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Sex differences in psychopathy and antisocial personality disorder

A review and integration

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Abstract

Although the correlates and causes of psychopathy and antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) have been the subject of extensive investigation, researchers in this area have until recently focused almost exclusively on males. As a consequence, relatively little is known about psychopathy and ASPD in females. In this paper, we review the empirical literature on sex differences in the base rates, mean symptom levels, correlates, and factor structure of psychopathy and ASPD. In addition, we discuss the potential sex-differentiated phenotypic expressions of psychopathy and ASPD (e.g., somatization disorder [SD]) as well as sex differences in the developmental trajectories of these conditions. There is suggestive evidence that these conditions may be differentially expressed across biological sex, although further investigation of this issue is warranted. We conclude with recommendations for future research in this area, including suggestions for embedding the study of sex differences in psychopathy and ASPD within a construct validation framework.

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1. Introduction

The classification and etiology of psychopathy and antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) are among the foremost challenges to researchers in the field of personality disorders today

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(Lykken, 1995). Researchers who have attempted to clarify the correlates and causes of these conditions have traditionally focused largely or almost exclusively on males (e.g., Hare, 1982; Harris, Rice, & Quinsey, 1994; Hart & Hare, 1989). Consequently, little is known about the causes, assessment, and diagnosis of psychopathy and ASPD in females (Mulder, Wells, Joyce, & Bushnell, 1994; Salekin, Rogers, & Sewell, 1997; Salekin, Rogers, Ustad, & Sewell, 1998). Because the prevalence, correlates, and phenotypic manifestations of these conditions may differ in males and females, a better understanding of sex differences in psychopathy and ASPD is of considerable theoretical and practical importance.

2. Psychopathy and ASPD: conceptual and assessment issues

Most conceptualizations of psychopathy and ASPD have been either personality-based or behavior-based (Lilienfeld, 1994, 1998). Hervey Cleckley (1941/1988) provided the first comprehensive description of the psychopath's personality in *The Mask of Sanity*. In this work, Cleckley specified 16 criteria for psychopathy, including superficial charm, lack of anxiety, unreliability, deceitfulness, lack of remorse, inadequately motivated antisocial behavior, failure to learn from punishment, egocentricity, poverty of affect and emotional bonds, lack of insight, and failure to plan ahead. With this constellation of primarily personality features, Cleckley provided the most influential personality-based approach to this condition (Lilienfeld, 1994). The diagnosis of "antisocial personality" was also primarily personality-based in the second edition of the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-II; APA, 1968), which emphasized selfishness, irresponsibility, impulsivity, lack of loyalty, lack of remorse, and failure to learn from punishment in its description of this condition. Both Cleckley and DSM-II noted that chronic antisocial behavior was neither necessary nor sufficient for a diagnosis of psychopathy.

Because the DSM-II criteria for antisocial personality were believed by some to be subjective and inferential, alternative and ostensibly more reliable operationalizations that emphasized chronic antisocial behavior were developed. DSM-III (APA, 1980) and DSM-III-R (APA, 1987) described ASPD as characterized by a history of delinquent and irresponsible behaviors (prior to age 15) that endure into adulthood, heralding a shift toward a more behavior-based conceptualization (Lilienfeld, 1994). The DSM-IV (APA, 1994; see also DSM-IV-Text Revision, APA, 2000) criteria for ASPD are similar to the DSM-III and DSM-III-R criteria in their behavioral emphasis.

Since the 1960s, Robert Hare and colleagues have investigated the conceptualization and assessment of psychopathy. A major achievement of this line of research has been the development of the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL; Hare, 1985b), its revision, the Psychopathy Checklist—Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 1991), and a briefer version, the Psychopathy Checklist: Screening Version (PCL:SV; Hart, Cox, & Hare, 1995). These semistructured interviews, which typically incorporate file information, include many aspects of the Cleckley criteria while assessing aspects of the DSM criteria for ASPD. Factor-analytic studies of the PCL and its progeny reveal that these measures operationalize a two-factor structure of psychopathy, with Factor 1 items assessing core personality features and Factor 2 items assessing antisocial

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