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Psychopathy and impulsivity: The relationship of the triarchic model of psychopathy to different forms of impulsivity in offenders and community participants

Kathrin Weidacker [a,*], Katherine R. O'Farrell [b], Nicola S. Gray [a,c], Stephen J. Johnston [a], Robert J. Snowden [b]

[a] School of Human and Health Sciences, Department of Psychology, University of Swansea, Swansea, Wales, United Kingdom
[b] School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Wales, United Kingdom
[c] Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Psychopathic individuals are considered to be impulsive, but impulsivity is a multifaceted construct (including positive and negative urgency, lack of planning, lack of perseverance, sensation seeking). We investigated the relationships between the Triarchic Psychopathy Model (TriPM), conceptualising psychopathy in terms of: Boldness, Meanness, and Disinhibition, and UPPS-P Impulsivity. Prison and community participants were examined to assess for consistency in relationships between psychopathic traits and impulsivity across these samples. Boldness related to high sensation seeking, but to low negative urgency and strong perseverance. Disinhibition related to high levels of negative/positive urgency, and poor planning. Meanness was linked to most forms of impulsivity. While the samples showed small differences (higher Sensation Seeking for the community sample, and greater TriPM Disinhibition for the offenders), there were no differences in the relationships between TriPM and UPPS-P. The findings support the dimensional model of psychopathy and demonstrate that some aspects of psychopathy are related to reduced impulsivity. This might explain why some psychopathic offenders are able to commit instrumental violence or criminal behaviour that requires a high level of planning and persistence.

1. Introduction

The concept of psychopathy is of great importance to society in general and to forensic psychology and psychiatry in particular due to the high degree of antisocial and criminal activities associated with the disorder. However, the exact definition of the term, and how it is best measured, continues to be an area of debate (e.g., Gatner, Douglas, & Hart, 2016). One example is the role of "impulsivity" as key characteristic of the psychopathic personality. For example, the forensic diagnosis instrument of psychopathy, the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 1991), contains specific items assessing the degree of impulsivity in lifestyle, tendency to seek sensation, and poor behavioural controls, in addition to referring to an absence of considering the future consequences of one's actions.

At first glance, many of the behaviours associated with psychopathy also appear "impulsive" such as promiscuous sexual behaviour, gambling, drug-use and criminal activities (Blaszczynski, Steel, & McConaghy, 1997; Harris, Rice, Hilton, Lalumiere, & Quinsey, 2007; Sylvers, Landfield, & Lilienfeld, 2011). On the other hand, clinicians often report on the ability of psychopathic offenders to plan their crimes and to carefully manipulate others for their own gain. Such behaviours seem to contrast with what would be expected of an impulsive person. Similarly, psychopaths appear to commit far more than their fair share of "instrumental violence" where the violence is planned and committed for some sort of instrumental gain, compared to "reactive violence" where the violence is not planned and appears to arise out of strong emotional states (Cima & Raine, 2009; Woodworth & Porter, 2002).

Research relating self-report measures of impulsivity to psychopathy also fails to provide a consistent view of the relationship between these constructs. For example, Snowden and Gray (2011) measured the relationship between the two most widely used measures of impulsivity and psychopathy, the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale: BIS-11 (Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995) and the PCL-R, in a sample of personality disordered offenders. They found no significant relationship between the total BIS-11 and the total PCL-R score. However, there is increasing evidence that both the concept of psychopathy and impulsivity are uni-factorial constructs (Poythress & Hall, 2011). The PCL-R, for example, is underpinned by at least two factors (Harpur, Hakstian, & Hare, 1988), covering the interpersonal and affective components (Factor 1) as well as the lifestyle and antisocial components (Factor 2). These factors might also be subdivided into either three (Cooke & Michie, 2001) or

* Corresponding author at: School of Human and Health Sciences, Department of Psychology, University of Swansea, Singleton Park, SA2 8PP Swansea, Wales, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: K.Weidacker@gmx.de (K. Weidacker).

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four facets (Neumann, Hare, & Pardini, 2015). Returning to the data of Snowden and Gray (2011), it was shown that offenders with high Factor 2 scores on the PCL-R showed higher scores on the BIS-11, while Factor 1 scores were not related to BIS-11 scores.

In terms of self-report measure of psychopathy, the Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005), contains at least two underpinning factors, Fearless Dominance and Self-Centred Impulsivity, and sometimes a third factor of Coldheartedness is isolated (e.g., Berg, Hecht, Latzman, & Lilienfeld, 2015). Given that the PPI-R was designed based on a different conceptualisation of psychopathy than the PCL-R, viewing psychopathy as independent from criminal behaviour, the factors of the PPI-R do not have a simple one-to-one relationship with the factors of the PCL-R (Copestake, Gray, & Snowden, 2011). It seems likely that these different sub-factors may well have different relationships to measures of impulsivity. Hence, an understanding of the relationship between psychopathy and impulsivity must take into account different conceptions of psychopathy and its underlying factors.

Recently, the Triarchic Psychopathy Model (TriPM; Patrick, 2010) was introduced in an effort to integrate the divergent constructs of psychopathy, as for example utilized by the PCL-R and the PPI-R, and to further connect with neurobiological underpinnings. The TriPM conceptualizes psychopathy in terms of three distinct constructs, Boldness, Meanness, and Disinhibition, which differ in their phenotypes. The Boldness dimension incorporates psychopathic features such as high resilience to pressure and stressors, high social efficacy, and high tolerance to danger as well as unfamiliarity. It shows strong associations with the Fearless Dominance concept of the PPI-R (Sellbom, Wygant, & Drislane, 2015) and some relationship to the interpersonal (Facet 1) and antisocial (Facet 4) scales of the PCL-R (Venables, Hall, & Patrick, 2014). Meanness reflects callousness, aggression, cruelty, lack of empathy, shallow attachment, and general destructive behaviours to seek excitement and personal gain. It is related to the interpersonal (Facet 1), affective (Facet 2) and antisocial (Facet 4) facets of the PCL-R, but also to the PPI-R Self-Centred Impulsivity and Coldheartedness factors (Sellbom & Phillips, 2013; Sellbom et al., 2015; Stanley, Wygant, & Sellbom, 2013). The third dimension, Disinhibition, relates to diminished impulse control, poor self-regulation (especially in terms of negative emotions), and poor planfulness (Patrick, 2010), thereby relating to aspects of the lifestyle (Facet 3) and antisocial (Facet 4) facets of the PCL-R as well as to the PPI-R Self-Centred Impulsivity factor (Stanley et al., 2013; Venables et al., 2014).

1.1. Varieties of impulsivity

Impulsivity is widely acknowledged to be a multifaceted construct (e.g. Cyders & Coskunpinar, 2012; Evenden, 1999). Taking this into account, the UPPS Impulsive Behavior Scale was developed by means of factor analyses on items included in ten different impulsivity self-report measures (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). Early results indicated four different aspects of impulsivity, which has later been extended to include a fifth component of impulsivity (UPPS-P; Lynam, Smith, Whiteside, & Cyders, 2006). The Negative Urgency subscale of the UPPS-P reflects impulsive reactions when facing negative emotions and the ignorance of possible consequences of these impulses. Positive Urgency refers to the tendency to act impulsively when facing positive emotions. Lack of Premeditation involves acting without consideration of potential consequences. Lack of Perseverance indicates an inability to focus on ongoing tasks and complete them. Sensation Seeking relates to the risk seeking component of impulsivity.

1.2. Psychopathy and UPPS

So far, there are few psychopathy studies using the UPPS conception of impulsivity and none relating the UPPS to the triarchic conceptualisation of psychopathy. Varlamov, Khalifa, Liddle, Duggan, and Howard (2011) used the PCL-R to divide male offenders with a personality disorder into low and high psychopathy groups. These two groups did not differ on most of the UPPS scales, with only a significant difference on the Sensation Seeking scale, whereby those in the high psychopathy group had larger Sensation Seeking scores. Ray, Poythress, Weir, and Rickelm (2009) examined the relationship between the PPI-R and UPPS in a mainly male offender sample. The PPI-R Fearless Dominance factor was strongly related to Sensation Seeking with a small correlation to Lack of Premeditation. Self-Centred Impulsivity was significantly related to all UPPS scales.

In terms of male community participants, Miller, Watts, and Jones (2011) related the UPPS-P to the self-report version of the PCL-R – the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP-III: Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007). The first SRP-III factor, resembling that of Factor 1 of the PCL-R, was solely related to enhanced scores on Positive Urgency. However, the second SRP-III factor, resembling Factor 2 of the PCL-R, was associated to enhanced impulsivity in terms of Positive/Negative Urgency, as well as to Lack of Premeditation. Berg et al. (2015) also examined community participants on the relationships between the UPPS and the PPI-R. Similar to findings in the prison sample investigated by Ray et al. (2009), they found both that Fearless Dominance had a strong relationship with Sensation Seeking, but not with other UPPS-P scales[1] and that Self-Centred Impulsivity was significantly related to all UPPS scales (Berg et al., 2015).

At present there is no report on how UPPS-P impulsivity is related to the three phenotypes of psychopathy as described via the TriPM. Further, to date no direct comparison of TriPM/UPPS-P relationships between offender and community samples has taken place. We, therefore, measured five aspects of impulsivity via the UPPS-P and the three characteristics of psychopathy embedded in the TriPM in two male samples. Offenders and community participants were compared on their relationships between TriPM psychopathy and UPPS-P impulsivity.

1.3. Hypotheses

Based on previous research linking the Boldness dimension to the Fearless Dominance concept of the PPI-R (Sellbom et al., 2015), which in turn was found to be related to enhanced levels of UPPS-P Sensation Seeking and Lack of Premeditation (Ray et al., 2009), a positive relationship between TriPM Boldness and UPPS-P Sensation Seeking and Lack of Premeditation was hypothesised. In respect to the Meanness dimension of the TriPM, previous research has found associations between this and the PPI-R Self-Centred Impulsivity as well as the PPI-R Coldheartedness factors (Stanley et al., 2013), which additionally have been found to correlate with all aspects of impulsivity as measured by the UPPS-P (Berg et al., 2015; Ray et al., 2009). As such it was hypothesised that the Meanness dimension of the TriPM will be strongly associated with all forms of impulsivity measured by the UPPS. The third TriPM dimension, Disinhibition, has previously been found to be related to poor planfulness (Patrick, 2010) and to the PPI-R Self-Centred Impulsivity factor (Stanley et al., 2013). Therefore it was hypothesised that TriPM Disinhibition will be positively correlated to all aspects of UPPS-P impulsivity, but especially the Lack of Premeditation sub-scale, given that both relate to a deficit in planning (Lynam et al., 2006; Patrick, 2010).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Male community participants were recruited through the University's participant panel and reimbursed with course credits as

[1] Other correlations were significant due the large sample size (>1000) but were of a small effect size.