



An examination of psychopathy's relationship with two indices of moral judgment



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ABSTRACT

Although psychopathic individuals are often considered immoral in their thinking, research support for this view has been inconsistent. We examined psychopathy's relation to two indices of moral reasoning and decision-making, namely (1) Kohlbergian moral dilemmas and (2) sacrificial moral dilemmas in an undergraduate sample ($N = 191$). We hypothesized that psychopathic traits would not be strongly associated with moral reasoning on Kohlbergian moral dilemmas, but that they would be associated with a greater willingness to engage in utilitarian moral judgment by virtue of psychopathic individuals' affective deficits and emotional detachment. We expected these relations to be most pronounced for the psychopathy subdimensions Fearless Dominance and Coldheartedness. Counter to prediction, we found only a modest negative association between psychopathic traits and Kohlbergian moral reasoning. Psychopathic traits did not relate consistently to utilitarian decision-making. These results suggest that, despite the common perception that psychopathic individuals are deficient in moral understanding, psychopathic traits may be largely unassociated with profound moral reasoning deficits.

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1. Introduction

Historically, psychopathic individuals have been characterized as “moral monsters” (Ellis, 1890), p. 17) and as lacking moral knowledge (Hare, 1991; Hare, 2003). This widespread belief coheres broadly with meta-analytic evidence tying psychopathic traits to antisocial behavior (Leistico, Salekin, DeCoster, & Rogers, 2008). One proposed explanation for psychopathic individuals' engagement in antisocial behavior is that they cannot distinguish right from wrong. Nevertheless, recent meta-analytic evidence (Marshall, Watts, & Lilienfeld, 2016) challenges this popular view (Furnham, Daoud, & Swami, 2009) and points to an unexpectedly meager relationship between psychopathy and aberrant moral judgment. Still, these counterintuitive findings leave open the possibility that psychopathic individuals display moral deficits that extant research has failed to detect. To address this issue, we examined psychopathic traits' relation to moral judgment while adopting several methodological enhancements to provide additional insight into this relationship.

1.1. Moral judgment

Broadly, psychologists have used two measures to examine psychopathy's relations with moral judgment: (a) Kohlbergian moral reasoning measures and (b) sacrificial moral dilemmas. Regarding the former, Kohlberg, 1963 proposed an influential theory of moral development encompassing three stages of moral reasoning: (1) pre-conventional, (2) conventional, and (3) post-conventional. According to Kohlberg, the reasons one draws upon to justify one's decision in a moral dilemma, and not the decision itself, determine one's moral reasoning stage. For example, the most famous of these items is the “Heinz and the drug” dilemma, in which participants must decide whether a man should steal a very expensive medicine to help his wife stave off cancer and rank the reasons why the husband should or should not steal the drug. Individuals in the pre-conventional moral reasoning stage emphasize self-preservation (e.g., avoiding going to jail), those in the conventional stage emphasize others' intentions (e.g., save a dying wife), and those in the post-conventional stage – the highest moral stage – emphasize universal, abstract moral principles (e.g., saving human lives).

Some researchers have hypothesized that psychopathic individuals possess less advanced moral reasoning capacities than do other individuals (e.g., (Campbell et al., 2009)) because they act with egocentric motivations and consequently do not progress through the full range of Kohlbergian moral stages. Support for this contention has been mixed.

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Campbell et al., 2009 found that psychopathic individuals prioritize self-interest and tend to not attend to post-conventional moral concerns, whereas Pennuto, 2007 found that psychopathy was unrelated to moral reasoning. Adding to the confusion, still another study (Link, Scherer, & Byrne, 1977) revealed that psychopathic traits were related to *more* advanced moral reasoning.

Beyond measures of Kohlbergian moral reasoning, researchers have also used sacrificial moral dilemmas to examine moral judgment (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001). For instance, in the canonical trolley dilemma, a train is headed to kill five people and the participant may choose to flip a switch to divert the train to kill only a single person. The decision to flip the switch is in line with *utilitarian* moral philosophy, which emphasizes pragmatic consequences (e.g., saving the most lives), whereas the decision to not flip the switch is in line with a *deontological* moral philosophy, one that entails prioritizing duties or obligations to individuals regardless of consequences.

Because utilitarian moral judgment has been linked to aberrant affective processing (Koenigs et al., 2007) and lack of anxiety (Perkins et al., 2013), researchers have posited that psychopathic individuals may be more likely to make utilitarian decisions owing to their lack of social emotions, such as guilt or empathy (Blair, 2007). Bartels & Pizarro, 2011 found that highly psychopathic individuals endorse utilitarian moral decisions more frequently (i.e., pushing an individual onto train tracks to save five people) than do their less psychopathic counterparts. Importantly, they postulated that these results do not necessarily suggest that psychopathic individuals are more advanced utilitarian decision-makers. Instead, psychopathic individuals may express utilitarian choices by virtue of other (e.g., egoistic) motivations. Regardless, other work has not found support for a significant relationship between psychopathy and moral decision-making, leading some to argue that psychopathic individuals know right from wrong but do not care (Cima, Tonnaer, & Hauser, 2010). These findings raise the possibility that psychopathic individuals possess an intact moral sense, but are insufficiently motivated to act in line with such knowledge.

These mixed findings call for an investigation of the strength of the relationship between psychopathy and moral deficits. In a meta-analysis of 23 studies examining the relationship between psychopathy and moral judgment, Marshall et al., 2016 found a small yet statistically significant relationship between psychopathy and Kohlbergian moral reasoning measures ($r_w = 0.10$) and sacrificial moral dilemmas ($r_w = 0.16$).¹ One plausible account of these surprisingly small relationships emerges from differences in how researchers conceptualize and measure psychopathy.

For instance, although psychopathy has historically been considered a unitary construct, growing data suggest that it is a configuration of largely distinct personality traits and behaviors (Lilienfeld, Watts, Francis Smith, Berg, & Latzman, 2015) that are continuously distributed in the population (e.g., (Edens, Marcus, Lilienfeld, & Poythress, 2006)). As such, researchers have increasingly studied psychopathy in non-clinical and non-criminal samples, including undergraduates. Still, few studies have examined the relationship between psychopathic traits and moral judgment dimensionally.

In line with the configural conceptualization of psychopathy, factor analyses of two commonly used self-report psychopathy measures – the Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised (PPI-R; (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005)) and the Levenson Self-report Psychopathy Scale (LSRP; (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995)) – have found that two, if not three (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009), subdimensions constitute psychopathy. Importantly, psychopathy subdimensions of the PPI-R and the LSRP often differentially relate to important constructs, such as internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Patrick, Hicks, Krueger,

& Lang, 2005). For example, PPI-R Fearless Dominance (PPI-R FD), a higher-order dimension partially underpinning psychopathy that measures stress immunity and physical and social boldness, tends to correlate negatively with internalizing (e.g., fear, distress) and externalizing (e.g., aggression) behaviors. In contrast, PPI-R Self-centered Impulsivity (PPI-R SCI) and LSRP Factor 2, both of which capture the impulsive and reckless psychopathy features associated with antisocial behavior, are positively associated with these forms of psychopathy (Miller & Lynam, 2012).

This research leaves open the possibility that psychopathic traits (i.e., affective deficits) may differentially relate to moral judgment tasks. Meta-analytic evidence (Marshall et al., 2016) offered little evidence of this possibility on either Kohlbergian moral reasoning or sacrificial moral dilemmas. Nonetheless, the power to detect differences was low because few studies examined the relationship between psychopathy subdimensions and moral judgment. In addition, when researchers have adopted dimensional approaches toward psychopathy, most have only examined the relationship between a singular subdimension of psychopathy—namely, exclusively LSRP Factor 1—and moral judgment, overlooking the possibility that other psychopathy features may relate to moral judgment.

1.2. Current study

With these considerations in mind, the primary objective of the current study was to examine whether and how subdimensions of psychopathy relate differentially to alternative measures of moral judgment, which should provide a more fine-grained picture of psychopathy's relation to moral judgment. To do so, we adopted four methodological enhancements compared with previous studies.

First, given the multidimensional nature of psychopathy (Edens et al., 2006), we examined the relations between psychopathy subdimensions and two measures of moral judgment: Kohlbergian measures of moral reasoning and sacrificial moral dilemmas. Given the decidedly mixed literature, we based our hypotheses largely on recent meta-analytic evidence (Marshall et al., 2016). In line with this meta-analysis, we predicted that psychopathic traits would not be strongly associated with scores on Kohlbergian measures of moral reasoning. We also predicted that, consistent with research connecting utilitarian decision-making and affective deficits (Koenigs et al., 2007), psychopathy subdimensions characterized by a pronounced absence of anxiety and empathy (i.e., PPI-R FD and PPI-R Coldheartedness) would predict utilitarian decision-making, albeit only modestly. More provisionally, we predicted that the disinhibitory psychopathy features (i.e., PPI-R SCI, LSRP F1, and LSRP F2) would correlate negatively with deontological decision-making, given that they are related to emotional distress (e.g., (Benning, Patrick, Blonigen, Hicks, & Iacono, 2005)).

Second, we adopted measures of two competing conceptualizations of psychopathy, operationalized by the PPI-R and LSRP. The overwhelming majority of research on this topic has relied exclusively on the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (Hare, 1991; Hare, 2003) and its variants. This approach raises two concerns. First, exclusive reliance on a single psychopathy indicator introduces mono-operation bias and thus raises questions regarding the generalizability of any given finding to other psychopathy measures. Second, because the PCL-R contains several items that directly assess immoral (i.e., antisocial) behaviors (e.g., juvenile delinquency, criminal versatility), studies using this measure may inflate the extent to which psychopathy is characterized by moral deficits. The inclusion of an alternative measure of psychopathy, one that places less focus on overt antisocial behaviors (e.g., the PPI-R), may help to address this possibility.

Third, because psychopathy measures diverge in their coverage of adaptive functioning, we included both the PPI-R and the LSRP, the former of which focuses more heavily on potentially adaptive psychopathy features, to ensure broad coverage of differing conceptions of psychopathy. Fourth, we examined the relationship between psychopathic

¹ The data presented here was included in this meta-analysis (Marshall et al., 2016), although sensitivity analyses omitting these data did not produce any difference in the meta-analytic effects (analyses available from first author upon request).

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