



# The influence of academic discipline on empathy and psychopathic personality traits in undergraduate students



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## ABSTRACT

The Attraction, Selection and Attrition (ASA) model posits that people are attracted to organizations that embody similar personality traits and values to their own. These traits are thought to be further shaped by the organization's culture, ultimately creating a homogenous workforce within the organization (Schneider, 1987). This research applies the ASA model to investigate whether specific university disciplines have an impact on the development of psychopathic traits and empathy in students. An online survey collected data on levels of psychopathic traits and empathy from 259 psychology and business undergraduate students to examine whether group level variations were present across years and disciplines. Generalized Linear Mixed Modelling analyses supported the hypothesized interaction effects of year of study and discipline for psychopathic traits only. Moderate-large discipline effect sizes were noted, with psychology students reporting significantly higher levels of cognitive ( $d = 0.77$ ) and total empathy ( $d = 0.74$ ) than business students. Additionally, business students reported significantly higher levels of affective, antisocial, interpersonal and total psychopathic traits than psychology students ( $d = 0.36$ – $0.45$ ). Findings provide support for the attraction and selection components of the ASA model. Implications of these findings are discussed in the context of the model and self-selection.

## 1. Introduction

The personality literature has established that external environments play a pivotal role in personality trait development (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). Changes in personality traits tend to be most dramatic during young adulthood; a period of time when many are in university and/or starting a career (Roberts et al., 2006). The present study investigated the impact university discipline may have on students' personality trait development, situated within Schneider's (1987) Attraction, Selection, Attrition theoretical framework.

Schneider's (1987) Attraction, Selection, Attrition (ASA) model posits that people will be attracted to organizations that they perceive as aligning with their own personality traits, values and interests. Organizations will select employees in a similar fashion, resulting in the individual traits of the employee continuing to be accentuated by the organizational environment as well as their unique life experiences. Employees who do not fit the organization culture over time either resign or are terminated by the organization, resulting in a homogenous workforce (Schneider, 1987).

The ASA model is underpinned by the self-selection and indoctrination hypotheses. The self-selection hypothesis, congruent with the attraction and selection components of the ASA model, posits that

individuals will be attracted to vocational choices that they believe to embody their own personality characteristics. The indoctrination hypothesis, congruent with the final attrition component of the ASA model, suggests that particular vocational environments will influence or enhance the development of personality characteristics which may be advantageous to that environment (Elegido, 2014). Previous literature has found strong support for the self-selection hypothesis however evidence for the indoctrination hypothesis is sparser (Elegido, 2014).

It should be noted however that attraction, selection and attrition are also influenced by genetic factors (see Scarr & McCartney (1983) for an overview of this work), certain environmental demands and expectations such as income and societal pressures. The 'Plasticity Principle', coined by Roberts, Wood, and Caspi (2008) posits that personality trait change can also be brought about by repeated exposure to reward and punishment schedules which aim to shape behaviour to align with social roles (Roberts et al., 2008). Workplace environments are capable of influencing personality trait changes due to the operant conditioning of employees via punishment and reward within the workplace environment (Le et al., 2014).

It is a small inferential leap to apply the ASA model to a university setting. For example, Vedel and Thomsen (2017) found that students who were motivated by power, self-interest and financial gain were

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more likely to enrol in a business degree as this leads to a career which encourages and rewards self-interested behaviour (psychopathic alignment). Comparatively, psychology students reported the highest levels of openness and agreeableness (empathy alignment; Vedel & Thomsen, 2017) which are appropriate for working in this field. Therefore, drawing on the ASA model, it is proposed that empathic and psychopathic personality traits which initially attract students to a course in psychology or business are the same ones that may be influenced and accentuated as they progress through their degree.

### 1.1. Empathy

The construct of empathy is the single most researched variable in relation to psychotherapeutic processes (Camarano, 2011; Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, & Teng, 1995), with psychologists thought to rely heavily on the emotional ability to exhibit empathy – to cognitively understand another's perspective, co-experience their emotional state or ideally, both (Camarano, 2011). Additionally, empathy is considered a core component of engaging in ethical and other prosocial behaviours. It is not surprising then to think that psychology training programs might place strong emphasis on improving interpersonal communication skills and empathic understanding (Marangoni et al., 1995).

Business schools are designed to equip students with skills for success in a traditionally competitive field. It has been argued that business degrees often lack an empathic, person centred approach and in-depth focus on moral and ethical behavioural practice (Frank, 2004). The literature yields mixed results on the efficacy of increased empathy for therapists, as well as the extent to which empathy skills training, built into psychology and business courses, is effective in furthering the development of this particular construct (Marangoni et al., 1995; Toto, Man, Blatt, Simmens, & Greenberg, 2015). Therefore, further investigation into the development of empathy in both psychology and business students is warranted.

### 1.2. Psychopathy

A deficit or lack of empathy is associated with antisocial behaviour and is a defining feature of psychopathy (Camarano, 2011). Other features of psychopathy include superficial charm, egocentricity, dishonesty, risk-taking and manipulative behaviour as well as a lack of guilt and remorse, masked by normalcy (Wilson & McCarthy, 2011). Traditionally, psychopathy has been conceptualized as a dyadic and fixed personality disorder used primarily as a psychiatric diagnosis in forensic settings. However, there is a growing body of literature focused on psychopathy within community settings, specifically in the workplace (Wilson & McCarthy, 2011), with research suggesting around 4% of corporate leaders meet the threshold for a psychopathic pathology, considerably higher than the 1% reported prevalence in the general population (Babiak, Newman, & Hare, 2010).

This shift in research focus has been accompanied by an updated conceptualization of the construct which evaluates psychopathy as a collection of personality traits, existing on a spectrum, displayed in varying levels of severity (Babiak et al., 2010; Boddy, 2015). Further, research suggests that these traits tend to cluster into four unique areas of personality, namely; the interpersonal, affective, antisocial, and lifestyle psychopathy facets (Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2016). This view of psychopathy is in line with current personality development research, emphasizing the role of both genetics and environment, and as such was adopted for the purposes of the present study.

Despite increased interest, research investigating the role of psychopathic traits in the business world remains in its infancy (Babiak et al., 2010; Boddy, 2015), resulting in limited knowledge of the manifestation and longer-term implications these traits may have within this sector. Even sparser literature exists which has examined the development of psychopathic personality traits in business students, a pre-cursor to the business world (Brown, Sautter, Littvay, Sautter, &

Bearnes, 2010; Frank, 2004; Hassall, Boduszek, & Dhingra, 2015; Vedel & Thomsen, 2017; Wilson & McCarthy, 2011). Two previous studies have directly examined levels of psychopathy in business and psychology students, reporting business students possess higher levels of psychopathic traits than psychology students ( $d = 0.32\text{--}0.75$ ) (Hassall et al., 2015; Vedel & Thomsen, 2017). Cross-sectional and longitudinal research is required to understand the influence university courses may have on the further development of empathy and psychopathic traits (Wilson & McCarthy, 2011).

### 1.3. Present study

The relationship between empathy and psychopathy has produced some mixed findings. Whilst much of the previous forensic literature supports an inverse relationship between psychopathy and empathy, new findings are emerging which suggest that empathy levels tend to be higher in non-incarcerated psychopathic individuals (Mullins-Nelson, Salekin, & Leistico, 2006). For example, Mullins-Nelson et al. (2006) found psychopathy was negatively correlated with affective empathy ( $r = -0.406$ ), but not significantly correlated with cognitive empathy, suggesting that psychopathic individuals in the community may possess normative levels of cognitive empathy, allowing them to exhibit adequate social skills to evade detection from the judicial system. These mixed findings highlight the need for further research into the relationship between facet level empathy and psychopathic traits.

Investigation of psychopathic traits and empathy in a university student population would provide valuable information regarding the prevalence of these traits in non-clinical populations and identify possible external perpetuating factors involved in their development. Previous cross-sectional research has established that different personality types will be attracted to different academic environments, what remains unknown is whether these traits are further developed from exposure to these learning environments. Further, the two previous studies that have directly compared business and psychology students on levels of psychopathic traits used a UK sample of 3rd year students and a Dutch sample of 1st year students. The present research provides an Australian comparison of these traits and adds to the sparse literature in this area.

Therefore, working within an ASA framework, the present research was the first to examine the influence university course discipline has on the manifestation of psychopathic traits and empathy in business and psychology students. As empathy deficit is considered a core feature of psychopathy and empathy is a possible predictor of selecting a helping profession discipline (Marsh, 1988), it was hypothesized that after controlling for age, gender, and social desirability, year of study and discipline would interact in predicting levels of empathy and psychopathic traits. Specifically, year of study would be negatively related to levels of empathy (cognitive and affective) for business students, but positively related for psychology students; and year of study would be positively related to levels of psychopathic traits (Interpersonal, Antisocial, Affective and Lifestyle facets) for business students, but negatively related for psychology students. Findings can provide insight into the influence university courses may have on the development of these personality traits.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample was comprised of 135 (64 = male, 71 = female) business and 124 (26 = male, 98 = female) psychology undergraduate students from four Australian universities with a mean age of 24 years ( $SD = 8.35$ ). A summary of participant demographics is presented in Table 1.

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