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Psychopathic personality or personalities? Exploring potential variants of psychopathy and their implications for risk assessment

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Abstract

Although psychopathy typically has been construed as a relatively uniform construct, seminal theories and contemporary research suggest that it may be heterogeneous. In this article, the most promising literature is distilled to distinguish among potential variants of antisocial personality disorder (APD) that can be derived from, and informed by, modern conceptions of psychopathy. This analysis suggests that there are primary and secondary variants of psychopathy, which may be distinguished based on the extent to which they are heritable and are characterized by affective deficits, impulsivity, trait anxiety, and characteristics of borderline and narcissistic personality disorders (NPD). These variants also may differ in their patterns of violence and responsiveness to treatment. If variants of psychopathy can be identified reliably and supported empirically, psychopathy may be transformed from a global label to a set of more specific constructs that improve our ability to understand, manage, and treat individuals who have largely been regarded as dangerous and untreatable.

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1. Introduction

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—4th Edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994), longstanding patterns of antisocial and violent behavior are captured by a single category, antisocial personality disorder (APD). However, chronic antisocial behavior likely is a function of a host of factors other than personality deviation (Blackburn, 1998a). Moreover, there is preliminary evidence that individuals classified with APD can differ substantially from one another both behaviorally and characterologically (Cunningham & Reidy, 1998; Rogers & Dion, 1991). The probable over-inclusiveness of the APD diagnosis (Lilienfeld, 1994) is reflected in the finding that this “disorder” tends to be the rule rather than the exception in correctional settings, with 50–80% of offenders typically meeting diagnostic criteria (Hart & Hare, 1997; Widiger & Corbitt, 1997). A large body of research conducted over the past two decades indicates that the construct of psychopathy captures individual differences among those with APD and that this construct bears critical implications for clinical and legal decisions about violence risk and treatment (see Edens, Petrila, & Buffington-Vollum, *in press*; Hart & Hare, 1997; Hemphill, Hare, & Wong, 1998; Rice, 1997; Salekin, Rogers, & Sewell, 1996).

Unlike the more behaviorally focused diagnosis of APD, psychopathy can be understood as a constellation of personality features that generally includes remorselessness, callousness, deceitfulness, egocentricity, failure to form close emotional bonds, low anxiety proneness, superficial charm, and externalization of blame (Lilienfeld, 1998). The most widely accepted measure of psychopathy is the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 1991), which assesses a set of interpersonal, affective, and behavioral features that are based largely on Cleckley’s (1941) seminal description of psychopathy (see Rogers, 1995). In contrast to the APD criteria, only about 15–30% of correctional offenders in North America typically are classified as psychopathic, based on standard PCL-R cut-off scores (Hart & Hare, 1997). More important, the narrower class of individuals identified as psychopathic in correctional, forensic, and psychiatric samples appears to be at disproportionate risk for a variety of negative outcomes. Psychopathic traits have been associated with higher rates of community violence, violent and nonviolent criminal recidivism, institutional management difficulties, and poor treatment outcomes, and generally have proven more useful for predicting these outcomes than has APD (see reviews by Edens, Buffington-Vollum, *et al.*, *in press*; Edens, Petrila, *et al.*, *in press*; Edens, Skeem, Cruise, & Cauffman, 2001; Hare *et al.*, 2000; Hart & Hare, 1997; Hemphill *et al.*, 1998; Rice, 1997; Salekin *et al.*, 1996).

Although psychopathy has typically been construed as a relatively uniform construct, several scholars have postulated the existence of specific variants of psychopathy. First, the multidimensional factor structure of the PCL-R itself reflects the possibility of distinctive subgroups of criminal offenders. Although most research has focused on the predictive utility of PCL-R total scores, early factor analyses suggested that the PCL-R was composed of two correlated factors (e.g., Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989). Factor 1 emphasizes “personality” traits consistent with Cleckley’s conceptualization of psychopathy (e.g., callousness and grandiosity), whereas Factor 2 emphasizes the “social deviance” and criminality (e.g., impulsivity and parasitic lifestyle) associated with recent APD diagnostic criteria (Lilienfeld,

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