Psychopathic Traits and Conduct Problems in Community and Clinic-Referred Samples of Children: Further Development of the Psychopathy Screening Device

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This study examined the structure of psychopathic traits in 2 samples of children. The nonreferred community sample included 1,136 children recruited from elementary schools in 2 school districts in the southeastern United States. The clinic sample included 160 children referred to an outpatient mental health clinic serving the same geographic region. In both samples, parent and teacher ratings of psychopathic traits were subjected to a principal-axis factor analysis, and the congruence of the factor structure across samples was examined using confirmatory factor analysis. In both samples, 1 dimension that consisted of the callous and unemotional traits that have been hallmarks of most clinical descriptions of psychopathy was isolated. Two other dimensions consisting of narcissistic traits and impulsivity emerged in the community sample. Both the narcissism and impulsivity dimensions were highly related to symptoms of oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. However, the callous and unemotional traits were only weakly associated with these symptoms after controlling for the other dimensions of psychopathy.

The personality construct of psychopathy has been a focus of clinical research for many decades (Cleckley, 1955; Hare, 1970; McCord & McCord, 1964). However, despite this large body of research, there remains considerable disagreement as to the core characteristics of this construct (Hare, 1998; Robins, 1978). Recently, research by Hare, Harpur, and colleagues has been very influential in advancing our understanding of this construct. These researchers developed an assessment strategy, the Psychopathy Checklist—Revised (PCL–R; Hare, 1991), which combines a semistructured interview and a review of institutional charts to assess multiple aspects of psychopathy. When ratings of psychopathy on the PCL–R were factor analyzed, two dimensions emerged (Harpur, Hakstian, & Hare, 1988; Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989). The first dimension was a callous and unemotional interpersonal style that included such characteristics as a lack of remorse for misdeeds, absence of empathy, narcissism, a callous use of others for one’s own gain, and a lack of emotionality. The second dimension focused on problems of impulse control and a deviant and antisocial lifestyle.

The importance of capturing the multidimensional nature of psychopathy was further established by four key findings using the PCL–R (see Hare, Hart, & Harpur, 1991, and Hare, 1998, for a review of this literature). First, most personality inventories that purport to assess psychopathy, as well as the diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), tend to focus on the impulsive and antisocial lifestyle dimension of psychopathy. Second, although most inmates in forensic institutions tend to show high scores on this impulsive and antisocial lifestyle dimension, only a minority of these inmates show high scores on the callous and unemotional dimension. Third, those inmates who show callous–unemotional traits seem to show a more severe and violent pattern of antisocial behavior and are at higher risk for violent recidivism after release from an institution. Fourth, the two dimensions have different correlates that could suggest different etiologies. For example, the callous and unemotional dimension tends to be more highly associated with abnormalities in the processing of emotional information, whereas the impulsive and antisocial lifestyle dimension tends to be more highly associated with intellectual deficits, lower socioeconomic status, and dysfunctional family backgrounds.

These findings illustrate the potential importance of this multidimensional conceptualization of psychopathy for both research (e.g., understanding the various causes of antisocial behavior) and practice (e.g., predicting risk for violent recidivism). However, there are several important limitations to this research. The first limitation is that this line of research has studied psychopathy primarily in forensic samples, and the limited research conducted with noninstitutionalized samples is much less consistent. Several studies investigating psychopathic traits in college samples have reported findings consistent with the two-factor conceptualization (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Wilson, Frick, & Clements, 1999; Zagon & Jackson, 1994), whereas other studies have found evidence for a single dimension (Forth, Brown, Hart, & Hare, 1996) or for more than two dimensions (Lilienfeld & Andrews,