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Endorsement and processing of negative affect among violent psychopathic offenders

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between negative affect and psychopathy in a sample of 110 adult violent offenders. Self-report measures of negative affect and cognitive functioning were administered via a computer. In contrast to the majority of previous research, psychopaths were more likely to disclose negative affect, a finding that did not occur with the cognitive measure. Response latencies were used to assess how psychopaths processed negative affect. The response latencies of psychopaths were incongruent with self-report as compared to non-psychopaths. These results suggest that psychopaths can report on affective dimensions, but the processing of negative affect is at minimum different, if not dysfunctional.

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1. Endorsement and processing of negative affect among violent psychopaths

A number of researchers and clinicians have hypothesized that psychopathy is associated with an affective deficit (Hare, 1998; Lykken, 1995; Patrick, Bradley, & Lang, 1993). Yet, the relationship between self-report measures of affect and psychopathy has yielded inconsistent results. With the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, some studies have only examined the association with total scores whereas others have reported correlations between Factor 1 (interpersonal/affective features) and Factor 2 (behavioural features). Self-reported anger and hostility

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questionnaires have been moderately and positively correlated with PCL-R total scores, but more strongly related to Factor 2 than Factor 1 (Hobson & Shine, 1998). In contrast, self-reported empathy scales have been more strongly and negatively correlated with Factor 1 as compared to Factor 2 scores (Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989; Rutherford, Cacciola, Alterman, & McKay, 1996). Psychopathy has been associated with self-reported measures of depression, anxiety and fear scales (Blackburn & Coid, 1998; Harpur et al., 1989; Moltó, Poy, & Torrubia, 2000; Schmitt & Newman, 1999; Vitale, Smith, Brinkley, & Newman, 2002). Even though most studies have shown a slight negative correlation between negative affect and Factor 1 scores, the weak relationship between negative affect and psychopathy may be influenced by psychopaths' attempt at impression management and/or by an unrealistic perception of their own subjective feelings (Kroner & Forth, 1995). Overall, some of the inconsistencies between affect and psychopathy may be due to measurement issues, but differences may also be accounted for by the specific type of affect being assessed. Psychopaths may have differentiated access to various emotions.

The experimental and laboratory evidence for affective deficits among psychopaths has come from studies examining non-linguistic and linguistic processing, lexical decisions, emotional imagery, and cerebral structure, with some of the strongest results coming from the examination of negative affect. Non-linguistic emotional processes have been studied using the blink-startle paradigm. Research by Patrick and his colleagues (Levenston, Patrick, Bradley, & Lang, 2000; Patrick et al., 1993) have found that the blink-startle responses of psychopaths were not modulated by the positive or negative valence of slides. Non-psychopaths showed a larger blink-startle response when viewing unpleasant slides as compared to viewing pleasant slides. Psychopaths showed no difference in blink-startle response while viewing pleasant and unpleasant slides. Similarly, using a lexical decision task, psychopaths showed little or no event-related potential differentiation between negative and positive emotional words, unlike their non-psychopath counterparts (Kiehl, Hare, McDonald, & Brink, 1999).

Hare and colleagues (Hare, 1998; Christianson et al., 1996) have suggested that the psychopaths' emotional meaning and processing of negative affect is deficient. Intrator et al. (1997) used single photon computed tomography (SPECT) to examine differences in brain functioning between psychopaths and non-psychopaths during a lexical decision task. Psychopaths showed greater relative activation of the right and left frontal temporal cortical regions in the emotional condition (i.e., maggot, corpse), with non-psychopaths having minimal metabolic requirements for processing affect. The authors concluded that the processing of affective information with non-psychopaths is over learned and efficient, requiring minimal metabolic activity. In contrast, the greater general activation among psychopaths suggests an affective processing anomaly. A recent MRI study by Kiehl et al. (2001) has reported an increased activity in the cortical and subcortical regions for psychopaths while processing affectively negative words. Mills (1995) used event-related potentials during affective tasks to investigate cerebral asymmetry among psychopaths. Compared to non-psychopaths, psychopaths did not use as many right frontal resources to process affective information even though psychopaths had no deficits in performance. The pattern of frontal, temporal, and parietal site responses, suggested that affective tasks were processed in perceptually unelaborated ways. Mills argued that the psychopath has a "diffuse" cerebral organization with odd inter- and intra-hemispheric communication.

Overall, the research supports the contention that some form of affective deficit is central to psychopathy. A well stated metaphor of psychopaths' affective processing is that they, "know the

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