



# Moral cognition, emotion, and behavior in male youth with varying levels of psychopathic traits



Maaïke Cima<sup>a,b,c,\*</sup>, Andries Korebrits<sup>d</sup>, Geert Jan Stams<sup>e</sup>, Peter Bleumer<sup>f,g</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department Developmental Psychopathology, Radboud University, Behavioural Science Institute, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Conrisq Group, Juvenile Youth Institutions (YouthCarePLUS) Bjbabant, Brabant, OGH Zetten, and Pactum, Arnhem, The Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> St. Joseph Foundation, Juvenile Delinquency Facility, Het Keerpunt, Cadier en Keer, The Netherlands

<sup>d</sup> Helios Park Clinics Leipzig, Germany

<sup>e</sup> Department of Pedagogy, Amsterdam University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>f</sup> Foundation Working with Goldstein, Eindhoven, The Netherlands

<sup>g</sup> Institution for Mental Health, GGZ Breburg Tilburg, Tilburg, The Netherlands

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 October 2016

Received in revised form 23 May 2017

Accepted 30 June 2017

Available online 22 July 2017

## 1. Introduction

Morality is an important concept of human social behavior (Cimbora & McIntosh, 2005). A better understanding of the moral development and externalizing behavior in juveniles might help to identify children at risk for a deviant social development early in life. Morality can be seen as a multidimensional construct involving a cognitive (e.g., judgment of right and wrong), emotional (e.g., affective empathy, shame and guilt) and behavioral (e.g., delinquency or prosocial behavior) dimension. According to the theory of Gibbs (2003), which is based on the theory of Kohlberg (1984) and Hoffman (2001), moral development is mainly a cognitive process, which can be divided in four stages. The first two stages are described as immature, in which moral judgment is superficial and egocentric, and mainly driven by reward and punishment. Typically reasoning patterns during these stages are, for instance, 'If you cannot get caught, you will not get punished, so why not do it' (stage 1) and 'If you do something for me, I'll do something for you' (stage 2). The subsequent third and fourth stages are generally seen as more mature: superficial considerations are replaced by considerations shaped by the basics of interpersonal relationships (stage 3: 'It could harm another person') or general standards and values of culture and society (stage 4: 'If everybody would think like that, the world would become a very bad place to live'). Consequently, higher stages of moral reasoning are a defense against the development

of antisocial aggressive actions because the well-being of relationships and society are emphasized (Gibbs, 2003; Kohlberg, 1984; Van Vught et al., 2011). The cross-cultural validity of Gibbs' theory has been confirmed in a review based on studies using a measurement instrument, the Sociomoral Reflection Measure (SRM), designed to assess these four stages of moral judgment (Gibbs, Basinger, Grime, & Snarey, 2007).

Several studies demonstrated that delinquents generally show reasoning patterns of a lower moral developmental stage than age-matched groups of non-delinquents (Blasi, 1980; Nelson, Smith, & Dodd, 1990; Smetana, 1990). More recently, the meta-analysis of Stams and colleagues (Stams et al., 2006) revealed that lower stage moral reasoning was strongly associated with delinquency, with an overall effect size of  $d = 0.76$ , even after controlling for several relevant demographic and personal characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, culture, gender, age, and intelligence). The authors reported psychopathy to be a unique moderator (Stams et al., 2006). Studies including delinquents with psychopathic traits yielded a larger effect size ( $d = 1.16$ ) than studies not including delinquents with psychopathic traits ( $d = 0.72$ ). These results indicate that there was a stronger relationship between psychopathic traits and moral reasoning indicating that moral reasoning of juvenile delinquents with psychopathic traits was substantially lower as compared to juvenile delinquents without psychopathic traits and a non-delinquent comparison group. However, this conclusion was based on older studies (Campagna & Harter, 1975; Fodor, 1973). More recent studies examining moral reasoning and psychopathic traits in juvenile delinquents have not been performed.

Psychopathy constitutes a pervasive pattern of disregard for the rights of others. It is defined as a lack of empathy, guilt and remorse, being superficial, impulsive, manipulative and egocentric (Cleckley, 1976). Psychopaths often have a parasitic lifestyle and their behavior is antisocial, callous and morally inappropriate (e.g., murder, fraud, arson and rape; Cuthbert, Lang, & Patrick, 1994; Hare, 2006). Several researchers share the view that the well-known emotional deficits of the psychopath are causally related to their moral knowledge, leading to morally inappropriate behavior (Blair & Cipolotti, 2000; Kiehl, 2006). According to this view, emotional deficits correspond with deficits in moral knowledge, which combined with psychopaths' limitation in

\* Corresponding author at: Department Developmental Psychopathology, Radboud University, Brain Science Institute, P.O.Box 9102, 6500 HC, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.  
E-mail address: m.cima@bsi.ru.nl (M. Cima).

inhibitory control may lead to morally inappropriate behavior (Blair, 1995; Nichols, 2002; Prinz, 2008).

Cima, Tonnaer, and Hauser (2010) examined an alternative hypothesis for morally inappropriate behavior in adult psychopaths. Instead of presuming that emotions precede and guide moral judgment, they considered that emotional experiences may not be necessary for making adequate moral judgments. Based on findings that adult psychopaths compared to non-clinical individuals as well as non-psychopathic offenders make the same kind of moral decisions when they were asked to judge whether an action embedded in a moral dilemma was permissible or not, Cima et al. (2010) concluded that psychopaths show normal patterns of moral judgments, but simply seem not to care about their judgments, which may explain their immoral behavior (Cima et al., 2010). It is likely that normal emotional processing is most important for generating insight in the distinction between morally permissible and morally forbidden judgments and in guiding appropriate actions (Huebner, Dwyer, & Hauser, 2009). Indeed, Raine and Yang (2006) argued that moral emotions are the driving force behind moral actions.

Research in adults has indicated that some individuals seem to lack the human tendency to feel what others feel, i.e. sympathy, and to care about others, also called affective morality. The emotions that mostly relate to this type of morality include feelings of guilt, shame and affective empathy (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Van Langen, Wissink, Van Vugt, Van der Stouwe, & Stams, 2014), feeling other people's pain, but not cognitive empathy, namely understanding other people's pain (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; Preston & De Waal, 2002). Although there is a highly positive relationship between cognitive and affective empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006), psychopathic individuals seem to understand what other people feel (Blair et al., 1996; Dolan & Fullam, 2004), but lack the ability to feel the emotion themselves (Cima et al., 2010; Hare, 2006; Montagne et al., 2005). In a recent study with young children using the Affective Morality Index (AMI; Feilhauer, Cima, Benjamins, & Muris, 2013) to distinguish between cognitive and affective morality, results showed that children high on Callous Unemotional traits (CU traits; Frick, Cornell, Barry, Bodin, & Dane, 2003) and externalizing behavior knew how other persons should feel after committing an antisocial act (i.e., guilty), but failed to feel this guilt themselves. Moreover, they reported that they felt happiness and excitement after committing an antisocial act (Feilhauer et al., 2013). This study supports the notion that children high on CU-traits have the knowledge of right and wrong (cognitive morality), but fail to experience the moral emotions typically associated with immoral behavior (feeling guilt). This finding is in line with Kochanska (2008) who assume that the development of guilt is an important indicator of moral development and thus a prerequisite of appropriate moral behavior. Indeed these researchers found that lack of guilt emerged as a significant precursor of later externalizing problem behavior. Accordingly, children with externalizing problem behaviors are often insensitive to punishment. The socialization process in which these children learn from the negative consequences of their behavior does not adequately mature, which might explain poor moral development in delinquent youth (Cima, 2016).

Only a few studies examined both moral cognition and moral emotion in delinquent youth. For instance, Larden, Melin, Holst, and Langstrom (2005) reported that delinquent adolescents aged 13 to 18 years exhibited less mature moral judgments and more cognitive distortions as compared to a non-clinical control sample. Interestingly, however, no association between delinquency and self-reported empathy was found. Moral judgment and empathy were positively correlated and both constructs were negatively correlated with cognitive distortions, suggesting that cognitive distortions in particular are an important target for interventions (Helmond, Overbeek, Brugman, & Gibbs, 2014), although a single focus on cognitive distortions may not be sufficient to reduce delinquent behavior given the multifaceted etiology of delinquent behavior (Van Stam et al., 2014).

### 1.1. Current study

Most studies regarding morality in youth focus on moral reasoning and judgments. No study to date examined the relationship between moral cognitions (dividable into moral reasoning and moral judgments), moral emotions, and moral behavior in youths varying in their levels of psychopathic traits. With this in mind, the present study was conducted. Since adult psychopaths demonstrate the same kind of nuanced decision-making strategies as do both healthy controls as well as non-psychopathic offenders (Cima et al., 2010), juvenile delinquents varying in their levels of psychopathic traits represent a unique opportunity to explore the role of moral cognitions and moral emotions in guiding decisions of right and wrong. If juveniles also have intact moral knowledge it provides stronger evidence for an early developing, possibly innate system of unconscious, but operative system of moral knowledge, that is immune to the kind of neurobiological/cognitive deficits that psychopaths show. Therefore, the first purpose was to examine whether there are differences between delinquent youth and non-delinquent controls in moral cognitions, emotions, and behavior. In line with previous work (Larden et al., 2005; Stams et al., 2006; Van Langen et al., 2014), it was hypothesized that the delinquent sample would show a lower level of moral reasoning, fewer moral emotions, and more morally inappropriate (rule breaking) behavior. The second aim of the present study was to explore the relationships among various moral concepts (i.e., cognition, emotion, and behavior) in both groups. It was expected that moral cognition would be positively related to moral emotions and moral behavior. Thus a more mature moral judgment/reasoning level should be associated with higher levels of moral emotions and morally appropriate behavior. Furthermore, given the results of previous investigations (Cima et al., 2010; Raine & Yang, 2006), it was expected that especially moral emotions would be positively related to moral behavior. A third aim of the present study was to examine the relation between psychopathic traits and various concepts of morality. In line with earlier research (Cima et al., 2010; Stams et al., 2006), it was hypothesized that higher levels of psychopathic traits would be accompanied by a lower level of moral reasoning, fewer moral emotions, and more morally inappropriate behavior. A final aim was to examine whether moral emotions or moral cognitions predict moral behavior and whether an interaction of being a delinquent and having high psychopathic traits may significantly add to this prediction.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The total sample ( $N = 93$ ) consisted of 40 delinquent boys, who resided in the Judicial Youth Institution *Het Keerpunt* in Cadier en Keer, the Netherlands, and 53 non-clinical (i.e., comparison group) delinquent boys who were recruited at several high schools in the same geographical area. The educational level of the delinquent and comparison group was low and highly comparable, in particular lower vocational training. All participants had Dutch nationality. Mean age of the total sample was 16.81 years ( $SD = 0.97$ ) ranging between 15 and 18 years. The mean age of the delinquent group was 17.33 years (Range = 15–19;  $SD = 0.94$ ), while the non-clinical comparison group was slightly younger: 16.42 years of age (Range = 15–18;  $SD = 0.78$ ). This difference was significant [ $t(91) = 5.04$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ] and therefore all further analysis were controlled for age.

Exclusion criteria for participation in the current study were an intelligence quotient (IQ) lower than 70, the presence of a psychotic disorder, and current alcohol or drug abuse.

### 2.2. Procedure

The study was approved by the Psychological Ethical Test Committee of Tilburg University. For the delinquent group, the researcher

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6462976>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6462976>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)