



Gray's model and psychopathy: BIS but not BAS differentiates primary from secondary psychopathy in noninstitutionalized young adults

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Abstract

Gray's two-factor model represents motivation in terms of a behavioral inhibition (BIS) and a behavioral activation system (BAS). Although this model has theoretical links to psychopathy, few studies have examined this relationship. In a sample of 326 noninstitutionalized young adults, we examined the relationship of the BIS/BAS dimensions to multiple indices of primary and secondary psychopathy. Across measures of psychopathy, primary but not secondary was related to BIS standing, whereas indices of both psychopathic dimensions demonstrated robust, positive relationships to the BAS. Generally, results support Newman, MacCoon, Vaughn, and Sadeh (2005) distinction between primary and secondary psychopathy on the basis of the BIS. However, positive associations of all psychopathy measures with BAS indices emphasize the role of a common BAS in psychopathy.

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1. Introduction

Based on the psychobiology of animal learning, Gray (1970, 1987) proposed a theoretical model encompassing two primary motivational systems: the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) and the behavioral activation system (BAS). The BIS represents apprehensive motivation and is sensitive to conditioned signals of punishment, frustrative nonreward and novelty. In contrast, the BAS is appetitive and sensitive to conditioned signals of reward and nonpunishment. At the trait level, Gray's (1987) two factors of BIS and BAS translate into anxiety and impulsivity, respectively. A theory of normal adaptation, Gray's model is drawing increased interest from psychopathy researchers. A personality disorder, psychopathy has been the subject of considerable theorizing vis-à-vis Gray's original model.¹

Although three-factor (Cooke & Michie, 2001) and four-facet (Hare, 2003) models of psychopathy have been recently advanced, factor analytic studies of psychopathy measures have generally supported a two-factor model (Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003; Hare, 1991; Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989; Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones, 1999). Broadly, these dimensions represent the theoretical distinction between primary and secondary psychopathy (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Brinkley, Schmitt, Smith, & Newman, 2001). Though primary and secondary psychopathy remain open constructs, primary psychopathy represents the core emotional deficits and interpersonal manipulation in psychopathy, whereas secondary psychopathy may represent nonessential but associated characteristics, including antisociality and neurotic tendencies (Karpman, 1941). Using multiple measures of each construct, we examine the relationship of Gray's two-factor model of BIS and BAS in relation to primary and secondary psychopathy.

2. Gray's original BIS/BAS and psychopathy

Fowles (1988), building on Gray's initial formulation, hypothesized that both an overactive BAS and an underactive BIS are related to "behavioural excess, in the sense of doing things that potentially lead to trouble" (p. 421). An overactive BAS would lead to more frequent approach responses irrespective of potential punishments. Similarly, an underactive BIS would result in more frequent approach responses due to a person's lower sensitivity to punishment that, in turn, leads to reduced inhibition. Thus, high-impulsive and low-anxious personalities are both prone to risky and disinhibited behavior in approach-avoidance conflicts. Characterized by disinhibition and risk-taking, psychopathy has been hypothesized by Lykken (1957) to result from low fear, as a core emotional marker. Although fear and anxiety represent different constructs (Gray, 1987), Lykken (1995) used Gray's model for underpinning differences between primary and secondary psychopathy. Lykken suggests that primary psychopathy is associated with a hyporeactive, weak BIS and normal (i.e., average) BAS. Fowles (1980) similarly points to the role of the BIS in primary psychopathy. In contrast, Lykken (1995) views secondary psychopathy as resulting from an overactive BAS, but normal BIS.

Following these theorists, Newman et al. (2005) proposed that long-standing operationalizations of primary and secondary psychopathy using the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R;

¹ In this study, we focused on Gray's original BIS/BAS model, which was the focus of Newman et al.'s (2005) study, rather than the revised Response Sensitivity Theory proposed by Gray and McNaughton (2000).

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