

Is juvenile psychopathy associated with low anxiety and fear in conduct-disordered male offenders?

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Abstract

Although the traditional conceptualization of psychopathy suggests that this construct is negatively associated with anxiety the literature has produced mixed findings. The present study examined the relationship between self-report measures of anxiety/fear and psychopathy assessed using the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version in 110 adolescent male offenders with conduct disorder. In line with the literature in children, we found that measures of anxiety and fearfulness exhibited differential associations with different elements of psychopathy. Specifically, we found that trait anxiety was negatively correlated with the affective components of the psychopathy construct and that fearfulness was negatively correlated with the more antisocial components of the construct. The findings are discussed in the context of growing literature on psychopathy assessment in younger cohorts.

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1. Introduction

The antisocial personality disorders (conduct disorder, antisocial personality disorder, and psychopathy) are a group of overlapping disorders of personality that are associated with significant intra and interpersonal dysfunction across the lifespan. There is increasing recognition that these disorders are complex constructs and comprise a constellation of symptoms and behaviors (Blackburn, 1998; Frick, 1998; Hare, 1998). The last decade has seen a growing

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interest in the assessment of psychopathy in children and adolescents and a number of reviews have highlighted the need to demonstrate that psychopathy is a stable construct with similar external correlates across the lifespan (Dolan, 2004; Edens, Skeem, Cruise, & Cauffman, 2001; Farrington, 2005).

There has been longstanding debate in the literature concerning the nature of the association between antisocial behavior in these disorders and fear and anxiety, particularly in relation to the psychopathy construct. Several theories have focused on the low fear hypothesis of antisocial behavior (Cloninger, 1987, 1994; Gray, 1982; Lykken, 1957) or the absence of anxiety (Cleckley, 1976). However, several researchers have noted that antisocial personality disorders can be associated with relatively high levels of negative affect including anxiety as a secondary consequence of their antisocial behavior (Blackburn, 1998; Fowles, 1988; Frick, 1998; Lilienfeld, 1992, 1994). It has been suggested that there are subgroups of antisocial individuals with varying degrees of anxiety and neuroticism. Those with low levels of anxiety are described as primary psychopaths (Blackburn, 1998) or undersocialized delinquents (Quay, 1987). Those with high levels of anxiety are described as secondary psychopaths (Blackburn, 1998) or neurotic delinquents (Quay, 1987). Some support for this distinction comes from studies showing that low anxious psychopaths have deficits on passive avoidance learning tasks compared to high anxious psychopaths (Newman, Widom, & Nathan, 1985).

Cleckley's (1941, 1976) original conceptualization of psychopathy emphasized deficient emotional processes, including impoverished emotional reactions, lack of anxiety, and a disjunction between the lexical and experiential components of emotion as key components of the disorder. Several studies provide evidence of attenuation of physiological responses to emotional information processing in psychopathic subjects with marked callous-unemotional traits (Patrick, 1994). In addition, there is evidence of discordance between linguistic and experiential components of emotion in both fear imaging (Patrick, Cuthbert, & Lang, 1994) and memory paradigms (Christianson et al., 1996). The behavior and physiological anomalies associated with psychopathy are thought to arise because the psychological processes that would normally function to motivate adaptive behavior and emotional responding, in response to cues for punishment, do not occur. Thus subjects who are characterized as having low anxiety and an inability to empathize with others may have significant difficulties learning from the previous adverse consequences of their behavior either on themselves or their victims. Low anxiety may also be associated with a degree of fearlessness that results in repeated engagement in antisocial activities and a failure to learn from experience.

In recent years there have also been attempts to distinguish between anxiety and fear constructs, with fearfulness seen as a sensitivity to cues of impending danger (Gray, 1982; Tellegen, 1982) while trait anxiety is viewed as the distress that results from the feeling that negative consequences are inevitable (Tellegen, 1982). Although anxiety and fear are overlapping constructs they do appear to have distinct neural underpinnings (Dien, 1999).

Early empirical studies testing the hypothesis that psychopathy is associated with a reduced capacity for fear/anxiety has produced inconsistent findings. While Lykken (1957) reported that primary psychopaths had lower fear, but not anxiety scores compared with non-criminal comparisons, others (Schmauk, 1970; Widom, 1976) have not been able to replicate this finding. More recent studies assessing psychopathy using the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) devised by Hare (1991) have focused on the relationship between anxiety and fear and the two-factor model of psychopathy outlined by Harpur, Hare, and Hakstian (1989) in which Factor 1 reflects affective and interpersonal traits and Factor 2 consists of the social deviance/behavioral items. To address the issue that these factors may have a differential relationship with anxiety/

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