



Gender moderates psychopathic traits' relations with self-reported childhood maltreatment



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 April 2017

Received in revised form 10 July 2017

Accepted 11 July 2017

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Psychopathy

Gender

Childhood maltreatment

ABSTRACT

Some cross-sectional research has revealed that childhood maltreatment is a robust statistical predictor of the behavioral, but not affective and interpersonal, features of psychopathy. Using a large sample of undergraduates ($N = 1169$), we sought to (a) expand upon previous research by examining the relations between childhood maltreatment and psychopathic traits, and (b) clarify the role of gender in these relations. Consistent with predictions, disinhibition and meanness were significantly positively associated with self-reported childhood maltreatment, whereas boldness was generally unrelated. Gender moderated the relations between psychopathy features and childhood maltreatment in two ways. The relations between boldness and childhood neglect were negative and small to moderate in males but near zero in females, while the relations between disinhibition and meanness and childhood maltreatment were stronger for males than females. We discuss the multiple conceivable interpretations of the main effects, call for genetically-informed research to better adjudicate between these possibilities, and raise the possibility that psychopathy's relations with childhood maltreatment depend on gender.

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Psychopathy (psychopathic personality) is a multidimensional personality construct that includes superficial charm, lack of empathy and guilt, and poor impulse control (e.g., Hare, 2003). The search continues for variables that may contribute to its development (Patrick, 2006). Some cross-sectional research has examined psychopathy's relations with child abuse and neglect (e.g., Bernstein et al., 1998; Graham et al., 2012; Kimonis et al., 2013; Schimmenti et al., 2015) and has revealed that childhood maltreatment is a robust statistical predictor of the behavioral, but not affective and interpersonal, features of psychopathy (e.g., Poythress et al., 2006). Other research has examined the role of gender in these relations with mixed results (e.g., Miller et al., 2011; MacMillan et al., 2001). In the present study, we sought to (a) expand upon previous research by examining the relations between childhood maltreatment and psychopathic traits (b) clarify the role of gender in these relations.

1. Psychopathy

There are a number of conceptualizations of psychopathy, but one prominent model (Patrick et al., 2009), termed the triarchic model, posits that psychopathy comprises three separable trait dimensions: Boldness, Meanness, and Disinhibition. Boldness intends to reflect a relative insensitivity to threat signals, and comprises interpersonal dominance, reduced stress reactivity, physical harm avoidance, and thrill seeking. Disinhibition is a predisposition toward deficits in impulse control marked by a lack of planfulness, foresight, and affect regulation. Finally, Meanness is marked by a lack of empathy and social attachment, guiltlessness, disdain toward others, and rebelliousness.

The triarchic dimensions ostensibly give rise to numerous phenotypic manifestations, in part because they bear differential correlates. For instance, although psychopathy is traditionally viewed as maladaptive, the boldness dimension encompasses several potentially adaptive features. Comprising social poise, self-confidence, and venturesomeness, bold individuals demonstrate a general lack of distress, even when faced with negative consequences, and are considered more emotionally stable and resilient than those low on this trait (Patrick et al., 2009). Whereas Boldness features are typically negatively associated with most forms of psychopathology, Disinhibition and Meanness features are positively

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¹ Data from the psychopathy scales were also used in a published manuscript (Latzman, Vaidya, et al., 2014), but as predictors of external criteria not examined in this manuscript.

associated with internalizing and externalizing psychopathology (e.g., Brislin et al., 2015).

2. Psychopathy and childhood maltreatment

In light of the differential correlates across psychopathy subdimensions, some researchers have begun to identify separable risk factors or potential etiological mechanisms that underlie each of the three subdimensions (e.g., Fowles & Dindo, 2006; Latzman et al., 2017). In addition to Karpman (1941) implicating the influence of upbringing in the development of secondary psychopathy, McCord and McCord (1964) viewed lack of parental affection (i.e., emotional neglect) as a key precipitant of psychopathic personality. Consistent with this theoretical perspective, some research implicates childhood abuse in the development of psychopathy (see Farrington et al., 2010, for a review of longitudinal and cross-sectional evidence), although the causal status of this relation requires clarification. Nevertheless, much of this research is cross-sectional, and thus the nature of the relationship between childhood maltreatment and psychopathy is subject to multiple interpretations (DiLalla & Gottesman, 1991; Jaffee, in press).

Childhood abuse is subsumed under the umbrella of childhood maltreatment, which refers to all forms of negligent and abusive treatment (i.e., emotional, physical, sexual) that results in actual or potential harm to a child's health or development (Edwards et al., 2003). Approaches to studying childhood maltreatment rely upon a variety of methods, ranging from file data to retrospective self-reports. The strengths and limitations of these methodological approaches notwithstanding, research suggests that childhood maltreatment is a robust predictor of psychopathic traits (e.g., Bernstein et al., 1998; Lang et al., 2002). For instance, Weiler and Widom (1996) observed that men who experienced childhood maltreatment (i.e., were abused and/or neglected) had significantly higher psychopathy scores compared with those who did not (see also Schimmenti et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the extent to which these findings reflect a causal link between maltreatment and later psychopathy remains unclear.

Other research suggests that psychopathy subdimensions relate differentially to childhood maltreatment. For instance, Graham et al. (2012) found that disinhibition (i.e., antisocial) traits were significantly related to reporting various forms of childhood maltreatment, both neglect and abuse, among adult men convicted of sexual offenses, whereas other psychopathy features, such as the interpersonal and affective traits, were related to reporting sexual abuse only (see also Poythress et al., 2006; Verona et al., 2005).

3. Gender differences in psychopathy

Until relatively recently, the majority of research on psychopathy relied upon exclusively or primarily male samples, and the extent to which there are meaningful differences in psychopathic traits across a function of gender was less understood (e.g., Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002). As such, a particular focus of the present study was to clarify the potential role of gender in the relations between psychopathy and childhood maltreatment. Traditionally, there have been two approaches to understanding gender differences in psychopathy. The first has been to examine mean-level differences in psychopathic traits across gender. Males consistently score higher on psychopathy measures (see Verona & Vitale, 2006, for a review) compared with females.

Nevertheless, mean-level differences in psychopathy do not bear on the extent to which psychopathic traits manifest equivalently² (i.e., are expressed differently) across gender. This question is addressed by comparing the relations (e.g., correlations) between psychopathy and

external criteria in males and females. Research support for the moderation of psychopathy's nomological network by gender has been decidedly mixed. For instance, in a systematic examination of 32 different correlates, such as general personality traits, externalizing behaviors, and retrospective reports of childhood maltreatment and parenting styles, Miller et al. (2011) found overwhelming support for psychopathy manifesting equally across gender (see also Sellbom et al., 2017; Verona & Vitale, 2006). Moreover, they found no support for gender differences in the correlates of self-reported maltreatment. Nevertheless, some research has found that the association between childhood maltreatment and psychopathy (Colins et al., 2016) and antisocial behaviour (MacMillan et al., 2001) was more pronounced among females compared with males.

4. Present study

Although informative, the existing literature is limited in several ways. First, most studies have focused on childhood abuse and not neglect (but see Graham et al., 2012, Kimonis et al., 2013, and Poythress et al., 2006). Some researchers (i.e., Kimonis et al., 2013) have posited that psychopathic traits' relations with childhood maltreatment types may differ as a function of maltreatment type such that these traits are more related to childhood abuse than neglect, or vice versa. Nevertheless, little research has examined psychopathic traits' relations with childhood neglect, and as such the extent to which psychopathy relates to reports of childhood neglect and to differing types of maltreatment is less clear. Second, this literature has tended to focus on all male (and typically predominantly Caucasian) samples of incarcerated adults or delinquent youth (e.g., Kimonis et al., 2013; Lang et al., 2002). The extent to which psychopathy relates to childhood maltreatment among more normative mixed-gender samples has received little attention (but see Miller et al., 2011); hence, whether these relations vary by gender warrants further consideration.

Using a large, racially-diverse sample of undergraduates, we examined (a) the relations between multiple types of self-reported childhood maltreatment (i.e., abuse and neglect) and psychopathic traits, and (b) gender differences in these relations, both mean-level and correlational. We hypothesized that disinhibition features would be positively associated with childhood maltreatment broadly construed (e.g., Kimonis et al., 2013; Schimmenti et al. 2015), but that boldness features would be unrelated or slightly negatively associated with these indices. Although meanness' relations with childhood maltreatment have not yet been explored, we hypothesized that these features would be as strongly positively associated with childhood maltreatment as disinhibition. We did not advance specific hypotheses regarding psychopathic traits' differential relations with maltreatment types. In addition, although we expected males to exhibit higher mean levels of psychopathic traits, we did not expect gender to moderate the relations between psychopathy and childhood maltreatment given that previous examinations have failed to yield robust and replicable gender moderation effects (Miller et al., 2011).

5. Method

5.1. Participants

Participants were 1169 undergraduates (73% female) enrolled at a large, public, urban university in Atlanta, Georgia. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 58 ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.71$, $SD = 4.65$) and were predominantly of black/African-American (37%), white/Caucasian (34%), or Asian/Asian-American (15%) descent. Participants completed an online survey via a secure website in partial fulfillment of a research requirement. On the basis of extreme responding on Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised validity scales (see Measures section), 9 protocols were identified as potentially problematic. As these cases did not affect the relations between psychopathy and childhood maltreatment,

² By "manifest equivalently," we mean that our moderation analyses examine differential expressions of an extant trait across levels of gender. Conceptually, differential expression reflects a conditional probability that indicates that the level of psychopathic traits given childhood maltreatment depends on another variable, in this case gender.

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