



Empathic, moral and antisocial outcomes associated with distinct components of psychopathy in healthy individuals: a Triarchic model approach



Pedro R. Almeida^{a,*}, Maria João Seixas^a, Fernando Ferreira-Santos^{b,c}, Joana B. Vieira^b, Tiago O. Paiva^b, Pedro S. Moreira^{d,e}, Patrício Costa^{d,e}

^a School of Criminology, Faculty of Law, University of Porto, Portugal

^b Laboratory of Neuropsychophysiology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Porto, Portugal

^c Human Neurobehavioral Laboratory, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Catholic University of Portugal, Porto, Portugal

^d Life and Health Sciences Research Institute (ICVS), School of Health Sciences, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal

^e ICVS/3B's, PT Government Associate Laboratory, Braga/Guimarães, Portugal

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 November 2014

Received in revised form 5 May 2015

Accepted 6 May 2015

Keywords:

Psychopathic traits

Triarchic model

Empathy

Morality

Antisocial behavior

ABSTRACT

In the present report we analyzed the associations between the facets of the recent Triarchic Measure of Psychopathy (TriPM) and distinct dimensions of empathy, morality, and antisocial behavior.

Three hundred and seventy-four participants from the community completed the TriPM, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index and the Moral Foundations Questionnaire. A subset of one hundred and three participants completed a self-reported delinquency scale.

In line with the multidimensional nature of the TriPM, we found that different facets of psychopathy were associated with distinct domains of empathy and morality. In addition, every TriPM subscale was positively related to self-reported delinquency, although meanness lost its predictive power when its shared variance with disinhibition was controlled.

Our results lend conceptual validity to each of the Triarchic model's traits and suggest that psychopathy should not be regarded as a unitary construct, but rather as a combination of dimensional traits with distinct etiologies.

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1. Introduction

The conceptualization and operationalization of psychopathy continues to be a topic of debate, even after decades of prolific research (Skeem, Polaschek, Patrick, & Lilienfeld, 2011). Hare's (1991) two-factor model has been the most influent conceptualization of the construct. The model characterizes psychopathy as a constellation of affective, interpersonal, and behavioral traits grouped into two inter-related factors, which aggregate into a super-ordinate dimension (Hare, 1991; Hare & Neumann, 2008). However, several aspects of this model, particularly its unitary nature, have recently been challenged. For instance, research on psychopathy's nomological network suggests that distinct aspects of the construct are differently associated to external criteria, such as negative emotionality (Hicks & Patrick, 2006).

The Triarchic model of psychopathy (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009) holds as a primary premise that psychopathy reflects a confluence of three separable traits: boldness, meanness, and disinhibition. Boldness captures dominance, fearlessness and invulnerability to stress. Meanness is defined as the callous self-interested pursuit of resources, without considering consequences for others. Disinhibition is characterized by lack of behavioral restraint and impaired emotional regulation. According to the model, two major etiological mechanisms, trait fearlessness and externalizing vulnerability, underlie the emergence of these traits (Patrick et al., 2009; Skeem et al., 2011). Although boldness and meanness are phenotypically distinct, they share low fear as an etiological substrate. Boldness is conceptualized as reflecting an adaptive phenotypic expression of dispositional fearlessness. Environmental influences, particularly parental maltreatment and early physical abuse, and difficult temperament, are assumed to shape trait fearlessness into meanness (Patrick et al., 2009). Unlike boldness and meanness, disinhibition is seen as etiologically separate from trait-fearlessness and related to the functioning

* Corresponding author at: Escola de Criminologia da Faculdade de Direito da Universidade do Porto, Rua dos Bragas, 4050-123 Porto, Portugal. Tel.: +351 91 6448947.

E-mail address: palmeida@direito.up.pt (P.R. Almeida).

of the prefrontal structures underlying inhibitory control (Nelson, Patrick, & Bernat, 2010).

In the present study, we explored the external correlates of each TriPM component, examining their associations with three central constructs associated with psychopathy – empathy, morality, and antisocial behavior. We predicted that each component would show specific patterns of association with distinct dimensions of these constructs. Although reduced empathy is considered one of the core features of psychopathy (Hare, 1991), little empirical work has been done on how subcomponents of psychopathy relate to the cognitive and affective aspects of empathy. Studies suggest that psychopathy is associated with reduced affective, but not cognitive, empathy (Blair et al., 1996). However, one further important qualification, from the dual-process stance, is how each component of psychopathy is specifically associated with the distinct facets of empathy. For instance, measures of empathy have previously shown distinct patterns of association both with the unique variance of each PCL dimension (Seara-Cardoso, Neumann, Roiser, McCrory, & Viding, 2012) and with the two orthogonal dimensions of the Psychopathic Personality Inventory – Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005; Patrick, Poythress, Edens, Lilienfeld, & Benning, 2006). Here we extend these findings by analyzing the associations between the Triarchic components of psychopathy and the dimensions of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980). The IRI conceptualizes empathy as a set of dimensions related to how one is responsive to others: perspective taking reflects the tendency to adopt the psychological point of view of others, fantasy assesses the tendency to transpose oneself into the feelings and actions of characters of fiction, empathic concern assesses sympathy and concern for the misfortune of others, and personal distress measures feelings of personal anxiety and discomfort in tense interpersonal contexts. Given the self-oriented aspects of personal distress, we hypothesized this dimension would be negatively associated with boldness, but positively associated with disinhibition. Also, given that amorality and callousness describe meanness to a great extent, we expected this facet to be negatively associated with all the other-oriented dimensions of empathy.

According to Blair's (2005, 2007) Integrated Emotion System, psychopathic individuals are impaired in the development of care-based morality. The model assumes that abnormalities in the amygdala and related structures compromise the ability to associate harm-causing behaviors with distress cues. This is proposed to compromise the development of a sense of concern for others that normally inhibits instrumental antisocial behavior. While there is evidence that psychopathy is associated with reduced concern for the welfare of others (Aharoni, Antonenko, & Kiehl, 2011), less is known regarding the association between psychopathy and other domains of morality. Haidt and Graham (2007) have proposed that basic intuitive morality extends to at least five domains. These encompass, besides harm/care and justice, ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and spiritual purity. Studies on the association of psychopathy and the moral foundations show that psychopathy is associated with reduced concern with harm and justice (Aharoni et al., 2011; Glenn, Iyer, Graham, Koleva, & Haidt, 2009). We extended these analyses by examining the associations between the Triarchic components of psychopathy and each domain of morality. We predicted that care and justice would be negatively associated with meanness, but not with disinhibition. However, given the pervasive pattern of law-defiant behaviors that characterize disinhibited individuals, we expected negative associations between disinhibition and respect for authority.

The final external criterion we used was antisocial behavior. Although PCL scores are good predictors of antisocial outcomes, such as recidivism (Yang, Wong, & Coid, 2010) or violence (Kennealy, Skeem, Walters, & Camp, 2010), these associations

seem to be restricted to characteristics of psychopathy assessed by the antisocial and impulsive facets of the PCL (Kennealy et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2010). However, in a study using the TriPM in a non-forensic sample, Drislane et al. (2014) have shown that high levels of boldness, meanness, and disinhibition were associated with increased frequency of arrest. While these results suggest that all three facets are associated with higher rates of criminal behavior, this study did not report the unique associations between facets and self-reported delinquency, which we have done in the present study. In line with Drislane et al. (2014), we expected higher scores in all components to be positively associated with self-reported delinquency.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Three hundred and seventy-four participants, aged between 18 and 49 ($M = 21.84$; $SD = 4.03$; 61.5% female), were recruited from the community through personal and online advertisement. Most participants (75.6%) were undergraduate students. A subsample of 103 randomly selected participants (Mean age = 23.52; $SD = 3.25$; 52.4% female) completed a self-reported delinquency scale. This subsample was slightly older ($t(372) = 5.160$, $p < .001$) and had less female participants ($\chi^2(1) = 4.939$, $p = .032$).

3. Measures

3.1. Triarchic Psychopathy Measure

Psychopathy was assessed using the Portuguese version of the TriPM (Patrick, 2010). This instrument encompasses three subscales that assess boldness, meanness, and disinhibition, and has been shown to possess good psychometric characteristics (Sellbom & Phillips, 2013). See Table 1 for consistency measures for all scales.

3.2. Interpersonal Reactivity Index

Empathy was assessed using the Portuguese version (Limpo, Alves, & Castro, 2010) of the IRI (Davis, 1980). The instrument is divided into four subscales. Empathic concern and personal distress assess the affective dimensions of empathy, while fantasy and perspective taking assess its cognitive dimensions. Reliability values (Table 1) were within the range reported for the validation study (Limpo et al., 2010).

3.3. Moral Foundations Questionnaire

The endorsement of each moral foundation was assessed using the Portuguese version of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011). The MFQ is a 30-item self-report scale divided in two parts, in which participants rate the moral relevance and agreement with items related to the five moral foundations.

3.4. Self-reported delinquency

Self-reported delinquency was assessed using a reduced and adapted subset of the Portuguese version of the International Self-reported Delinquency-2 (Junger-Tas et al., 2010). The questionnaire addresses 19 types of offenses (11 property offenses, four personal offenses and four other antisocial behaviors). Participants are inquired whether they performed these behaviors during their lifetime, in the last 12 months, and the frequency of occurrence in the last 12 months. Two measures of self-reported delinquency

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