiroshima University, 1-7-1, Kagamiyama, Higashi-hiroshima-shi, Hiroshima 739-8521, Japan. Tel./fax: +81 82 424 6572.

E-mail address: kmasui@gmail.com (K. Masui).

¹ Research Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.

relationship between psychopathy and negative humor styles in noninstitutionalized young adults.

1.1. Psychopathy and social exclusion

It has been suggested that psychopathy places individuals at risk of social exclusion. For example, Masui, Iriguchi, Terada, Nomura, and Ura (2012) found a negative correlation between psychopathy, primary psychopathy in particular, and the experience of social support from family members. In addition, Dishion, Nelson, and Yasui (2005) examined the association between scores on a self-report measure of antisocial behavior frequency for boys and girls and like/dislike evaluations from classmates. Classmates tended to dislike peers who endorsed more antisocial behaviors (Dishion et al., 2005). A second study found that non-clinical adolescents generally provided negative evaluations of their high psychopathy peers (Rauthmann, 2012). In that study, two participants worked briefly on a cooperative task and subsequently provided evaluations of their partners. Partners evaluated high psychopathy individuals as being more dominant and less nurturing and ingenuous.

1.2. Social exclusion and humor styles

The experience of social exclusion is also positively correlated with use of negative humor styles. For example, greater use of self-defeating humor appears to be associated with social exclusion (Kirsh & Kuiper, 2003). Moreover, feelings of loneliness, which are elicited by social exclusion (Zardo, Williams, & Richardson, 2005), predict decreased use of the self-enhancing and affiliative styles, along with increased use of the self-defeating style (Hampes, 2005).

The experience of being socially excluded often decreases prosocial behavior in those who are excluded, with a corresponding increase in aggressive behaviors (DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009; Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillip, 2003; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007; Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2003). Twenge et al. (2007) indicated that socially excluded participants subsequently donated less money to a student fund, were unwilling to volunteer for further lab experiments, were less willing to help, and cooperated less during a mixed-motive game with another participant. Furthermore, Warburton et al. (2003) found that participants who felt excluded assigned an innocent person four times as much hot sauce to eat as socially included participants. Additionally, the experience of acute or chronic social exclusion such as teasing, ostracism, bullying, and romantic rejection was involved in most cases of the school shootings (Leary et al., 2003). Based on such findings, it could reasonably be proposed that social exclusion should predict concurrent decreases in use of friendly, adaptive humor styles and increases in use of hostile, maladaptive styles.

1.3. The present study

The present study extends previous research on the relationship between psychopathy and negative humor styles by examining the potential mediating effect of social exclusion, in a sample of noninstitutionalized young adults. Based on previous findings (described above), we hypothesized that there would be positive relationships between psychopathy, social exclusion, and negative humor styles. Additionally, psychopathic traits lead people to act in such a way as to be excluded, and then this exclusion would lead psychopathic individuals to adopt negative styles of humor, either in an effort to regain the acceptance of others, or in order to retaliate. Therefore, we specifically hypothesized that social exclusion would mediate the positive effect of psychopathy on use of negative humor styles.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The original sample consisted of 186 Japanese undergraduate university students (92 females, 94 males) who were recruited in an introductory psychology class. The final sample consisted of 139 undergraduate students (69 females, 70 males) who participated at both assessment points. All participants took part in the present study in exchange for partial course credit. The mean age of participants in the present study was 18.43 ($SD = 0.77$, age range = 18–23 years).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. The Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy (LSRP) scale

The LSRP scale is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure primary and secondary psychopathic traits in healthy populations (Levenson et al., 1995). The LSRP scale has moderate reliability and convergent validity with alternative measures of psychopathy (Brinkley, Schmitt, Smith, & Newman, 2001; Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones, 1999). A Japanese version of the LSRP scale was developed through back translation of the items (Sugiura & Sato, 2005) and demonstrates the same factor structure as the original, as well as adequate test–retest reliability and construct validity (Osumi, Kanayama, Sugiura, & Ohira, 2007). The Japanese version includes twenty-one items each rated on a four-point scale (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). The primary psychopathy scale is composed of fifteen items pertaining to manipulation, egocentricity, and lack of empathy and remorse, whereas the secondary scale includes six items assessing impulsivity, quick-temperament and poor behavioral control.

2.2.2. The Experience of Social Exclusion (ESE) scale

Experiences of social exclusion were measured via the ESE scale designed by Yanagisawa, Isobe, and Ura (2010). This scale consists of eleven items assessing the frequency with which individuals experienced various instances of social exclusion during interactions with friends, over the past three months (e.g., “When I asked my friends if I could borrow their things, they said no”). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (from *not at all* to *very often*). Previous research has demonstrated excellent internal reliability and evidence of construct validity for the ESE scale (Yanagisawa et al., 2010).

2.2.3. Humor Style Questionnaire (HSQ)

The original HSQ is a 32-item questionnaire designed by Martin et al. (2003), and the Japanese version is a 26-item scale translated by Kimura, Tsugawa, and Oka (2008). The HSQ assesses four humor style subtypes (described in the Introduction): Self-enhancing, affiliative, aggressive, and self-defeating. In this study, we separately calculated and analyzed each one of the four subtypes of humor. Participants responded to each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale (from *totally disagree* to *totally agree*). The Japanese HSQ has adequate reliability and demonstrates both convergent and discriminant validity (Kimura et al., 2008).

2.3. Procedure

The present study included two assessment points. Participants were asked to complete the LSRP scale at the first assessment point (Time 1). They were asked to complete the ESE scale and the HSQ at the second assessment point (Time 2). Both Times 1 and 2 were conducted in an introductory psychology class. The interval between Times 1 and 2 was about three months. Each assessment point took approximately fifteen minutes.

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