



Psychopathy dimensions and awareness of negative and positive consequences of aggressive behavior in a nonforensic sample

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Abstract

Predictions derived from the two-factor model of psychopathy were examined. Sixty-three male college students completed measures of primary and secondary psychopathy and then watched either a film displaying overt aggression or a neutral film. After viewing the film, self-report ratings of negative and positive consequences for engaging in aggressive behavior were completed. Participants lower in primary psychopathy reported a greater awareness of negative consequences for aggression after exposure to the aggressive film stimulus compared with similar participants who watched the neutral film. This priming effect was not found for individuals higher in primary psychopathy. Ratings of positive consequences by participants higher in secondary psychopathy were not affected by film condition. However, those of the participants who scored lower in secondary psychopathy showed a priming effect when exposed to the aggressive film stimulus, reaching similar levels as participants higher in secondary psychopathy who were exposed to a neutral film. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The distinction between primary and secondary psychopathy plays a central role in contemporary frameworks for understanding individual differences underlying antisocial and aggressive behavior. Current conceptualizations of primary psychopathy are similar to the

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Cleckley (1941) original description of the psychopathic personality. That is, primary psychopaths are described as extremely self-centered and manipulative, and exploitatively using others. Cleckley's core conceptualization has been expanded by contemporary theorists to include impulsive, antisocial, and deviant behaviors, which are thought to be representative of secondary psychopathy (Harpur, Hare & Hakstian, 1989; Levenson, Kiehl & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Salekin, Rogers & Sewell, 1996). There is considerable support for the distinction between primary and secondary psychopathy from both laboratory studies (see Lykken, 1995, for a review) and studies of personality traits (Lilienfeld, 1998). For example, violent criminals tend to produce elevated scores on measures of both primary and secondary psychopathy, but secondary psychopathy may predict instrumental violence (such as armed robbery) and violent criminal recidivism better than primary psychopathy (Cornell, Warren, Hawk, Stafford, Oram & Pine, 1996; Salekin et al., 1996).

Researchers have recently developed self-report measures for the assessment of primary and secondary psychopathy in nonincarcerated individuals (Forth, Brown, Hart & Hare, 1996; Levenson et al., 1995; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). For example, the Primary and Secondary Psychopathy scales (PSP; Levenson et al., 1995) were rationally derived to operationalize the two-factor framework. The PSP contains items worded to minimize the impact of social desirability on responding, an issue important to the use of self-report assessment in this domain (Lilienfeld, 1998). Levenson et al. (1995) report that these scales show adequate internal consistency coefficients and patterns of correlations with measures of other constructs that are consistent with the two-factor framework (cf. Lilienfeld, 1998). The availability of these self-report measures is a potential boon to the study of psychopathy because they may allow for a more efficient method of operationalizing the primary and secondary psychopathy dimensions.

Researchers have speculated that primary and secondary psychopathy reflect somewhat different biological substrates (Lykken, 1995; Newman, Schmitt & Voss, 1997; Newman & Wallace, 1993). Indeed, primary psychopathy has been theorized to represent a deficiency in the behavioral inhibition system (BIS; Fowles, 1980). The BIS represents brain structures associated with fear, the inhibition of behavior, and passive avoidance behavior. In contrast, secondary psychopathy is thought to reflect an excess in the behavioral activation system (BAS). The BAS represents brain structures associated with rewards, the activation of approach behavior, and the active avoidance of fear and pain. Although there is considerable support for associating the BIS/BAS framework with the primary/secondary psychopathy framework (Lykken, 1995), there are several aspects of this conceptualization that have not been examined. Newman and Wallace (1993) have speculated that the hypothesized BIS deficiency may lead primary psychopaths to 'allocate attention preferentially to reward cues as opposed to punishment cues' (p. 304). More recently, Newman et al. (1997) have suggested that primary psychopaths may neglect information about negative consequences only in situations in which the individual has to suspend another activity. Although it is unclear whether this deficit is pervasive or specific to certain situations, primary psychopathy is believed to lead to a neglect of information about the negative consequences of antisocial behavior. Similarly, secondary psychopathy may not be associated with the processing of negative consequences of their behavior (e.g., electric shocks used in passive avoidance learning paradigms), but may indicate difficulties when confronted with incentives (Lykken, 1995).

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