



Recalled parental bonding, current attachment, and the triarchic conceptualisation of psychopathy

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 January 2013
Received in revised form 13 March 2013
Accepted 18 March 2013
Available online 9 April 2013

Keywords:

Attachment
Parental bonding
Psychopathy

ABSTRACT

The current investigation examined whether attachment functioning might mediate the effects of parenting on traits associated with psychopathy. Participants completed the Parental Bonding Instrument, the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale, and the Triarchic Psychopathy Measure within a cross-sectional design. Whilst several recalled parenting variables demonstrated significant correlations with the psychopathy subscales, mediation analyses confirmed that the majority of these effects were mediated by current attachment anxiety and avoidance. Only paternal overprotection maintained a significant direct effect on levels of disinhibition. These findings provide support for the argument that attachment dysfunction may represent a potential mechanism through which parenting practices contribute to the emergence of psychopathy-related traits. Inferences regarding causality and mechanisms of effect are naturally constrained by the cross-sectional design of the current investigation, but the preliminary findings presented warrant further examination within prospective designs.

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1. Introduction

Psychopathy represents a pathological form of personality characterised by impulsivity, antisocial tendencies, and a range of interpersonal/emotional deficits (Hare, 2003). It has strong associations with criminality and recidivism, (Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1991), and those with high levels of psychopathy are likely to engage in both reactive and premeditated aggression, and to demonstrate little remorse for their actions (Hare, 2003). In addition, current treatments typically result in only small to moderate gains, with several aspects of the psychopathic disposition posing serious challenges to therapeutic progress (Salekin, Worley, & Grimes, 2010). As such, a great deal of empirical interest has been devoted to determining the causes and correlates of this distorted personality style, including the potential role of parenting experienced during childhood.

1.1. Parenting and psychopathy

The quality of parent–child relationships has been shown to exert a lasting impact on social, emotional, and behavioural development, leading several eminent researchers to implicate such factors in the development of psychopathy (Hare, 1970; McCord & McCord, 1964). Indeed, several retrospective studies have found

that adolescents or adults who score highly on measures of psychopathy recall early family environments characterised by parental rejection, neglect or separation, inconsistent or severe punishment, and/or inadequate supervision (e.g., Campbell, Porter, & Santor, 2004; Gao, Raine, Chan, Venables, & Mednick, 2010; Kimbrel, Nelson-Gray, & Mitchell, 2007; Marshall & Cooke, 1999). Such observations have led to the suggestion that suboptimal parenting may play an aetiological role in the development of psychopathy.

Longitudinal studies have evidenced some provisional support for this argument, demonstrating prospective links between parenting practices and psychopathy-related traits. For example, chronically-elevated levels of callousness have been longitudinally related to harsh parenting in children aged 2–4 (Waller et al., 2012), as well as poor parent–child communication among male adolescents with symptoms of Oppositional Defiant Disorder/Conduct Disorder (Pardini & Loeber, 2008). In addition, McDonald, Dodson, Rosenfield, and Jouriles (2011) found that a parenting intervention successfully reduced levels of psychopathy-related traits among children aged 4–9, and that these effects were mediated by a reduction in levels of harsh and inconsistent parenting by mothers.

Whilst such findings are encouraging, some inconsistencies still remain. For example, whilst there is some evidence that parenting relates to certain affective features of psychopathy (e.g., callousness; Waller et al., 2012), other evidence suggests parenting practices are selectively related to the more behavioural features of psychopathy (i.e. impulsivity/antisociality; Kimbrel et al., 2007; Wootton, Frick, Shelton, & Silverhorn, 1997). In addition,

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longitudinal studies demonstrate the potential for reciprocal child–parent influences. For example, early levels of child conduct problems and hyperactivity have been found to elicit harsh parental discipline practices (Larsson, Viding, & Plomin, 2008), suggesting that the relationship between parenting and psychopathy may be more complex than initially conceived.

1.2. Attachment as a mediating mechanism

In order to better understand the relationship between parenting and psychopathy, researchers have begun to consider potential mechanisms of effect. One suggestion is that these links are mediated by the development and influence of maladaptive internal working models (IWMs) of attachment (e.g., Bowlby, 1944; Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009; Saltaris, 2002). According to attachment theory, in response to early interpersonal experiences, children develop a series of IWMs concerning the value of the self and significant others within relationships (Bowlby, 1969). These IWMs are essentially mental representations that are used to guide and interpret behaviour across a wide variety of interpersonal contexts. The functioning of these IWMs can be reliably assessed across the lifespan, and have demonstrated links with a wide variety of intra- and inter-personal behaviours (for a review, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

As early as 1944, Bowlby argued that experiences of parental rejection or separation might disrupt attachment system functioning and give rise to a particular form of “affectionless” offending, seemingly akin to contemporary descriptions of psychopathy. Others have elaborated upon such claims, suggesting that sub-optimal parent–child interaction generates maladaptive IWMs that disrupt moral socialisation, and give rise to several characteristic features of psychopathy, such as negative dispositions towards others, and a lack of empathy, compliance, or self-control (e.g., Lykken, 1995; Patrick et al., 2009; Saltaris, 2002). In other words, parenting is assumed to relate to psychopathy *through* its impact on attachment IWMs.

Consistent with this argument, several studies have reported associations between psychopathy-related traits and two particular forms of attachment dysfunction; dismissive attachment (a distinct lack of attachment relationships) and disorganised attachment (lacking a coherent strategy for dealing with attachment-related distress; e.g., Bakermans-Kranenburg & van Ijzendoorn, 2009; Pasalich, 2011). Yet, some studies have failed to find attachment-related differences between individuals designated as high versus low in clinician-rated psychopathy (e.g., Frodi, Dernevik, Sepa, Philipson, & Bragesjo, 2001), whilst others report only modest attachment–psychopathy links among nonclinical samples (Brennan & Shaver, 1998). Such inconclusive findings may be due to such studies relying upon a categorical approach to attachment (where individual differences in IWM functioning are expressed in terms of discrete “attachment styles”), which has been criticised for discounting important within-category variation (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

Studies utilising the conceptually preferred dimensional approach to attachment demonstrate that adolescents scoring highly on clinician-rated psychopathy demonstrate poor parental attachment (Flight & Forth, 2007; Kosson, Cyterski, Steuerwald, Neumann, & Walker-Matthews, 2002). With regards to attachment functioning within adults, Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) proposed the now widely adopted two-dimensional model of attachment anxiety and avoidance. Attachment anxiety represents a person’s sensitivity to rejection, and degree of preoccupation with attachment figure availability. Attachment avoidance represents the degree to which individuals avoid versus approach attachment figures during times of distress, and their willingness to engage reciprocally in the functions of attachment relationships. Within

a nonclinical sample, Mack, Hackney, and Pyle (2011) demonstrated that both attachment anxiety and avoidance demonstrated independent relationships with the behavioural symptoms of psychopathy, and that an interaction between high levels of both attachment anxiety and avoidance predicted affective symptoms of psychopathy. Such findings suggest that, when adult attachment is measured in a conceptually accurate manner, theoretically consistent links can be drawn between attachment functioning and psychopathy. Such evidence supports the idea that attachment IWMs could function as the mechanism behind parenting–psychopathy links.

1.3. The present research

The current investigation sought to directly test such a prediction, using a cross-sectional design within a predominately student sample. Whilst it is acknowledged that use of a nonclinical sample may limit the applicability of findings to previous theorising among clinical samples (e.g., Bowlby, 1944), it is considered a useful first step in evaluating such links for two reasons. Firstly, the use of nonclinical participants affords recruitment of a much larger sample than typically achieved within clinical populations, enhancing the power of analyses to detect the presence of more complicated mediation effects. Secondly, modern conceptualisations of psychopathy acknowledge the dimensional nature of personality, such that all individuals can be placed somewhere upon a continuum of traits associated with a particular disorder (Hare & Neumann, 2005). Nonetheless, it should be noted that the effects reported currently may not necessarily generalise to clinical populations.

Within the current investigation, psychopathy was operationalised using the triarchic meta-conceptualisation proposed by Patrick et al. (2009). Within this conceptualisation, psychopathy is decomposed into three distinct facets. Disinhibition captures the behavioural deficits associated with psychopathy, such as a tendency towards impulsivity, focus on immediate gratification, and impaired regulation of affect/behaviour. Meanness represents the affective/interpersonal deficits, including lack of empathy and emotional bonds to others, and a propensity towards exploitation/cruelty. Finally, boldness captures the more functional, social efficacious aspects of psychopathy, such as self-assurance, and high tolerance for stress, danger or unfamiliarity. Whilst these facets may sometimes inter-relate empirically, Patrick et al. (2009) stress the importance of considering them as “distinctive phenotypic identities” (p. 925), which should be assessed and interpreted separately.

Unlike previous factorial solutions, within this conceptualisation no one component focuses exclusively on the overtly antisocial traits associated with more criminal manifestations of psychopathy (e.g., delinquency, predatory violence). As such, it offers a potentially more appropriate way to examine psychopathic traits within nonclinical populations (Patrick et al., 2009). Recent findings demonstrate provisional support for the three-factor structure of this triarchic conceptualisation, along with evidence of convergent and concurrent validity by virtue of its associations with established psychopathy measures, and other psychopathy-relevant traits (such as Machiavellianism, narcissism, and low empathy; Sellbom & Phillips, 2013).

Several hypotheses were tested. First, it was predicted that recollections of suboptimal parenting practices (indexed by lower care and higher overprotection) would be positively related to disinhibition, yet negatively related to boldness (as this represents the more socially efficacious elements of psychopathy). Given that previous investigations have reported an inconsistent relationship between parenting and affective deficits associated with psychopathy, no firm predictions were made for the meanness

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