



# The characteristics of non-criminals with high psychopathy traits: Are they similar to criminal psychopaths?

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## Abstract

This study compared the findings from a sample of non-criminals with high and low psychopathy levels to published findings with criminal psychopaths and non-psychopaths. Congruent to findings with criminal psychopaths, participants with high psychopathy traits (High-P) compared to those with low psychopathy traits (Low-P) performed significantly worse on the Iowa Gambling Task, a task sensitive to orbital frontal cortex dysfunction. Moreover, the High-P group also evidenced a lack of empathy, a hallmark feature of psychopathy. These findings could not be explained by differences in estimated IQ or performance on a task sensitive to an executive functioning deficit. The discussion focuses on possible differences between non-criminal and criminal psychopaths, concluding criminal psychopaths manifest more extreme degrees of the interpersonal-affective and antisocial features of psychopathy.

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## 1. Introduction

The majority of psychopathy research has been conducted with criminal samples employing the Psychopathy Checklist—Revised (PCL-R; 1991, 2003), the “gold standard” measure of psychopathy in clinical settings. Psychopathy, as captured by the PCL-R, is a

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hierarchical construct encompassing four facets reflecting its affective (e.g., lack of empathy), interpersonal (e.g., grandiosity), lifestyle (e.g., impulsivity) and antisocial (e.g., delinquency) features. Whilst the existence of non-criminal psychopaths has long been recognized (e.g., Cleckley, 1964; Schneider, 1958), relatively few studies have been conducted with this population. Consequently, our understanding of the differences between non-criminal and criminal psychopaths is incomplete. Understanding the differences between these two populations is important as it may identify “protective” factors preventing community-dwelling, non-criminal psychopaths from becoming criminal psychopaths (Frick, Kimonis, Dandreaux, & Farel, 2003; Lilienfeld, 1994).

Comparing the characteristics of non-criminal and criminal psychopaths has been problematic for a number of reasons, one being the inappropriateness of using the PCL-R in non-clinical settings. The PCL-R’s lengthy administration time coupled with the low percentage of community-dwelling psychopaths (approximately 1%; Hare, 2003) renders it inefficient for mass screenings; a necessary method for obtaining sufficient sample sizes. Moreover, various conceptualizations of the ‘non-criminal’ psychopath exist that do not capture the same psychopathy construct as the PCL-R. Therefore, the use of different psychopathy constructs across studies with non-criminal and criminal samples makes comparing the findings of such studies difficult.

Three commonly used measures of non-criminal psychopathy include Levenson’s Primary and Secondary Psychopathy scales (LPSP; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995), the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996) and the Behavioral Activation/Inhibition System scales (Carver & White, 1994). Whilst the LPSP (Brinkley, Schmitt, Smith, & Newman, 2001) and PPI (Poythress, Edens, & Lilienfeld, 1998) have shown moderate correlations with the PCL-R, they were not modeled on the PCL-R so may capture a divergent psychopathy construct. However, another commonly used measure, the Self-Report Psychopathy scale (SRP), was modeled on the Psychopathy Checklist (Hare, 1985). A revised version of the SRP showed a moderate correlation (mean  $r = .38$ ) with the PCL-R (Zágon & Jackson, 1994) and correlations of .55 for women and .62 for men with the screening version of the PCL-R (Forth, Brown, Hart, & Hare, 1996). Moreover, the current version, the SRP-III, has evidenced a similar four-facet solution (Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007) to the most recent version of the PCL-R (Hare, 2003).

Comparing the characteristics of non-criminal and criminal psychopaths has also been difficult because research with non-criminals have largely employed self-report measures of various personality (e.g., Mullins-Nelson, Salekin, & Leistico, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Williams, Paulhus, & Nathanson, 2003) and behavioral dispositions (e.g., Book, Holden, Starzyk, Wasyliw, & Edwards, 2006; Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006; Ross & Rausch, 2001). In contrast, research with criminal psychopaths has been predominantly psychophysiological (Lorber, 2004) and neuropsychological in nature (e.g., Blair et al., 2006b; Hart, Forth, & Hare, 1990; LaPierre, Braun, & Hodgins, 1995; Smith, Arnett, & Newman, 1992).

Neuropsychological research with criminal (i.e., incarcerated), PCL-R-defined psychopaths indicates they do not have an executive dysfunction associated with generalized frontal lobe deficits (Hart et al., 1990; Smith et al., 1992) but instead exhibit more specific deficits associated with the prefrontal cortex, including the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC; Blair, Morton, Leonard, & Blair, 2006a; LaPierre et al., 1995). Further evidence was presented by Mitchell and colleagues (Mitchell, Colledge, Leonard, & Blair, 2002), who found

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