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Personality traits and violent behavior: A comparison between psychopathic and non-psychopathic male murderers

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between psychopathy and traits of temperament and character in a specific population of criminals, such as murderers, has not been sufficiently investigated. This study assesses the relationship between psychopathy and temperament and character traits in murderers. The sample consisted of 118 men divided into three groups: psychopathic murderers ($N=40$), non-psychopathic murderers ($N=40$) and 38 non-psychopathic non-criminals (controls). All individuals were evaluated by Psychopathy Checklist Revised (PCL-R) and The Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI). Psychopathic murderers presented higher scores than the other two groups in PCL-R; both criminal groups presented higher scores than non-psychopathic non-criminals. Psychopathic murderers showed lower scores than non-psychopathic murderers on Harm Avoidance, Reward Dependence, Persistence, Self-Directness and Cooperativeness. There was no difference between murderers groups regarding Novelty Seeking and Self-transcendence. In all TCI personality traits psychopathic and non-psychopathic murderers showed scores lower than controls, except Harm Avoidance for non-psychopathic murderers. In conclusion, most personality traits assessed by TCI were associated with psychopathy, while Novelty Seeking and Self-transcendence were associated with homicidal behavior independently of the psychopathy.

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1. Introduction

Violent behavior, including homicide, is increasing in diverse societies, (Large et al., 2008; Vinkers et al., 2011). Several aspects have been considered in the study of homicidal behavior, for instance individual risk factors for violence, mental disorders, social and economics determinants, and educational achievement (Fazel et al., 2009; Elgar and Aitken, 2011; Roma et al., 2012; Wolf et al., 2014). As for mental disorders, studies have suggested that psychopathy, substance use and personality are associated with homicide (Woodward et al., 2000; Roberts et al., 2007; Fazel et al., 2009).

Studies have shown a strong association between various types of personalities (schizoid, antisocial, borderline, psychopathic) and violent crime (Loza and Hanna, 2006; de Barros and de Padua Serafim, 2008; Walsh et al., 2009; Logan and Johnstone, 2010; Esbec and Echeburúa, 2010; Spaans et al., 2011; Camp et al., 2013; Mela

et al., 2014). For those with psychopathy, this association is justified due to characteristics such as lack of empathy, pathological egocentricity, shallow emotions, low threshold for display of aggression, and lack of remorse (Hare and Neumann, 2008). In addition, low responses of anxiety and guilt in relation to their behaviors (Graig et al., 2006; Blackburn, 2007; Serafim et al., 2009; Laajasalo et al., 2013) increases the risk of further violence.

The association between personality traits and psychopathy disorder has been measured using different instruments. For the diagnosis of psychopathy, Hare's Psychopathy Checklist Revised (PCL-R) is considered the gold standard. This scale has dimensional characteristics consisting of two intercorrelated factors. The first factor assesses affective insensitivity while the second emphasizes antisocial behavior (Hare, 2003; Lindberg et al., 2009; Laajasalo et al., 2013; Jüriloo et al., 2014).

To assess personality, on the other hand, several instruments have been proposed, such as, The Big Five Inventory (BFI) and Personality Inventory Revised – NEO PI-R (Miller et al., 2011), Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire – MPQ (Gaughan et al., 2009), Schedule for Non-adaptive and Adaptive Personality (SNAP) (Pryor and Miller, 2009) and Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory – MMPI (Finn et al., 2014), for instance.

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Another important instrument in the evaluation of personality traits is the Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI) developed by Cloninger et al. (1993). The TCI is a self-administered dimensional questionnaire constructed to assess personality considering temperament and character. Temperament represents stable, heritable, neurobiological dispositions to learn automatic behavioral reactions in response to specific environmental stimuli (danger, novelty, and reward) composed by Novelty Seeking, Harm Avoidance, Reward Dependence and Persistence. The character traits, Self-Directedness, Cooperativeness, and Self-Transcendence, change with maturation and are more closely associated with higher cognitive processes including interpretation and formal construction (Cloninger et al., 1993).

Richter and Brändström (2009) compared TCI scores of 200 psychiatric inpatients to 800 healthy volunteers. The results showed that both patients' groups, with and without PDs, differ from healthy volunteers on temperament and character dimensions. Patients with PD reported significantly higher Harm Avoidance and lower Novelty Seeking and Cooperativeness than either patients without PD and healthy volunteers, suggesting that these are important factors concerning the diagnosis of PD. The authors also suggested that TCI is a useful tool for the diagnosis of PD.

Basoglu et al. (2001), comparing patients with antisocial personality disorder with healthy controls, found higher scores on novelty seeking and lower Harm Avoidance in patients than in controls. Patients also presented lower scores than controls in reward dependence and persistence, and in the character dimensions of self-directedness and cooperativeness.

Although several studies investigated temperament and character traits using TCI in specific populations, for instance, such as those dealing with obesity, depression, cancer, eating disorders, impulsivity and criminality (Jengiç et al., 2008; Amianto et al., 2012; Aukst et al., 2013), none studied individuals had a history of violent behavior such as homicide. This is the first study using TCI in murders with and without psychopathy. The knowledge of personality characteristics associated with homicidal behavior has important forensic implications especially on the establishment of penal responsibility. It has also clinical potential relevance in the identification of the personality traits associated with the risk of violent behavior.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

One hundred and eighteen men over the age of 18 years participated in the study. Eighty subjects were convicted for murder under Article 121 of the Brazilian Penal Code and were serving prison sentences in the Maximum Security Prisons of the State of São Paulo. They had their sanity attested to by the Institute of Social Medicine and Criminology of São Paulo (IMESC). The participation of murderers occurred initially by authorization of the Judge of the Division of Criminal Executions and then with the voluntary consent of the inmates.

The murderers were divided into two groups according to PCL-R criteria for psychopathy: psychopathic murderers ($N=40$; mean age 32.8 years, 95% CI [31.6, 31.1]); and non-psychopathic murderers ($N=40$; mean age 34.3 years, 95% CI [34.1, 35.4]).

The control group consisted of subjects with no criminal history and without classification of psychopathy according to PCL-R criteria ($N=38$; mean age 32.2 years, 95% CI [32.5, 33.3]). They were recruited from different areas and were construction and factory workers, technical professionals from hospitals and colleges, store employees, administrative service workers and university students.

Exclusion criteria for all groups were: previous psychotic episode, epilepsy, mental retardation, dementia, previous psychiatric hospitalization, and use of psychiatric medication. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of São Paulo Medical School and written informed consent was obtained from all subjects. All murderers, psychopathic and non-psychopathic, were considered accountable, i.e., fully capable of understanding the nature of their illegal acts under the Brazilian Penal Code.

Demographic data of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive socio-demographic data of participants ($n=118$).

Data	Psychopathic murderers ($n=40$) n (%)	Non-psychopathic murderers ($n=40$) n (%)	Controls ^a ($n=38$) n (%)
Skin color			
Black	10 (25)	08 (20)	09 (24)
White	27 (68)	24 (60)	26 (68)
Brown	03 (08)	08 (20)	03 (08)
Marital status			
Married	04 (10)	15 (38)	22 (58)
Single	23 (58)	12 (30)	12 (32)
Widower	00 (00)	02 (05)	01 (03)
Cohabiting	10 (25)	05 (13)	02 (05)
Divorced	3 (08)	06 (15)	01 (03)
Level of education			
Incomplete elementary	11(28)	10 (25)	06 (16)
Elementary	14 (35)	18 (45)	10 (26)
Incomplete High School	06 (15)	03 (08)	06 (16)
Complete High School	07 (18)	08 (20)	10 (26)
University (incomplete)	00 (00)	00 (00)	02 (05)
University	02 (05)	01 (03)	04 (11)

^a Control group: non-psychopathic non-criminals.

2.2. Measures

The Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003) is a structured interview with 20 items and evaluates the degree of psychopathy on a 40-point scale, examining two interrelated factors: Affective Insensitivity and Antisocial Behavior. An individual is considered a psychopath if he or she obtains a score of ≥ 30 , according to the cutoff point used for research or forensic classification of psychopathy. For the classification of psychopathic non-murderers a score of < 26 was considered.

The Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI; Cloninger et al., 1993) is a 240 item self-reporting questionnaire, which assesses four temperament dimensions that are mostly inherited: Novelty Seeking (NS), Harm Avoidance (HA), Reward Dependence (RD) and Persistence (P) and three character dimensions which represent personality traits acquired through life experience: Self-Directedness (SD), Cooperativeness (CO) and Self-Transcendence (ST).

2.3. Data analysis

The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS for Windows version 14.0. Descriptive data were expressed in terms of mean values, and with standard deviation. ANOVA was used to compare the three groups regarding the scores on the TCI factors, followed by Tukey's multiple comparison tests to detect group differences. In a second step, a discriminant analysis was conducted, using the stepwise selection method to identify among the variables of TCI that best differentiate each group. Statistically significant was considered at $p < 0.05$.

Discriminant analysis using the stepwise selection method was used as a process for analysis in order to identify among all variables of the studied TCI those which would best differentiate the groups; the adopted procedure is justified in this context as categorical membership was generally unclear. Therefore, a model considering the TCI variables (NS, HA, RD, P SD, CO and ST) was adjusted to obtain the classification functions of each group, using the variables selected in the stepwise procedure. With these functions, the aim was to classify each individual of the sample in this way to assess the quality of the classification.

3. Results

3.1. Psychopathy classification

Table 2 describes the PCL-R scores for the three groups. Psychopathic murderers, non-psychopathic murderers and non-psychopathic non-criminals differed in all parameters. Psychopathic murderers presented higher scores than the other two groups ($p < 0.001$) on factor 1 (14.0; S.D. 1.2), factor 2 (14.4; S.D. 1.5), total score (31.5; S.D. 1.3), followed by the non-psychopathic murderers ($p < 0.001$; factor 1: 8.5; S.D. 1.5; factor 2: 9.9; S.D. 1.3; total score: 20.3; S.D. 2.3). Both criminal groups presented higher

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