



Psychopathy and behavior problems: A comparison of incarcerated male and female juvenile delinquents

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the present study was to compare incarcerated male and female juvenile offenders regarding psychopathic traits, behavior problems, psychopathy taxon, conduct disorder, self-reported delinquent behavior, and crime seriousness. Within a total forensic sample of 261 detainee participants, subdivided in a male group ($n = 217$) and a female group ($n = 44$), statistically significant differences were found. Female juvenile offenders show less callous–unemotional traits, more emotional symptoms, more prosocial behaviors, less self-reported delinquent behavior, and lower crime seriousness. Conduct disorder prevalence was very high, but no statistically significant gender differences were found. The predictive importance of psychopathic traits, behavior problems, psychopathy taxon, and conduct disorder for the prediction of group membership (female versus male) was established by binary logistic regression.

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1. Introduction

Until recently, the study of psychopathy in women, adolescents and children has been all but ignored by psychopathologists and forensic psychologists (Verona & Vitale, 2006). Researchers have drawn on the established nomological network of psychopathy in male offenders, looking to modify adult psychopathy assessment instruments in order to make them developmentally appropriate to apply to youths. The use of the psychopathy construct in children and adolescents remains controversial, as it was developed more specifically for adult male populations (Seagrave & Grisso, 2002).

The application of the psychopathy construct to adolescents in the context of juvenile delinquency has recently been gaining increasing importance in research, despite its long history in the biomedical and psychological sciences (Vaughn & Howard, 2005). There has been accumulating evidence for an association of this construct with greater stability and frequency of antisocial behaviors, more serious and violent delinquent behaviors, early onset of criminal activity, early arrests by police and early convictions (e.g., Forth & Book, 2010; Kruh, Frick, & Clements, 2005; Van Baardewijk, Vermeiren, Stegge, & Doreleijers, 2011).

Psychopathy is generally conceptualized as a syndrome that remains throughout life and encompasses a constellation of extreme interpersonal, emotional, behavioral and lifestyle traits. Psychopathic individuals tend to demonstrate proactive violent behaviors more frequently, motivated by instrumental reasons such as material gains and revenge (e.g., Serin, 1991). Psychopathic traits, which can be defined from the dimensional point of view, refer to a manipulative, deceitful, callous and remorseless pattern that has come to be associated with a more serious, persistent and violent early-onset type of antisocial behavior, with a preference for exciting and dangerous activities (e.g., Andershed, Gustafson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2002; Frick, Kimonis, Dandreaux, & Farrel, 2003; Vitacco, Neumann, Robertson, & Durrant, 2002).

In contrast with the literature relating to adults, research on the relative prevalence rates of psychopathic traits in boys and girls shows mixed results; some researchers noted overall higher psychopathic tendencies among boys than among girls, some found overall higher psychopathic tendencies among girls than among boys, and others found no gender differences. Other research reported gender differences only for certain aspects of psychopathy or fails to observe any significant gender differences at all (Verona, Sadeh, & Javdani, 2010). We will review some of these studies.

In a clinical sample of 95 children (age range 6 to 13 years), Frick, O'Brien, Wootton, and McBurnett (1994) found no differences between boys and girls regarding callous/unemotional traits (CU), but did find that boys scored significantly higher in the impulsivity/conduct problems

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(I/CP) dimension. Scores derived from the CU factor were only moderately associated with measures of conduct problems and exhibited a different pattern of association with several criteria that have been associated with psychopathy (e.g., sensation seeking) or childhood antisocial behavior (e.g., low intelligence).

Frick, Bodin, and Barry (2000b) examined the structure of psychopathic traits in a community ($n = 1136$) and in a clinical sample ($n = 160$) of children. They found that boys scored higher on CU traits and narcissism. Both the narcissism and impulsivity dimensions were strongly related to symptoms of conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The CU traits were only weakly associated with these symptoms, after controlling for the other dimensions of psychopathy.

Pardini, Lochman, and Frick (2003) sought to clarify the nature of the CU and I/CP factors and examine their relationship with social-cognitive problems in incarcerated adolescents. They found that girls scored higher on I/CP, but not on CU traits. Results suggested that CU traits were associated with lower emotional distress and a specific social information-processing pattern.

Campbell, Porter, and Santor (2004) evaluated the clinical, psychosocial and criminal correlates of psychopathic traits in a sample of 226 male and female incarcerated adolescent offenders. No significant differences were found between males and females regarding the PCL:YV scores. Only 9.4% exhibited a high level of psychopathic traits (PCL:YV ≥ 25) and, as is consistent with past research, higher PCL:YV scores were positively associated with self-reported delinquency and aggressive behavior and were unrelated to emotional difficulties.

Salekin, Leistico, Trobst, Schrum, and Lochman (2005) examined the construct related validity of psychopathy in a sample of 114 male and female young offenders. Psychopathy measures included the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD), the Child Psychopathy Scale (CPS), and Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL:YV). Results showed substantial convergence between the three psychopathy measures. Two of the psychopathy scales correlated to a higher degree than expected with neuroticism, suggesting that worry and anxiety may accompany psychopathic features in earlier developmental stages. No significant differences were found between the male and female groups regarding psychopathy scores.

Dadds, Fraser, Frost, and Hawes (2005) assessed the psychometric and predictive validity of CU traits as an early precursor of conduct disorder and antisocial behavior in a community sample of children (4–9 years of age). CU traits contributed small but significant improvements to the 12-month prediction of antisocial behavior for boys and older girls. Boys scored higher than girls on the APSD total score.

Marsee, Silverthorn, and Frick (2005) investigated the association of psychopathic traits with aggression and delinquency in a non-referred sample of boys ($n = 86$) and girls ($n = 114$). There were no clear differences for the CU, narcissism, or impulsivity dimensions regarding their association with aggression and delinquency. Also, psychopathic traits predicted aggression and delinquency for both boys and girls. Boys had higher psychopathy scores as measured by the APSD.

Schrum and Salekin (2006) examined the applicability of the PCL:YV items to a sample of detained adolescent girls. Item response theory (IRT) was used to analyze test and item functioning of the PCL:YV. Although it has been previously found that affective features provide the most information regarding psychopathic traits, in this study interpersonal features of psychopathy, followed by affective features, provided greater levels of information. As compared to boys, girls scored lower on PCL:YV.

Penney and Moretti (2007) examined the relationship between psychopathy characteristics as measured by the tridimensional structure of the PCL:YV and aggressive and antisocial behavior in a sample of 142 high-risk adolescent girls and boys. Regression analyses showed that the relationships between psychopathic features and outcomes were equivalent for both boys and girls, and that differences observed were most consistently associated with aggression. Boys scored higher than girls on factors 1 and 2, but not on factor 3 of the PCL:YV.

Rucevic (2010) investigated the association of psychopathic traits with violent and non-violent delinquency, delinquency versatility, and risky sexual behavior in a Croatian sample of unspecified boys ($n = 226$) and girls ($n = 480$). Psychopathic traits were measured by the self-reported Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI): boys scored significantly higher on the Grandiose-Manipulative (GM) and CU dimensions, but no differences were found regarding the Impulsive-Irresponsible dimension. Results from the regression analyses showed that the Impulsive-Irresponsible (II) behavioral style had a stronger association with non-violent delinquency and delinquency versatility for boys, for girls on the other hand it had a stronger influence on risky sexual behavior.

After reviewing studies on gender differences in the prevalence of psychopathic tendencies in youth, Verona et al. (2010) concluded that the evidence is mixed. The authors suggest that higher psychopathic trait scores for boys than for girls tend to arise in studies that measure these traits in children and young adolescents (under 13 years) from clinically-referred or community samples. According to Verona et al. (2010) gender differences in the prevalence of psychopathic tendencies seem to diminish in studies of adjudicated adolescents, and it is argued that this could potentially involve more severe manifestations of psychopathic traits among females than males placed in detention centers. As the existing research indicates that adult females demonstrate fewer psychopathic traits than adult males, even among incarcerated offenders, the authors consider this finding interesting and emphasize the need for more research with juvenile offenders.

Although sex differences in psychopathic traits (e.g., CU traits) are an important area of study, there is a lack of research on this topic, especially in European samples. This study aims to examine sex differences in the prevalence of psychopathic traits, behavior problems (which are related to psychopathic traits albeit distinct constructs), conduct disorder (CD), self-reported delinquency, and crime seriousness in Portuguese adolescents (13 years of age or older) incarcerated in detention centers. We hope to help elucidate the mixed and inconclusive evidence reported by Verona et al. (2010). Bearing in mind the theoretical framework mentioned above, this study aimed to test the following hypotheses: a) No statistically significant differences will be found between the female group and the male group regarding psychopathic traits, behavior problems, psychopathy taxon, and conduct disorder, b) Psychopathic traits, behavior problems, psychopathy taxon, and conduct disorder will not be statistically significant in predicting group membership (female versus male).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of detainees recruited from the total population of incarcerated juvenile offenders in Portugal. A total of 261 participants (age range = 13–20 years, mean age = 15.83 years, $SD = 1.30$ years), male ($n = 217$, age range = 13–20 years, mean age = 15.85 years, $SD = 1.30$ years) and female ($n = 44$, age range = 13–18 years, mean age = 15.75 years, $SD = 1.31$ years), agreed to participate voluntarily in the study. They were detained by the court's decision.

The participants were mainly white Europeans (50%) from an urban background (96.4%). Their first criminal problems with the law had been early on in their lives (mean = 12.85 years, $SD = 1.784$ years), most were detained before they were 16 years old (mean = 14.94 years, $SD = 1.207$ years), and had been convicted to an average of 18 months detention (mean = 17.84 months, $SD = 6.57$ months). Most of them were convicted of having committed serious and violent crimes (83.5%).

2.2. Measures

The Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD; Caputo, Frick, & Brosky, 1999; Frick & Hare, 2001; Muñoz & Frick, 2007) self-report is a 20-item measure designed to assess psychopathic-like traits

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