



Psychopathy and violence in juvenile delinquents: What are the associated factors?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was a) to examine the discriminative power of the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD), aggressive traits, impulsiveness, antisocial attitudes and alcohol-related problems between subgroups of Russian juvenile delinquents ($n = 175$) with low versus high levels of violent behavior; and b) to compare the predictive value of these variables in two subgroups defined by higher versus lower levels of psychopathic traits. Results demonstrated that the APSD score, traits of physical aggression and alcohol-related problems were able to discriminate between groups with various levels of violence. Furthermore, the level of violence was the only variant factor when comparing levels of psychopathy. Finally, different sets of predictors emerged for the group with higher versus lower psychopathy scores. The results are discussed in relation to specific features of psychopathy and environmental factors in general and the use of alcohol in particular.

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1. Introduction

It is widely admitted that we are living in a violent society. Violence has become a part of our daily lives, with mass media regularly reporting on extreme cases of violence, steadily increasing our tolerance for violent behavior in movies and on television. At the same time, violence is a major concern for society since it brings extreme costs (Welsh, 2003), both economical and in terms of life quality, and tends to become a widespread pattern of reacting to interpersonal conflict or to the fulfilment of goals.

Recent studies have shown that the majority of crimes, especially violent crimes, are committed by a relatively small group of offenders (Baron, 1995; Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Wei, Farrington, & Wikström, 2002). This group has been shown to have a relatively early onset, a fairly persistent pattern of antisocial behavior (Moffitt, 1993, 2006; Nagin & Tremblay, 1999), and can be characterized by a callous and unemotional interpersonal style, frequently concurring with psychopathy (e.g. Frick, O'Brien, Wootton, & McBurnett, 1994; Forth & Burke, 1998).

The concept of psychopathy, since its first classical definition by Cleckley (1941), has increasingly attracted attention due to its predictive value for antisocial behavior (Hare, 2003; Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989) and for violent and aggressive behavior in adults (Grann, Långström, Tengström, & Kullgren, 1999; Hare, Clark, Grann, & Thornton, 2000). The bulk of these studies on adults were conducted using different versions of the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL, Hare, 2003).

According to Hart and colleagues (e.g. Hart & Dempster, 1997; Hart & Hare, 1996, 1997), there are at least three potential mechanisms that could account for the link between psychopathy and violence. The first mechanism is cognitive. It has been

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assumed that psychopaths are more likely than others to have antisocial cognitions (e.g. thoughts, fantasies, urges) and to perceive antisocial behavior as normative. Also, psychopaths may have specific cognitive schemata that predispose them to proactive (instrumental) aggression (Raine et al., 2006) and to evaluate the commitment of violent acts as potentially rewarding (Hart, 1998). The second mechanism is affective. Since affects (such as empathy, guilt, fear) may inhibit the expression of violence (e.g. Blair et al., 1995; Patrick & Zempolich, 1998), psychopaths may be more likely to commit violent acts due to their generalized affective deficits and prominent narcissistic traits (Hare, 1996). These traits were also evidenced in children with psychopathic tendencies (Blair, 2005). The third potential mechanism is behavioral. As noticed by Hart (1998), psychopaths appear to suffer from a pronounced impulsivity, i.e. a tendency to commit harmful acts without forethought or planning (Hart & Dempster, 1997; af Klinteberg, von Knorring, & Orelund, 2004; Seager, 2005) and ADHD (especially the impulsivity component) seems to be associated with childhood psychopathic tendencies (Colledge & Blair, 2001). Hart (1998) also suggested that due to their impulsiveness, psychopaths are predisposed to committing all kinds of acts, including violence, before processing internal cognitive and affective cues. Psychopaths may also impulsively engage in irresponsible behaviors, such as substance use, that indirectly increase their risk of becoming violent. Indeed, psychopathy has generally been associated with substance use in adult offenders (Crocker et al., 2005; Longato-Stadler, af Klinteberg, Garpenstrand, Orelund, Hallman, 2002), thus giving some support for the latter mechanism.

Identification at an early stage of those children and youth who are potentially vulnerable to the development of antisocial behavior, particularly violent and aggressive behavior, would provide much needed information for the development of intervention and prevention programs. The extension of the psychopathy construct to children and youth, however, has been somewhat controversial. The core issue of concern is the developmental processes and changes ongoing in adolescence (Edens, Skeem, Cruise, & Cauffman, 2001). Whether personality, and thereby the psychopathy trait constellation, are set and stable at this point in life is of major concern when evaluating the usefulness of the rating scales used in this kind of risk assessment. Results from several independent longitudinal studies, however, do suggest that psychopathic traits in adolescence extend and remain relatively stable into adulthood (Blonigen, Hicks, Krueger, Patrick, & Iacono, 2006; Loney, Taylor, Butler, & Iacono, 2007; Lynam, Caspi, Moffitt, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2007). Furthermore, several studies have identified a particularly severe subgroup of children with many characteristics similar to those of adults with psychopathy (see Frick, Barry, & Bodin, 1999; af Klinteberg, 2002).

The vast majority of the studies assessing the association between psychopathic traits and antisocial behavior in children and youth utilized the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD, Frick & Hare, 2001), or the Psychopathy Checklist-Youth Version or PCL:YV (Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003). Both, the PCL:YV and the APSD were originally developed to measure adolescent psychopathy and were modeled on the PCL-R items, but the PCL:YV is substantially more similar to the PCL-R. Also, the basic dimensions of psychopathy (arrogant, deceitful interpersonal style; deficient affective experience, and impulsive or irresponsible behavioral style), as defined by Cooke, Michie, Hart and Clark (2004) can be easily measured using the PCL:YV, but are not typically assessed using the APSD (Farrington, 2005). The study by Murrie and Cornell (2002) that compared the APSD and PCL:YV in incarcerated juveniles found that both the APSD self-report and the APSD staff rating correlated with the PCL:YV, but the correlations were lower than expected (ranging between .30 and .35). Another recent study (Lee, Vincent, Hart, & Corrado, 2003) indicated that the APSD had limited concurrent validity with respect to the PCL:YV and that there appears to be a method effect in the measurement of psychopathy. Vitacco, Rogers and Neumann (2003) compared the APSD with two versions of the PCL, in order to assess evidence of criterion-related validity, and their study also yielded mixed results. Thus, it seems that the APSD does not assess psychopathy in a manner parallel to that of the PCL:YV (Lee et al., 2003). Yet, some studies have suggested that as concerns its predictive ability, the APSD appears to produce results on the association between psychopathy and antisocial behavior that quite similar to those obtained using the PCL and the PCL:YV (e.g. Frick et al., 2005).

In a study of clinic-referred children (Christian, Frick, Hill, Tyler, & Frazer, 1997) the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD; Frick & Hare, 2001) subscale measuring callous and unemotional traits was able to identify those children with high levels of conduct problems, high rates of police contacts, and parental diagnoses of antisocial personality disorder. In a community study of children 4–9 years of age, the same APSD subscale was found to be associated with antisocial behavior in both boys and girls, although at a later age among girls (Dadds, Frost, Fraser, & Hawes, 2005). Using the APSD total score, Marsee (2005) found that among non-referred school-children psychopathic traits predicted aggression and delinquency for both boys and girls.

The original validation of the APSD was limited to samples of clinic-referred and community-based children. In extending this research to delinquent populations, Vitacco et al. (2003) used two samples of adolescent offenders. Construct validity of the APSD was examined via a confirmatory factor analysis that provided support for a three-factor model of the APSD. Another study (Muñoz & Frick, 2007) assessed psychometric properties of the APSD in a sample of non-referred young adolescents, where youth with conduct problems and youth high on psychopathic traits were over-sampled. The self-report scores on the APSD showed moderate correlations with parent ratings of psychopathic traits, were moderately stable across 1–2 years, and showed significant correlations with measures of antisocial behavior both concurrently and predictively.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the interplay of cognitive, affective and behavioral variables as they influence violent behavior in psychopathic versus non-psychopathic subjects in a population of delinquent adolescents from Northern Russia.

In line with previous findings (e.g. Guerra, Nucci, & Huesmann, 1994), we specifically considered internalized norms about right or wrong, as well as cognitive factors to influence antisocial behavior in general, and aggressive behavior, in particular. Presumably, these attitudes also influence the occurrence of guilt feelings (when internalized norms are crossed), thus influencing the affective mechanisms described by Hart (1998). Another factor comprising affective mechanism is a deficit in empathy, often observed in psychopaths and well described by narcissistic traits in both the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (Hare, 2003) and the APSD (Frick & Hare, 2001). As already mentioned, the behavioral mechanisms include impulsiveness and problems related to alcohol use.

Since psychopathic individuals in general tend to express more aggression throughout their life span than their non-psychopathic counterparts, we expected that a subgroup of violent delinquents would reveal a high level of psychopathic traits,

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