



# Psychopathy and sensitivity to the emotional polarity of metaphorical statements

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## Abstract

Clinical and research evidence indicates that psychopathy is associated with anomalies in processing and using the emotional components of language. However, most research on the topic has involved simple verbal stimuli, thereby telling us little about how psychopaths process and use emotional material that is part of a more complex linguistic process. We administered an “Emotional Metaphor Q-Sort” task to 35 male inmates assessed for psychopathy with the Hare Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL–R; Hare, 1991). The task consisted of metaphorical statements that had to be sorted along a continuum according to the direction and degree of their emotional valence, ranging from very negative to very positive. Although psychopaths and nonpsychopaths did not differ in their literal understanding of the metaphors, psychopaths made significantly more sorting errors than did nonpsychopaths, particularly with what should have been emotionally unambiguous metaphors. The results are consistent with the hypothesis that incarcerated psychopaths do not understand or make effective use of the emotional content of language.

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## 1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a clinical construct characterized by a cluster of interpersonal, affective, and lifestyle features, including egocentricity, grandiosity, deceptiveness, shallow emotions, lack of empathy, guilt, or remorse, impulsivity, irresponsibility, and the ready violation of social and

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legal norms and expectations (Cleckley, 1976; Hare, 1991, 1998a). Recent empirical research on the disorder has benefited from the use of paradigms and procedures of cognitive and affective neuroscience, particularly those associated with linguistic processes. The ways in which psychopaths process and use language provide us with clues about the nature of their cognitive and emotional world.

Clinicians have long noted that psychopaths apparently fail to appreciate fully the emotional and abstract nuances of language (e.g. Cleckley, 1976). Empirical research, though consistent with this position (see reviews by Hare, 1998a, *in press*), is limited by the general focus on relatively simple verbal stimuli, such as isolated words. Few studies have investigated the role of affect in more complex forms of psychopathic language, such as sentences and phrases used to communicate ideas and emotions. The objective of this study was to assess the ability of psychopaths to understand the literal and emotional meanings of metaphors, linguistic constructions that closely capture language as it is used in everyday life.

Metaphors consist of any linguistic device whereby “aspects of one object are carried over or transferred to another object so that the second object is spoken of as if it were the first” (see Bernstein, 1987). Forming the basis of many types of figures of speech (e.g. simile, idiom, slang, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, analogy, proverb), they are a fundamental and ubiquitous component of language (Beck, 1987). Metaphors assist us in making our communications more vivid, memorable, comprehensible, and aesthetically pleasing (Allbritton, 1995; Katz, 1996). Like language in general, metaphors have both denotative/literal and connotative/affective meanings. It is the latter that should present a problem to psychopaths, given the evidence that they do not show normal behavioral, electrocortical, or neuroimaging differentiation between neutral and emotional words (e.g. Intrator et al., 1997; Kiehl, Hare, McDonald, & Brink, 1999; Kiehl et al., 2001; Williamson, Harpur, & Hare, 1991; see reviews by Hare, 1998a, *in press*).

A study by Williamson, Harpur, and Hare (1990; see Hare, 1998a) included a metaphor component in the investigation of the psychopath’s emotional language. Their “word triad” task required psychopaths and nonpsychopaths to choose the two words in a triad of words that were most similar in meaning. The words (warm, cold, deep, shallow, loving, hateful, wise, and foolish) were presented in various combinations, three at a time, and were chosen to allow relationship-based groupings into six possible categories: antonym, domain, metaphor, polarity, domain and polarity, and no relation. Psychopaths used polarity relationships (pleasant–unpleasant) less often than did nonpsychopaths, but did not differ from them in their use of metaphor, domain, and antonym. The authors suggested that psychopaths “are able to form metaphorical relationships at the single word level and this may compensate for their insensitivity to affective valence” (p. 13). However, the metaphoric relationship consisted of only two words, which is clearly metaphor at its most elemental. Furthermore, the authors noted that the psychopaths could have based their metaphorical pairings more on a denotative than on a connotative understanding of the words. Consistent with this possibility was the additional finding by Williamson et al. (1990; see Hare, 1998a) that psychopaths performed poorly on a task that required them to match sentences on the basis of their inferred emotional polarity; they made many “opposite polarity errors.” For example, they recognized that “*A man running from a monster*” and “*A man surfing on a large wave*” each had emotional connotations (one fear, the other exhilaration or excitement), but they rated them as being similar (positive) in polarity. Presumably, most people would consider one to have negative (bad) and the other to have positive (good) connotations, respectively.

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