



Psychopathy and trait emotional intelligence

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Abstract

Psychopathic individuals are infamous for their chronic and diverse failures of social adjustment despite their adequate intellectual abilities. Non-cognitive factors, in particular *trait emotional intelligence (EI)*, offer one possible explanation for their lack of success. This study explored the association between psychopathy and EI, as measured by the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003) and Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS, Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). Consistent with the Response Modulation (RM) model of psychopathy (Newman & Lorenz, 2003), low-anxious psychopathic individuals had significantly lower scores on TMMS Repair and Attention compared to controls. Consistent with proposals by Patrick and Lang (1999) regarding PCL-R factors, these EI deficits related to different aspects of the psychopathy construct. Correlations revealed significant inverse associations between PCL-R factor 1 and Attention and PCL-R factor 2 and Repair. We propose that the multi-dimensional EI framework affords a complementary perspective on laboratory-based explanations of psychopathy.

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1. Introduction

Despite adequate intelligence, psychopathic individuals are infamous for their profound failure of social adjustment. Highlighting this paradox, Cleckley (1976) observed: “In complex matters of

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judgment. . .(the psychopath) shows no evidence of a defect. So long as the test is verbal or otherwise abstract, so long as he is not a direct participant, he shows that he knows his way about. . .- When the test of action comes to him we soon find ample evidence of his deficiency” (p. 346). Through case studies, Cleckley illustrated how good, or even exceptional, cognitive abilities were not sufficient to ensure satisfactory decision-making and social adjustment.

Limitations of using cognitive intelligence alone to predict life success have been long-recognized. In 1940 David Wechsler referred to “non-intellective” elements, including personal, affective, and social factors when describing “the aggregate or global capacity of the individual to act purposefully, to think rationally, and to deal effectively with his environment” (Wechsler, 1940; p. 103). Shortly thereafter, he proposed that “non-intellective” abilities are essential for predicting one’s ability to succeed in life.

Research on non-cognitive factors underlying life success provides the cornerstone for the field of *emotional intelligence* (EI). Generally, EI entails the abilities to recognize and regulate emotions in ourselves and in others. According to Salovey and Mayer (1990), the construct of EI refers to individual differences in the ability to process and use emotional information to promote effective functioning in everyday life. Higher EI predicts enhanced psychosocial functioning (e.g., Salovey & Grewal, 2005; Schutte et al., 2001), including interpersonal factors (i.e., better social relationships) and intrapersonal factors (i.e., greater optimism). Thus, EI is a potentially important non-cognitive variable that may clarify why, despite adequate intelligence, some individuals have difficulty across multiple life domains (Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004).

Research on psychopathy provides substantial empirical support for Cleckley’s claim that psychopathy entails a peculiar incapacity to function successfully despite good intelligence. Although Hare’s (2003) PCL-R is not correlated with intelligence, psychopathic individuals identified with the instrument display a wide range of maladaptive antisocial behaviors that result in high incarceration rates and other negative consequences (Moriarty, Stough, Tidmarsh, Eger, & Dennison, 2001). In lieu of intellectual deficits, investigators frequently attribute this maladaptive behavior to deficient emotion processing. Indeed, laboratory research has documented psychopathy-related failures to attend to and make use of emotion stimuli (Newman & Lorenz, 2003), alter a dominant response set for reward in the face of growing punishments (Newman, Patterson, & Kosson, 1987), and discriminate among the affective aspects of words and faces (Blair et al., 2004).

Despite the growing research literatures on psychopathy and EI, there appear to be no published articles documenting their association. In light of the intuitive connection between psychopathy and EI, the lack of research, and the potential utility of the EI framework for clarifying psychopathic behavior, this study investigates the association between psychopathy and EI. According to Salovey and Mayer (1990), EI consists of multiple dimensions, including, the inclination to allocate *attention* to one’s feelings, the ability to *repair* one’s mood, and *clarity* in discriminating affective states. Thus, in the interest of specifying the association between psychopathy and EI, we examine the association between the PCL-R and these three dimensions.

Although the association between psychopathy and EI has not, to our knowledge, been previously studied, research on psychopathy provides a basis for postulating *a priori* hypotheses. The Response Modulation (RM) model (Patterson & Newman, 1993) holds that psychopathic individuals are deficient in allocating attention to process information, including emotional cues that are outside of their current attentional focus (Newman & Lorenz, 2003). Moreover, consistent with

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