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Does psychopathy manifest divergent relations with components of its nomological network depending on gender?

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ABSTRACT

Despite a great deal of empirical research on psychopathy there are fewer data on psychopathy in female samples, especially non-institutionalized samples, and it is unclear whether psychopathy manifests in similar ways across gender. In a large undergraduate sample, we explored psychopathy in relation to gender in a two-fold manner. First, we examined whether there were significant gender differences in self-report psychopathy scores; there were (men scored higher). Second, we tested whether psychopathy's relations with important constructs from its nomological network differ depending on gender. Psychopathy largely manifested a pattern of relations that did not vary across gender, with a few important exceptions (e.g., traits related to impulsivity and Openness). Ultimately, these results suggest that, despite mean-level differences between men and women, psychopathy operates in a relatively consistent manner across gender.

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1. Introduction

Substantial progress has been made in the research of psychopathy, which is a personality disorder characterized by traits such as egocentricity, callousness, manipulateness, and impulsivity. The majority of this research has been conducted on samples of male offenders (e.g., Kosson, Cyterski, Steuerwald, Neumann, & Walker-Matthews, 2002). As a result, less is known about the construct of psychopathy in females. More recently, attempts have been made to rectify this by studying psychopathy in female only samples (Vitale & Newman, 2001a, 2001b). Although these studies have resulted in important advances, it is unclear whether resultant differences are due to substantive differences in how psychopathy is manifested across gender or differences in the samples from which the results were derived. Ideally, studies would examine potential gender differences in samples comprising both males and females – a strategy that has been used increasingly over the past decade (e.g., Epstein, Poythress, & Brandon, 2006; Schmidt, McKinnon, Chattha, & Brownlee, 2006).

Additionally, many of the findings from relevant studies, discussed in detail below, underscore the importance of examining the components of psychopathy separately in relation to men and women, as differential relations may emerge. Factor 1 psychopathy is typically conceived of as the traits associated with the interpersonal (e.g., glib-charming) and affective (e.g., callousness) aspects

of psychopathy. Factor 2 psychopathy is typically conceived of as the traits (e.g., impulsivity) and behaviors associated with a chronically antisocial lifestyle. These factors are derived from factor analyses of the Psychopathy Checklist and its revision (PCL/PCL-R; Hare, 1980, 2003), which have been influential in the development of self-report measures with similar factor structures such as the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP-III; Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007). Failure to examine relations between psychopathy and important criteria at the factor level may mask important gender differences.

Although it is impossible to state definitively, the majority of research suggests that males manifest higher mean levels of psychopathy than women (e.g., Lilienfeld & Hess, 2001; Rutherford, Cacciola, Alterman, & McKay, 1996; cf., Stafford & Cornell, 2003). This is to be expected as males have higher rates of most externalizing forms of psychopathology (e.g., Seedat et al., 2009) and score lower on the trait of Agreeableness (see Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001), which is a core trait of psychopathy (Lynam & Derefinko, 2006).

Beyond mean-level differences, other research has begun to explore whether the nomological network surrounding psychopathy differs across gender. In Verona and Vitale's (2006) review of the literature, they suggest that the personality correlates of psychopathy are similar across gender, but that there may be somewhat different behavioral correlates such that psychopathy may not be as powerful a predictor of antisocial behavior and recidivism among females compared to males. Alternatively, psychopathy may be more strongly associated with internalizing forms of

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psychopathology and related behaviors such as suicide among women (Sevecke, Lehmkuhl, & Krischer, 2009), although this finding has not always replicated (Hemphala & Tengstrom, 2010). Despite these possible differences, Verona and Vitale suggest that “patterns of comorbidity associated with psychopathy, per se, in women appear similar to those for men” (p. 423).

In addition, emerging evidence suggests that there may be gender differences in etiological factors surrounding psychopathy’s nomological network. For instance, in a sample of women, traumatic childhood experiences such as sexual abuse are significantly related to externalizing disorders such as alcohol dependence (e.g., Kendler et al., 2000) and may be more strongly linked to antisociality in women than men (e.g., McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997; cf., Krischer & Sevecke, 2008). Other studies have found that childhood physical and sexual abuse is linked to psychopathy, primarily “factor 2,” in both men (Poythress, Skeem, & Lilienfeld, 2006) and women (Verona, Hicks, & Patrick, 2005).

In the current study, we addressed several of these issues. First, we examined whether men and women differed in their mean levels of psychopathy. We expected men to score higher on both factor 1 and 2 psychopathy scores. Second, we examined whether the relations between psychopathy and important constructs from its nomological network differed depending on gender. This is important as these issues have not been studied in great detail and because there are some inconsistencies in results across extant studies. We expected that problematic environmental events (e.g., abuse) would be more strongly linked to psychopathy in women than men (McClellan et al., 1997; cf., Krischer & Sevecke, 2008). We also expected psychopathy to be positively related to externalizing behaviors (EBs) across gender, although we expected that the relations would be stronger for men (Schmidt et al., 2006). Finally, we did not expect the pattern of relations between the psychopathy factors and basic personality traits to differ between men and women.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Participants were 361 students from the University of Georgia (225 women and 135 men; 1 unknown; 87% Caucasian). Mean age was 19.1 ($SD = 1.7$). Participants took part in the study in group settings and received research credit for their participation. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. IRB approval was obtained for all aspects of this study. Variables that demonstrated significant non-normality (skewness >2.0 and/or kurtosis >7.0 ; Curran, West, & Finch, 1996) were log-transformed prior to use.

3. Materials

3.1. Background information questionnaire (BIQ)

The BIQ included information pertaining to gender, race, ethnicity, and age.

3.2. Self-Report Psychopathy Scale – III (SRP-III)

The SRP-III (Williams et al., 2007) is a 64-item self-report measure of psychopathy that includes four subscales. Interpersonal Manipulation (SRP-IPM) and Callous Affect (SRP-CA) are considered indicators of “factor 1” psychopathy, whereas Erratic Lifestyle (SRP-ELS) and Antisocial Behaviors (SRP-ASB) are considered indicators of “factor 2” psychopathy. In the current study, we report the SRP-III scores in relation to factor 1 (SRP-IPM and SRP-CA;

$\alpha = .90$) and 2 (SRP-ELS and SRP-ASB; $\alpha = .86$). The factor scores were correlated at $.65$, $p < .01$; these correlations did not differ by gender ($z = .13$, *ns*). The SRP-III scores manifest substantial correlations with scores from other well-validated measures of psychopathy such as Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005; e.g., Gaughan, Miller, Pryor, & Lynam, 2009).

3.3. Revised NEO personality inventory (NEO PI-R)

The NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) is a 240-item self-report measure of the FFM, which includes the domains of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Alphas ranged from $.87$ to $.92$.

3.4. BIS/BAS scales

The BIS/BAS (Carver & White, 1994) scales include 20 self-report questions designed to assess the behavioral inhibition (BIS) and behavioral activation systems (BAS). The BIS is assessed via seven items. The BAS is measured using three short subscales including Reward Responsiveness, Drive, and Fun Seeking. In the current study, alphas ranged from $.79$ to $.85$.

3.5. UPPS-P impulsive behavior scale (UPPS-P)

The UPPS-P (Lynam, Smith, Whiteside, & Cyders, 2006) is a 59-item self-report measure of impulsivity-related traits. *The Negative and Positive Urgency scales* assess difficulties resisting cravings and urges when in a negative or positive affective state. (Lack of) *Perseverance* measures a tendency to give up easily because of boredom, fatigue, or frustration. (Lack of) *Premeditation* assesses a tendency to fail to pause and deliberate before acting. *Sensation Seeking* measures a tendency to pursue activities that may be exciting or involve risk. In the current study, alphas ranged from $.84$ to $.93$.

3.6. Psychological control scale (PCS)

The PCS (Barber, 1996) is a 16-item self-report measure of the level of psychological control asserted by one’s parents. The mean of the ratings for the mother ($\alpha = .82$) and father ($\alpha = .83$) was used if ratings for both were provided; otherwise just the single rating was used.

3.7. Parenting warmth and monitoring scale

This 24-item self-report scale (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991) measures the degree of warmth and supervision given to children (warmth: $\alpha = .82$; monitoring: $\alpha = .80$).

3.8. Child abuse and trauma scale (CATS)

The CATS (Saunders & Giolas, 1991) is a 38-item self-report measure of physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse. In the current study, we used revised scales on the basis of analyses presented by Poythress et al. (2006; in the current study, alphas ranged from $.71$ to $.86$). All scales were log-transformed prior to use.

3.9. Crime and analogous behavior scale (CAB)

The CAB is a self-report inventory that assesses a variety of EBs. An *alcohol use* variable was computed by taking the mean of five standardized variables (e.g., use of alcohol, age of first use). The remaining variables were lifetime variety scales in which each participant was given a “1” for each endorsed item: *substance use*

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