



## Empathy deficits and trait emotional intelligence in psychopathy and Machiavellianism

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationships between psychopathy (primary and secondary), Machiavellianism, trait emotional intelligence and empathy, using an image task that required an appropriate empathic response to the emotional displays of others (happy, sad and neutral). Results indicated that primary psychopathy and Machiavellianism were positively associated with the experience of positive affect from sad stimuli, while secondary psychopathy and Machiavellianism were positively associated with the experience of negative affect in response to neutral stimuli, and the opposite pattern was found for trait emotional intelligence. Regression analyses demonstrated that secondary psychopathy, Machiavellianism, trait emotional intelligence and state anxiety are important predictors when stimuli are ambiguous.

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### 1. Introduction

The study of aversive personality traits has received much attention in the past few years, particularly the non-clinical traits of psychopathy and Machiavellianism (e.g., Lee & Ashton, 2005; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). Within the personality-based approach to psychopathy there is a consensus that guiltlessness, callousness, dishonesty, egocentricity, failure to form close emotional bonds, low anxiety proneness, superficial charm and blame externalisation all represent core features (Hare, 1991). Theoretically, psychopathy is regarded as a heterogeneous concept consisting of primary psychopathy, which is characterised by features such as cruelty and lack of affect and secondary psychopathy, which is characterised by features such as impulsivity, neuroticism and aggression (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995).

Machiavellianism involves interpersonal strategies that promote the use of deception, manipulation and exploitation, and the Machiavellian individual can be described as cynical, domineering, aloof and practical (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998). According to Christie (1970) Machiavellian individuals are successful manipulators characterised by: (a) lack of interpersonal affect in interpersonal relationships, (b) lack of concern with conventional morality, (c) lack of gross psychopathology, and (d) low ideological commitment. Various researchers have noted the conceptual similarity between Machiavellianism and psychopathy

(e.g., McHoskey et al., 1998; Mealey, 1995) and it has been suggested that they denote a single construct (Lee & Ashton, 2005; McHoskey et al., 1998). However, Vernon et al. (2008) have demonstrated that Machiavellianism and psychopathy differ in heritability, and research indicates that although overlapping, they are distinct constructs (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Williams & Paulhus, 2004).

Unsurprisingly, psychopathy (Malterer, Glass, & Newman, 2008) and Machiavellianism (Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007) have been recently associated with lower trait emotional intelligence (also known as trait emotional self-efficacy). Individuals high in trait emotional intelligence are good at managing their stress levels and demonstrate enhanced psychosocial functioning, such as better social relationships (e.g., Schutte et al., 2001).

Being able to empathise is an important part of emotional intelligence and a defining criterion of clinical psychopathy is reduced empathic responding to victims (Hare, 1991). The ability to repeatedly cause serious harm to others is an indicator of a profound disturbance in an appropriate “empathic” response to the suffering of another (Blair, 2005). Empathy is known to inhibit and moderate aggression (Richardson, Hammock, Smith, & Gardner, 1994; Wheeler, George, & Dahl, 2002). Past research indicates that clinical psychopathic individuals show a selective empathic deficit in that they are impaired in the recognition of sad and fearful facial expressions (e.g., Montagne et al., 2005).

Although investigators have recently begun to extend findings from emotional deficits to psychopathy in normal populations, only a few studies have looked at whether empathy deficits exist in non-clinical samples (e.g., Del Gaizo & Falkenbach, 2008;

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Mahmut, Homewood, & Stevenson, 2008), this is surprising, especially when research with non-clinical samples has found that despite lower base-rates, there is evidence for diverse expressions of psychopathic traits across the population (Skeem, Poythress, Edens, Lilienfeld, & Cale, 2003). Del Gaizo and Falkenbach's (2008) study indicated that primary psychopathic traits were positively correlated with accuracy of perception of fearful faces, while secondary psychopathic traits were not related to emotional recognition. Mahmut et al.'s (2008) study indicated that individuals scoring highly on psychopathy demonstrated low levels of empathy on an emotional empathy questionnaire; the EEQ (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972).

Analogous to the psychopathic personality, conventional morality is not a concern to Machiavellian individuals; instead, they demonstrate shallow emotional involvement with others and sanction behaviour which is emotionally-manipulative (Austin et al., 2007). Because individuals high in Machiavellianism are likely to exploit others and to view others in a goal-oriented manner (they see people "as a means to an end"), unsurprisingly Machiavellianism has demonstrated negative correlations with empathy (e.g., Austin et al., 2007; Wastell & Booth, 2003).

The aim of the current study was to further explore the relationships between non-clinical psychopathy, Machiavellianism, trait emotional intelligence and deficits in empathy using a purposely-designed visual task to assess appropriateness of empathic responses to the emotional displays of others.

Hoffman (2000) defined empathy as "feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with one's own situation" (p. 30), while Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) defined emotional empathy as a "vicariously emotional response to the perceived emotional experiences of others" (p. 525). These definitions suggest an affective reaction ("affective/emotional empathy"; see Losoya & Eisenberg, 2001), not just a cognitive ability to read another person's thoughts or feelings correctly ("cognitive empathy"). Following this line of thought, this study is concerned with whether an individual experiences an appropriate empathic response rather than how capable he or she is of such an experience, hence the use of an empathy task that is not limited to emotion recognition.

Although psychopathy is considered a heterogeneous concept, many emotional deficit studies have approached it as homogeneous, potentially missing important differences between the two. An important difference between primary and secondary psychopathy is that negative affect is notably absent from primary psychopathy, whereas secondary psychopathy is associated with negative affect (Del Gaizo & Falkenbach, 2008). For this reason, the current study included a measure of state anxiety in order to measure the levels of anxiety experienced by participants at particular points during the study. Following on from findings from previous research it was hypothesised that primary and secondary psychopathy and Machiavellianism would be associated with low emotional intelligence and empathic deficiencies, i.e. the expression of inappropriate affect in response to images of positive and negative affective content.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 84 undergraduates (67 female) who participated in the study in exchange for course credits. Their ages ranged from 18 to 46 years ( $M = 20.7$ ,  $SD = 4.1$ ); 30 were White British (36%), 23 White Other (27%), six Black Caribbean (7%) and five Black African (6%). The remaining 20 participants (24%) were of Mixed, South Asian, East Asian and Arab ethnicity. Participants all had normal, or corrected to normal vision.

### 2.2. Materials

*Levenson self-report psychopathy scale (LSRP)*: The LSRP scale (Levenson et al., 1995) is a 26-item self-report measure designed to assess psychopathic attributes in non-institutionalised samples and to evaluate both the behavioural and personality traits commonly associated with psychopathy in the literature. The primary psychopathy scale consists of 16 items, ranging from disagree strongly (1) to agree strongly (4), designed to assess the core personality features described by Cleckley (1988), such as being selfish, uncaring and manipulative. The secondary psychopathy scale consists of 10 items assessing anti-social behaviour, a self-defeating lifestyle and impulsivity. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  in the current study were .84 for the primary psychopathy scale and .72 for the secondary psychopathy scale. The LSRP is both reliable and valid (McHoskey et al., 1998).

*Mach-IV*: Machiavellianism was assessed with the Mach-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970), which has 20 items covering the use of deceit in interpersonal relationships, a cynical attitude to human nature and a lack of concern for conventional morality. Participants indicate their response on a seven-point scale ranging from disagree strongly (1) to agree strongly (7), with higher scores indicating higher levels of Machiavellianism. The reliability and the validity of the Mach-IV are well documented (Fehr, Samsom, & Paulhus, 1992). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  in the current study was .77.

*Spielberger state-trait anxiety (STAI)*: The STAI (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970) consists of two 20-item scales: the state and trait anxiety scales. In this study, only items from the SAI were used (STAI Form Y-1). This is a 20-item self-evaluation questionnaire with responses to the statements about feelings at the present time ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much so), with higher scores indicative of greater state anxiety. In the current study, six items of the SAI were used due to time constraints. Participants were given the SAI to complete before and after viewing the images. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  in the current study was .82. for time one and .80 for time two.

*Trait emotional intelligence questionnaire – short form (TEIQue-SF)*: The TEIQue-SF (Petrides & Furnham, 2006) is a 30-item self-report scale that yields a global measure of trait emotional intelligence and emotional self-efficacy, namely, the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions and the emotions of others. The short form is based on the 153-item TEIQue and has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity (Petrides & Furnham, 2006). Participants are asked to rate their degree of agreement with each item on a seven-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (7). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  in this study was .90.

*Empathy image task using the self-assessment manikin (SAM)*:<sup>1</sup> To create the image set we initially selected 45 images; 15 were classified as representing sadness, 15 representing happiness and 15 representing neutral emotion. The stimuli were selected from the gettyimages® database, which depicts individuals of various ages, gender and ethnicity showing a range of emotions. Each image consisted of one individual who was the focal point of the image. Three independent raters (all psychology students) then rated the emotions displayed by the individual in each picture. Subsequently, nine images were discarded due to inter-rater disagreement over the emotion displayed (i.e. disagreement between sadness and fear and happiness and surprise). The resulting image set consisted of 36 images of male and female individuals expressing sad, happy and neutral emotional expressions, namely, 12 images of sadness (overtly sad expressions;  $\alpha = .81$ ) and 12 images of happiness

<sup>1</sup> All images are available on request.

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