



## Psychopathy and identification of facial expressions of emotion

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Received 15 May 2007; received in revised form 24 December 2007; accepted 8 January 2008

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### Abstract

The authors examined the association between psychopathy and identification of facial expressions of emotion. Previous research in this area is scant and has produced contradictory findings (Blair et al., 2001, 2004; Glass & Newman, 2006; Kosson et al., 2002). One hundred and forty-five male jail inmates, rated using the Hare Psychopathy Checklist: Screening Version participated in a facial affect recognition task. Participants were shown faces containing one of five emotions (happiness, sadness, fear, anger, or shame) displayed at one of two different levels of intensity of expression (100% or 60%). The authors predicted that psychopathy would be associated with decreased affect recognition, particularly for sad and fearful emotional expressions, and decreased recognition of less intense displays of facial affect. Results were largely consistent with expectations in that psychopathy was negatively correlated with overall facial recognition of affect, sad facial affect, and recognition of less intense displays of affect. An unexpected negative correlation with recognition of happy facial affect was also found. These results suggest that psychopathy may be associated with a general deficit in affect recognition.

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*Keywords:* Psychopathy; Emotion; Faces; Expression; Antisocial personality disorder

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## 1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a disorder comprised of a unique confluence of affective, interpersonal, and behavioral traits (Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 1991). Deficient or abnormal emotional experience has long been considered a hallmark of psychopathy (Cleckley, 1941). Research has demonstrated that psychopathic individuals experience emotions differently, showing qualitative and/or quantitative differences in their ability to experience emotion (Hare, 1993, 1998; Steuerwald & Kosson, 2000) and process affective language (Gillstrom & Hare, 1988; Hare & McPherson, 1984; Williamson, Harpur, & Hare, 1991). Significant abnormalities have also been found in physiological responses to affective material (Hare, 1978; Patrick, Bradley, & Lang, 1993) and memory for emotional events (Christianson et al., 1996).

Recently, researchers have begun to examine the relationship between psychopathy and identification of emotional states in others. Stevens, Charman, and Blair (2001) examined psychopathic children's ability to recognize both facial expressions of emotion and vocal tone. Children with psychopathic traits evidenced an impairment in their recognition for sad and fearful facial expressions and for sad vocal tone. Blair, Colledge, Murray, and Mitchell (2001) presented children with facial expressions of emotion that slowly evolved through 20 successive frames of increasing intensity. They found that children with psychopathic traits needed greater intensity of emotional expression in order to accurately identify sad facial expressions, and they were more likely than children without psychopathic traits to misidentify fearful facial expressions even when at the highest level of intensity of expression.

Studies examining the relationship between psychopathy and recognition of facial affect in adults have resulted in conflicting findings. Kosson, Suchy, Mayer, and Libby (2002) examined facial affect recognition in a sample of 77 male inmates and found that psychopathic men were less accurate than non-psychopathic men in identifying facial expressions of disgust. Blair et al. (2004), employing a paradigm similar to Blair et al. (2001), found that psychopathic men evidenced a significant impairment in their ability to identify fearful facial expressions. However, their sample size was quite small (i.e., 19 psychopathic men and 19 controls). Similar deficits in fear recognition were associated with psychopathic personality characteristics in a male college sample (Montagne et al., 2005). Dolan and Fullam (2006) found significantly lower accuracy recognition for sad faces among psychopaths relative to controls. However, most recently, Glass and Newman (2006) examined recognition of facial affect in a sample of 111 male prison inmates and found that psychopathic offenders performed as well as non-psychopathic offenders in identifying facial expressions of emotion. While most studies investigating facial affect recognition and psychopathy have found some deficit(s), the specific type of deficit has varied across studies and samples.

A relatively new emotion-based theory of psychopathy is Blair's (1995) and Blair et al.'s (2001) Violence Inhibition Mechanism, which posits that the emotional deficits associated with psychopathy are the result of empathy dysfunction, which leads to poor moral socialization. According to this model, psychopathic individuals fail to experience the fear and sadness of others as aversive and therefore fail to learn how to avoid acting and behaving in ways that result in others' sadness and fear. The neurological basis for this deficit is believed to lie within the limbic system and more specifically, the amygdala. Consistent with this notion, Gordon, Baird, and End (2004) found that college students ( $n = 22$ ) who scored low on the emotional-interpersonal domain of psychopathy

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