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Psychopathy, aggression, and cheating behavior: A test of the Cheater–Hawk hypothesis

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Abstract

According to Book and Quinsey (2004), the Cheater–Hawk hypothesis adequately explains the use of both cheating behavior and aggression in psychopaths. This study aimed to test this hypothesis by examining the association between primary and secondary psychopathy, cheating behavior, indirect aggression (also called relational aggression), and direct aggression using a non-institutionalized sample of University students. Primary psychopathy was related to cheating behavior, indirect and direct aggression, showing support for the Cheater–Hawk hypothesis. However, secondary psychopathy was only related to direct and indirect aggression. Primary psychopathy was also better predicted by indirect aggression, while secondary psychopathy was better predicted by direct aggression. As a whole the results partially support the Cheater–Hawk hypothesis, but appear to depend on the type of psychopathy and the type of aggression measured.

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1. Introduction

Psychopaths have captured the imagination of the media and the research community in recent years; not only because of the brutal and often uncaring way they treat people, but because of their near inability to be reformed (e.g. Barbaree, 2005). Robert Hare (1996: 25) described psychopaths as “...predators who use charm, manipulation, intimidation and violence to control others...Lacking in conscience and in feelings for others, they cold-bloodedly take what they want and to do as they please...they are responsible for a markedly disproportionate amount of serious crime, violence and social distress in society.”

Most research reveals that there are two types of psychopaths (Cleckley, 1976; Newman, MacCoon, Vaughn, & Sadeh, 2005). Primary psychopaths are individuals who generally show low levels of anxiety, empathy, fearlessness and emotion due to some intrinsic deficit rather than due to environmental or emotional difficulties. Secondary psychopaths show more impulsiveness, anxiety, empathy, and guilt than their primary counterparts. Their antisocial behavior is viewed not as an intrinsic deficit but rather as a result of environmental disadvantage, neurotic anxiety, psychotic thinking, low intelligence levels or other attributes that increase the likelihood for antisocial behavior (Lykken, 1995).

Although psychopaths are often caught and imprisoned for their crimes, many more “successful” psychopaths live in the community. These are individuals who may possess many of the same attributes of their unsuccessful counterparts; however, they do not have the same history of arrest and incarceration. Successful psychopaths operate well in mainstream society and may use their traits to “get ahead” at University (Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones, 1999), business (Board & Fritzon, 2005) and in other organizations (Babiak, 1995, 1996). These individuals have a charming façade and are very good at manipulating and using those around them to achieve success.

From an evolutionary perspective psychopathy can be explained using the Cheater and Warrior Hawk hypotheses (Book & Quinsey, 2004). These two hypotheses focus on two psychopathic traits, namely cheating and aggression. According to these views, psychopathy can be adaptive. This is particularly true for successful psychopaths who are good at using others for their own benefit while putting up a charming façade so as not to be caught out. The Cheater hypothesis explains the manipulativeness and cheating behavior of psychopaths. It builds upon game theory and is best exemplified by using the “Prisoner’s Dilemma” game where an individual must decide whether to cooperate with or cheat a group of people in order to maximise his/her own benefits. Psychopaths have been shown to exploit others to benefit themselves, both in Prisoner’s Dilemma games (e.g. Widom, 1976) and in real life (e.g. Mealey, 1995; Seto, Khatrar, Lalumiere, & Quinsey, 1997). This cheating may even go beyond the social aspect to actual cheating and dishonesty in financial, business, and academic life. For example, in a non-clinical population, Nathanson, Paulhus, and Williams (2006) found that psychopathy was a strong predictor of cheating on examinations, even after controlling for scholastic competence. According to the Cheater hypothesis, one reason that psychopaths “cheat” is because they have low levels of empathy, yet strong levels of indignation when they feel wronged.

However, aggression is also strongly associated with psychopathy (e.g., Miller & Lynam, 2003; Stafford & Cornell, 2003), something that the Cheater hypothesis does not explain. Conversely,

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