



Review

A systematic review of psychopathy in women within secure settings

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ABSTRACT

The construct of psychopathy has been comparatively understudied in women, and to date there has been no attempt to systematically review the literature related to psychopathy in women. This review assimilates the existing evidence in relation to the prevalence and factor structure of psychopathy in women within secure settings. An extensive systematic search was performed using 11 electronic databases and four search engines; citation, author and reference list searching was also performed. After removing duplicates and appraising the study's eligibility by title, 261 publications were appraised against minimum quality and eligibility threshold criteria, resulting in 28 remaining publications with data on 2545 participants. Quality appraisal was conducted by two raters, with excellent inter-rater reliability ($kappas = .7-.9$). A narrative synthesis was then performed. PCL-R based prevalence rates ranged from 1.05% to 31% (with a cut-off criterion of 30), with variations in multiple factors, such as geographical location and type of sample setting. The factor model with the most support from the reviewed studies was Cooke & Michie's (2001) 3-Factor model. The apparent gender differences in the prevalence rates, factor structure and item expression of psychopathy, presents implications for the assessment and general conceptualisation of the construct in women within secure settings.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

'Psychopathy' can broadly be understood to represent a feature of personality which is "distinguished by a callous disregard for the feelings of others, egocentricity, and impulsive social rule-breaking" (Blackburn, 1998). The term 'psychopath' dates back to 1800s, however it was Hervey Cleckley's seminal work 'The Mask of Sanity' (1941) which is considered to be the first attempt to formalise this personality construct. Cleckley revised his conceptualisation (Cleckley, 1941, 1950, 1955, 1964, 1976, 1984, 1988) across four decades of study with wider populations, including female patients.

The measurement of psychopathy has since progressed with the development of the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL; Hare, 1980), and later the Psychopathy Checklist Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 1991) and the briefer screening version (PCL:SV; Hart, Cox, & Hare, 1995). Research into psychopathy has been heavily influenced by the PCL measures, and the PCL-R is often quoted as being the 'gold

standard' in psychopathy assessment (Lynam & Gudonis, 2005), to the extent that the construct of psychopathy has become 'virtually synonymous' with the PCL-R (Hildebrand, 2004; Skeem & Cooke, 2010). It is argued that this reliance on PCL measures within psychopathy research has led to the occurrence of 'construct drift' (Forouzan & Cooke, 2005; Skeem & Cooke, 2010), with the PCL conceptualisation of psychopathy no longer accurately representing the initial Clecklean construct.

The conceptualisation of psychopathy presented in Cleckley's writing makes clear the point that criminality or violence are not central features of the construct, and while some individuals who display psychopathic traits may indeed "commit major crimes and sometimes crimes of maximal violence, there are so many, however, who do not, that such tendencies should be regarded as the exception rather than the rule, perhaps, as a pathologic trait independent, to a considerable degree, of the other manifestations which we regard as fundamental" (Cleckley, 1976, p. 262). The conceptualisation of psychopathy presented within the PCL measures does, however, incorporate a strong emphasis of 'antisocial behaviours' within its constituent items (e.g. juvenile delinquency, revocation of conditional discharge, criminal versatility). It has been argued that antisocial behaviours in the context of psychopathy are better understood as a consequence of the core personality

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features of the construct, rather than being representative of the construct itself (Cooke & Michie, 2001; Cooke, Hart, Logan, & Michie, 2004). This argument has led to the assertion that the PCL measures are intrinsically tautological (Roberts & Coid, 2007), and this has led to alternative conceptualisations of the PCL-R factor structure, and indeed to the creation of alternative assessment methods (e.g. The Comprehensive Assessment of Psychopathic Personality; Cooke et al., 2004).

Cooke and Michie (2001) proposed an alternative factor structure to the PCL-R which removed the items most closely related to antisocial or criminal behaviours, and instead presented a hierarchical model comprising of three-factors: 'Arrogant/Deceitful interpersonal style', 'Deficient affective experience' and 'Impulsive/Irresponsible behavioural style'. Prior to the publication of this 3-Factor structure, the 2-Factor model presented by Harpur, Hare, and Hakstian (1989) had become the "gold standard" structure which was most dominant within the PCL-R literature (Cooke & Michie, 2001). Within this 2-Factor model, Factor 1 encompasses the core personality features (interpersonal and affective), while Factor 2 encompasses the features of a 'chronically unstable and antisocial lifestyle' (Harpur et al., 1989), which includes the items related to criminality. Following the publication of Cooke and Michie's (2001) 3-Factor model, several 4-Factor solutions have been proposed, all of which reintroduce the omitted antisocial items. For example, Hare (2003) proposed a 2-Factor 4 facet model which retains the original 2-factor structure, encompassing four facets: interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and antisocial.

The empirical literature evaluating the appropriateness of these factor structures within male samples is expansive and contradictory; with some research suggesting the 3-Factor model is a superior fit (Hart et al., 1995; Patrick, Hicks, Krueger, & Lang, 2005; Weaver, Meyer, Van Nort, & Tristan, 2006), while others suggest that four dimension models are the most appropriate (Hare & Neumann, 2006; Hill, Neumann, & Rogers, 2004; Neumann, Kosson, Forth, & Hare, 2006; Vitacco, Neumann, & Jackson, 2005). The primary theoretical distinction between these appears to rest with the debate surrounding the role of antisocial behaviour in the conceptualisation of psychopathy.

The debate surrounding the relevance of antisocial features to the core construct of psychopathy is arguably of particular relevance to female populations. There is compelling evidence of gender differences in antisocial behaviour and offending (Moffit, 2001; Nicholls, Ogloff, Brink, & Spidel, 2005; Putkonen & Weizmann-Henelius, 2009; Strand & Belfrage, 2001) and the manifestation of aggression (Archer, 2000; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Nicholls & Dutton, 2001). Thus, given these differences, it could therefore be expected that there would be differences in the phenotypic expressions of the construct across genders. This could also conceivably impact upon the factor structure, item functioning and loading, and the prevalence of psychopathy in this population; thus bearing implications for the assessment of this construct with women.

In comparison to the expansive literature base of studies investigating psychopathy in males, the evidence base for women has been far more modest (Forouzan & Cooke, 2005). The absence of an adequate evidence base has "crucial ethical implications for forensic and correctional practice" (Forouzan & Cooke, 2005, p. 774), and thus there is a need to establish the extent to which the construct of psychopathy (and indeed the tools measuring it) differs between genders.

Cale and Lilienfeld (2002) reviewed the evidence for sex and gender differences in psychopathy, and asserted that "males and females differ in the developmental courses of psychopathy" (p. 1198). The authors draw upon literature illustrating gender differences, for example in internalising or externalising symptoms, differences in the type of antisocial conduct they exhibit, the prevalence rate of the diagnosis of conduct disorder and the age

of onset of behavioural problems and associated disorders. Indeed, in a study of psychopathy in adolescents, Cooper (2008) reported a correlation between psychopathy and self-reported bullying with female adolescent offenders; an association which was not observed in male adolescent offenders. The author suggests that in female adolescents, psychopathy is "strongly related to the perpetration of psychological harm" (p. 3), and that this represents an example of gender differences in the expression of psychopathy.

Given the suggestion of gender difference in the expression of psychopathy, the reliability and validity of the assessment of psychopathy is an important consideration. Vitale and Newman (2001) investigated the reliability and validity of the PCL-R with female samples, and concluded that the reliability of the tool was good, but the validity more modest. The authors warned against premature application of the tool, and asserted that despite indications of possible gender differences, further evidence was required to inform any gender-specific revisions to the tool. Dolan and Völlm (2009) also reviewed the literature evaluating the reliability and validity of the PCL-R when applied to female samples. The authors concluded favourably on the validity and reliability of the tool for the identification of psychopathy in women, however they also note the existence of "gender differences in the factor structure and item loadings on this measure" (p. 2). For example, the authors noted that certain items (e.g. 'promiscuity') appear to be particularly pertinent to the construct with females, whereas others appear to be less pertinent (e.g. 'criminal versatility', 'juvenile delinquency', 'revocation of conditional release' and 'failure to accept responsibility').

An important aspect that warrants a gender-based comparison, is in the base rate or prevalence of psychopathy within male and female samples. Research conducted with male samples adopting the PCL-R, have found prevalence rates generally ranging from 15% to 30% (Hare, 1991, 2003; Nicholls et al., 2005; Vitale, Smith, Brinkley, & Newman, 2002) when applying a cut-off of 30, but with variations between the samples employed. Research conducted with female samples has largely reported lower prevalence rates (Dolan & Völlm, 2009), but this has not yet been systematically reviewed.

The existing research regarding psychopathy in women has been conducted with a variety of sample settings, including many studies with community samples (Forth, Brown, Hart, & Hare, 1996; Rutherford, Cacciola, Alterman, McKay, & Cook, 1999; Salekin, Trobst, & Krioukova, 2001; Warren, 2009). However, where a diagnosis of psychopathy is likely to have the greatest impact on the individual (in terms of their general assessment, the way they are managed, and the treatment they receive), is arguably within secure settings. To date, there has been no systematic synthesis of the evidence base for this particular population; thus, the current review restricted the search criteria to include only secure forensic settings (whether criminal justice or health-care based) avoiding the heterogeneity that would arise if all types of settings were included within a single review.

1.2. Aims

The aim of this review was to synthesise the existing evidence relating to the prevalence and structural composition of psychopathy in women in secure settings. The reliability and validity of assessment tools was not reviewed, as this has been thoroughly investigated elsewhere (Dolan & Völlm, 2009; Vitale & Newman, 2001); thus the current review focuses on factor structure and prevalence rates. This review also differs from previous ones (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002; Dolan & Völlm, 2009) through its sole focus on psychopathy, excluding data on the related but distinct construct of Anti-Social Personality Disorder. Finally, this review is the first in this area to adhere to systematic review methodology.

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