



Psychopathic personality traits as a form of dispositional capability for suicide

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ABSTRACT

The capability to enact lethal self-harm has recently been highlighted as a critical risk factor for suicidal behavior. Klonsky and May's (2015) three step theory of suicide (3ST) expanded upon the construct of the capability for suicide by dividing it into categories: dispositional, acquired, and practical. The current study examined constructs of Patrick and colleagues' (2009) triarchic model of psychopathy as indicators of dispositional capability in gun owners, a sample at heightened risk for death by suicide (Anestis and Houtsma, 2017). We anticipated that specific psychopathic traits would exhibit robust associations with other components of the capability for suicide. In a sample of 300 gun-owning adults, Boldness was uniquely related to all indicators of practical capability in both male and female gun owners, and a Boldness*Meanness interaction predicted the highest levels of some capability components. These results are consistent with theoretical conceptualizations of the triarchic model. Our findings indicate that, among US gun owners, dispositional factors may impact comfort with and aptitude with guns, which may enhance our understanding of which gun owners are at the greatest risk of gun suicide should they develop suicidal thoughts.

1. Introduction

Gun ownership and male sex are well-established risk factors for suicide (M. Anestis and Houtsma, 2017; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016; Miller et al., 2013). Guns exhibit the highest rate of lethality (80–95%; Carrington, 1999; Spicer and Miller, 2000) and are used more frequently by males (CDC, 2017). Gun-owning and male suicide decedents die of self-inflicted gunshot wounds at higher rates than other suicide decedents (Anestis et al., 2017a, 2017b), and gun suicide decedents are more likely to die in their first suicide attempt (Anestis, 2016). Little attention has been paid to the potential importance of characterological variables in understanding specific suicide risk and protective factors in gun owners and variations across sex, although over one-third of US households have a gun-owning adult (37–41%; Desilver, 2013; Saad, 2011). The present research thus aims to extend knowledge on suicide risk by examining personality variables as they relate to capability for suicide in male and female gun owners.

1.1. Capability for suicide

Recent suicide research has emphasized an ideation-to-action framework (Klonsky and May, 2014), postulating that the transition from thinking about suicide to engaging in suicidal behavior requires the

capability to do so. Originally conceptualized by the interpersonal theory of suicide (ITS; Joiner, 2005), capability encompasses both an elevated tolerance for physical pain and heightened fearlessness about death and bodily harm. Capability within the ITS is acquired via repeated exposure to painful and/or provocative experiences (PPEs) capable of changing an individual's response to pain and the threat of death; however, subsequent research has demonstrated a significant genetic component to capability (Smith et al., 2012), indicating that some individuals may be more inherently capable of suicide than others. Recently, Klonsky and May (2015) proposed the Three Step Theory of Suicide (3ST), dividing capability into categories: dispositional, acquired, and practical. The acquired component mirrors the ITS description of capability. The dispositional component involves innate characteristics (e.g., disinhibition) that enable suicide attempts. The practical component refers to access to and comfort with lethal means, a point particularly relevant to guns. Accordingly, recent research examining practical capability within a community sample of adults found that more experience firing a gun was associated with factors thought to facilitate the transition from suicidal ideation to suicidal behavior (pain tolerance, pain persistence, fearlessness about death, lifetime suicide attempts) but not with suicidal thoughts or with pain detection (Anestis and Capron, 2017).

Notably, research on dispositional capability is limited. Bryan et al.

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(2016) reported that fearlessness about death prospectively predicted exposure to combat, whereas combat exposure did not predict subsequent increases in fearlessness about death. In two independent undergraduate samples, Bender et al. (2012) reported a significant association between sensation seeking and capability. Such results indicate that aspects of capability previously thought to develop in response to PPEs may instead prompt exposure to such experiences. Certain individuals may be more apt to approach threatening and potentially life-threatening stimuli, an obstacle thought to prevent the large majority of individuals thinking about suicide from engaging in suicidal behavior. Consistent with this, Anestis and Capron (2016) reported that suicidal ideation is more strongly associated with suicide attempts among individuals willing to persist through a physically painful and emotionally distressing task. Although informative, this study did not elucidate which individuals are more likely to approach potentially lethal stimuli and persist through pain and fear. Personality factors may represent dispositional factors that explain such behavior and, in this sense, may inform the evolving definition of the capability for suicide.

1.2. Psychopathic personality traits as potential indicators of dispositional capability

Psychopathic personality refers to a set of traits and behaviors dimensionally distributed in the general population (e.g., Edens et al., 2006). Differing conceptual models of psychopathy (e.g., Hare and Neumann, 2005; Patrick et al., 2009) feature indicators for interpersonal-affective deficits (e.g., low fear, high social dominance) and impulsive-antisocial behaviors (e.g., aggression, disinhibition). These divergent sets of indicators delineate two potential pathways through which these dispositional factors relate to capability. In one pathway, psychopathic traits, driven by the interpersonal-affective trait deficits such as low fear, may allow an individual to approach potentially lethal stimuli and persist through pain and fear. In the second pathway, psychopathic personality traits confer a general liability to disinhibited and risky behaviors that result in acquisition of capability. Extant literature has noted that these two clusters of psychopathic traits have divergent relationships with suicidality (e.g., ideation, history of attempts), such that interpersonal-affective traits exhibit negative or negligible relations and impulsive-antisocial traits exhibit positive relations (e.g., Douglas et al., 2008; Javdani et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2013; Verona et al., 2001; Verona et al., 2005; Verona et al., 2012).

A small literature, focused on the Acquired Capability for Suicide Scale (ACSS; Bender et al., 2011), reveals preliminary associations between capability and psychopathic personality traits across diverse populations. Utilizing the Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scales (LSRP; Levenson et al., 1995), Anestis et al. (2016a) found that interpersonal-affective traits (LSRP Factor 1) were positively related to ACSS, while impulsive-antisocial traits (LSRP Factor 2) were negatively related among undergraduates. In a forensic sample, the impulsive-antisocial, but not interpersonal-affective, traits were related to proxy indicators of capability (physical aggression and self-harm; Anestis et al., 2016a). Research utilizing a military sample found unique relationships between ACSS and both interpersonal-affective (LSRP-Egocentricity but not LSRP-Callous) and impulsive-antisocial (LSRP-Antisocial) traits (Harrop et al., 2017). ACSS has also been linked to Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2-Restructured Form (Ben-Porath and Tellegen, 2008/2011) indicators related to externalizing psychopathology, social dominance, fearlessness, aggression, and disinhibition in an outpatient clinical sample (Anestis et al., 2016b). While these studies provide preliminary evidence that both sets of psychopathic personality traits may serve as indicators of dispositional capability, most are hampered by a reliance on the LSRP, which arguably insufficiently measures the fearlessness/boldness theorized as

critical to dispositional capability (Drislane et al., 2014).

Patrick et al. (2009) triarchic conceptualization of psychopathy holds promise as a more relevant conceptualization among gun owners and in the exploration of dispositional capability. The triarchic model represents three distinct but intersecting phenotypic constructs: boldness, meanness, and disinhibition. The triarchic constructs are considered to be dispositional liabilities with distinct biological correlates (Patrick and Drislane, 2015). Boldness, encompassing social confidence, emotional resilience, venturesomeness, and similar constructs (e.g., fearless dominance), is related to diminished fear reactivity as indexed by reduced physiological fear responses (i.e., startle reflexes, skin conductance; Benning et al., 2005) and diminished amygdala reactivity (Hyde et al., 2014). Accordingly, boldness negatively relates to internalizing psychopathology (e.g., Brislin et al., 2016; Patrick and Drislane, 2015). Meanness is characterized by emotional callousness, low empathy, manipulateness, and antagonism (see Patrick and Drislane, 2015). In terms of biological correlates, meanness relates to reduced visual startle reactions to violence (Kyranides et al., 2017) and connects as a referent construct to reduced amygdala response to fear-inducing stimuli (Patrick and Drislane, 2015). Further, Brislin et al. (2016) found that meanness relates to higher pain tolerance. The triarchic model asserts that boldness and meanness are related constructs via a shared genetic predisposition to low dispositional fear (Patrick et al., 2009).

In contrast, disinhibition, a combination of impulsivity, disconstraint, hostility, and poor emotion regulation, relates to general poor inhibitory control (Patrick et al., 2009; Weidacker et al., 2017; Venables et al., 2015). Notably, this construct evidences the strongest convergence with factors tapping impulsivity in alternative psychopathy conceptualizations (Drislane et al., 2014; Venables et al., 2014) and, amongst the triarchic constructs, is uniquely connected to neurological correlates of behavioral inhibition deficits, such as diminished executive control (Patrick and Drislane, 2015). Disinhibition, along with similar impulsive-antisocial psychopathy constructs (i.e., LSRP-Antisocial), is also uniquely, positively associated with indicators of internalizing psychopathology, as well as suicidal desire and behavior (Anestis et al., 2016a; Patrick and Drislane, 2015; Venables et al., 2015).

Recent research has linked the triarchic constructs to both suicidality and capability (conceptualized via ACSS). Disinhibition and (low) boldness uniquely and interactively predicted suicidal behavior when measured via self-report and composite psychoneurometric indices in samples of young adult males, adult twins, and adult psychiatric outpatients (Venables et al., 2015, 2018). In an undergraduate sample, Harrop et al. (2017) noted an inverse relationship between boldness and suicidal desire (perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness), whereas meanness and disinhibition positively related to suicidal desire. Regarding capability, Harrop and colleagues reported positive relations between ACSS and boldness, but non-significant relations with the other triarchic domains. Buchman-Schmitt et al. (2017) additionally found that both disinhibition and (low) boldness were uniquely associated with suicidal desire among undergraduates; however, neither construct was related to capability (operationalized as a composite of ACSS-FAD and pain tolerance). Further, these researchers observed specific interactive effects whereby boldness served as a protective factor against the presence of suicidal desire. Taken together, boldness appears to confer risk toward the development of capability but protection against desire, whereas disinhibition confers risk for both. Meanness has received limited attention in this literature (of the four studies reviewed above, only Harrop et al., 2017, examined meanness). Moreover, the latter two studies are limited by reliance on undergraduates and on an ACSS operationalization of capability.

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