



Pergamon

CLINICAL
PSYCHOLOGY
REVIEW

Clinical Psychology Review 22 (2002) 729–752

Psychopathy in juvenile offenders Can temperament and attachment be considered as robust developmental precursors?

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Received 10 May 2001; received in revised form 22 August 2001; accepted 24 September 2001

Abstract

Attempts to predict adult psychopathy generally focus on aggressive and antisocial behavior exhibited in childhood and adolescence. Yet, children with conduct problems constitute a heterogeneous group, and many of the unique interpersonal and affective features associated with the construct of psychopathy only apply to a small subset of children displaying antisocial behavior. The current review seeks to derive an understanding of the specific precursors of the apparently amoral, affectionless, and self-centered orientation that psychopathic youngsters display towards other people. The focus is on the notions of temperament and attachment in early childhood, and their links to the emergence of moral emotions later in life. Based on a developmental perspective, the data currently available are examined, highlighting the insights gained from this body of work and outlining the conceptual and methodological challenges that still need to be addressed. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Juvenile psychopathy; Temperament; Attachment

1. Introduction

The concept of psychopathy has a long and prominent history in clinical psychology and criminology. Public imagination has always been fascinated by psychopathic individuals who are viewed as a breed apart from the class of “normal criminals,” in that they are peculiarly

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vicious and dangerous. Early accounts of this condition suggested that it represented a form of “moral insanity” (Blair, Jones, Clark, & Smith, 1995; Prichard, 1835 as cited in Benn, 1999). In fact, age-old popular images of madmen and violent maniacs emerged from these initial conceptualizations (see Adshear, 1999; Benn, 1999; Gillett, 1999; Harold & Elliott, 1999; Slovenko, 1999). Decades of heated debates focused on the free will of these moral transgressors, and on whether they were capable of “understanding” the consequences of their acts (Pinel, 1801/1962; Selmer, 1841 as cited in Millon, Simonsen, & Birket-Smith, 1998).

Until the second part of the twentieth century, insight into the mind and behavior of psychopaths was mostly gained through clinical characterizations of these individuals (e.g., McCord & McCord, 1964). For example, in his highly influential book “The mask of insanity,” Chekley (1941) offered a thorough description of the psychopath’s primary traits: guiltlessness, incapacity for object love, impulsivity, emotional shallowness, and superficial social charm. Attempts to study this condition from a research perspective have been more recent, and have until now mostly served to validate clinical accounts.

Based on both clinical and empirical work, current conceptualizations of psychopathy emphasize a personality disorder defined by a constellation of behavioral, interpersonal, and affective characteristics (Hare, 1993, 1998; Hart & Hare, 1997). Behaviorally, psychopathic individuals are risk-taking, sensation seekers who act impulsively and get involved in a variety of criminal activities. Interpersonally, they have been described as grandiose, egocentric, manipulative, arrogant, and cold-hearted. Affectively, they display shallow emotions and are unable to form strong emotional bonds with others. Among the trademarks of this condition, it has been suggested that psychopaths fail to experience or appreciate the emotional significance of events (Christianson et al., 1996; Hare, 1998). Clinicians and researchers generally emphasize a profound lack of remorse, guilt, and empathy, as well as a callous disregard for the feelings, rights, and welfare of others (Forth & Burke, 1998; Frick, 1998; Hare, 1991, 1993; Hart & Hare, 1997; Lynam, 1996).

It is a well-known finding that over the lifespan, psychopathy and other related disorders (e.g., oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, antisocial personality disorder [APD]) are more prevalent in males than in females (Offord, Adler, & Boyle, 1986; Offord, Boyle, & Racine, 1991; Salekin, Rogers, & Dayli, 2001; Salekin, Rogers, & Sewell, 1997). In fact, results of several national surveys (e.g., Epidemiological Catchment Area study, National Comorbidity Survey) indicate that the disorder is five to seven times more common in men than in women (see Paris, 1998). Some authors (e.g., Hamilton, Rothbart, & Dawes, 1986) contend that this gender difference can in part be explained by the fact that prevailing conceptualizations of psychopathy, which focus largely on antisocial acts and aggressive behavior, are less applicable to women. Because girls and women are typically not expected to engage in aggressive antisocial behavior and are actively discouraged from behaving against societal norms (Maccoby, 1986; Silverthorn & Frick, 1999), it has been suggested that personality components of the disorder (e.g., lack of empathy and remorse, superficiality) may be more predictive when studying female psychopathy. In essence, the argument is that differing symptom pictures exist for psychopathic males and females, and that women tend to be less aggressive than men. Although the hypothesis of two disparate gender-related psychopathy constructs is

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