



Difficulties in emotion regulation and psychopathic traits in violent offenders

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The present study aimed to advance our understanding of the relevance of emotion dysregulation (ED) for psychopathy.

Methods: Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were employed to examine person- and variable-centered associations between ED domains and psychopathic traits in a moderately-large ($N = 268$) sample of violent male offenders.

Results: LPA results indicated a 3-class solution with offenders most accurately classified based on ED levels (low, medium, high) across domains. The three ED subgroups revealed linear positive associations with psychopathy total, affective, and lifestyle facet scores, such that elevated levels of these traits were found in subgroups with greater ED. A similar linear trend emerged for the antisocial – but not interpersonal – facet, in-line with recent studies showing positive associations between executive functioning and interpersonal features of psychopathy. In SEM analyses, a latent ED factor positively predicted a super-ordinate psychopathy factor, controlling for psychopathological distress.

Conclusions: Taken together, current findings support the notion that ED involves broad difficulties across emotion regulation domains, which vary by degree rather than in kind, and that these difficulties have linear positive relations with psychopathic traits among violent offenders.

1. Introduction

Psychopathic personality is characterized by early-onset and persistent behavioral deviance in the company of a callous and exploitative interpersonal style (Cleckley, 1941/1988; Hare & Neumann, 2008; Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009). For the purpose of this study, we define the multifarious construct of psychopathy in terms of clusters of affective (e.g., callousness), interpersonal (e.g., manipulation), lifestyle (e.g., impulsivity), and antisocial (e.g., poor behavioral control) features (Hare & Neumann, 2008; Neumann, Hare, & Pardini, 2015). These four domains combine to form the pathological syndrome of psychopathy as operationalized in the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003) and its derivatives (i.e., PCL: Screening Version, PCL: Youth Version, Self-Report Psychopathy scale; Forth, Kosson, & Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003; Hart, Cox, & Hare, 1995; Neumann, Hare, & Newman, 2007; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2016).

Many theoretical accounts of psychopathy consider emotional dysfunctions as a central feature of the disorder (Blair, 2005; Cleckley, 1941/1988; Hare & Neumann, 2008; Kosson, Vitacco, Swogger, &

Steuerwald, 2016; Lykken, 1995; Patrick et al., 2009). Yet, the extent to which these dysfunctions include problems in emotion regulation is unclear. A deeper understanding of this issue is necessary, as emotion dysregulation may be one of the mechanisms linking psychopathy and aggressive behavior (Davidson, Putnam, & Larson, 2000; Garofalo, Holden, Zeigler-Hill, & Velotti, 2016; Hare, 2003; Long, Felton, Lilienfeld, & Lejuez, 2014; Patrick & Zempolich, 1998). More broadly, understanding the relevance of emotion regulation for psychopathy may be useful to refine etiological models and treatment approaches, given emotion regulation is shaped throughout the development (Frick & Morris, 2004; Patrick et al., 2009), and represents a dynamic factor that can be targeted in treatment (Garofalo, Velotti, & Zavattini, 2017; Robertson, Daffern, & Bucks, 2015). In the present study, an emotion regulation framework was employed to examine relations between difficulties in emotion regulation domains and psychopathic traits in violent male offenders.

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2. Emotion dysregulation: multiple components, selected impairments?

An influential and comprehensive operationalization of the construct defines emotion dysregulation as the impairment in one or more of the following domains: awareness, understanding, and acceptance of emotional responses; ability to engage in goal-directed behavior when upset; ability to refrain from impulsive behavior when upset; and ability to engage in effective emotion regulation strategies (Gratz & Roemer, 2004).¹ These impairments have been related to psychopathology transdiagnostically, and to personality pathology in particular (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Carpenter & Trull, 2013; Dimaggio et al., 2017; Gratz, Rosenthal, Tull, Lejuez, & Gunderson, 2009; Kring & Sloan, 2009). The rationale behind a multi-domain conceptualization of emotion regulation was to pinpoint the dissociable nature of these components to identify how specific domains might be related to distinct forms of psychopathology (Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

However, the preponderance of empirical evidence accumulated so far appears to show that impairments in these domains – at least as assessed via self-report – reflect a general underlying deficit in emotion regulation. Specifically, the emotion regulation dimensions have demonstrated weak discriminant validity, which may indicate that impairments across domains go hand in hand, such that difficulties in emotion regulation vary in degree rather than in kind (for a recent review, see John & Eng, 2014). Yet, no studies to date have examined this issue from a person-centered perspective; that is, if it is possible to identify subtypes of individuals based on unique emotion dysregulation profiles. Among offenders, identifying different subtypes based on emotion dysregulation domain profiles versus levels could help address whether there are unique versus widespread associations between emotion dysregulation domains and psychopathic traits. In either case, research on this issue could help elucidate the relevance of emotion regulation for psychopathy.

2.1. Competing views on the links of emotion dysregulation and psychopathic traits

An early review of historical descriptions of the psychopathic personality found general agreement among scholars in considering emotional instability and low frustration tolerance (both intimately linked to emotion dysregulation; Carpenter & Trull, 2013) among the defining features of psychopathy (Albert, Brigante, & Chase, 1959). An explicit reference to a lack of emotional stability remains in the Comprehensive Assessment of Psychopathic Personality (CAPP) model (Cooke, Hart, Logan, & Michie, 2012), but other contemporary conceptualizations diverge in the emphasis placed on emotion dysregulation in relation to psychopathic traits. Part of the reason might be that a long-held view considered the prototypical psychopath as fundamentally devoid of emotions, hence not requiring emotion regulation (Baskin-Sommers, 2017). Yet, lack of empirical support for a complete absence of emotional experience in psychopathy (Brook, Brieman, & Kosson, 2013; Derefinko, 2015; Hoppenbrouwers, Bulten, & Brazil, 2016; Kosson et al., 2016) has led investigators to argue that individuals with

psychopathic traits do feel emotions, but have difficulty regulating them (Baskin-Sommers, Stuppy-Sullivan, & Buckholtz, 2016; Harenski & Kiehl, 2010).

A nuanced perspective, based on the response modulation theory of psychopathy, attempted to link specific emotion regulation domains with certain psychopathic features. In particular, the interpersonal-affective traits of psychopathy were hypothetically related to poor attention to emotions (i.e., lack of emotional awareness and clarity), whereas lifestyle-antisocial traits were hypothesized to be related to problems in modulating emotions and behavior when distressed (Malterer, Glass, & Newman, 2008; Patterson & Newman, 1993). As mentioned above, however, whether specific components of trait emotion dysregulation are empirically dissociable remains unclear. More recent developments of the theoretical perspective proposed by Newman and collaborators (e.g., the Impaired Integration model; Hamilton, Racer, & Newman, 2015) have posited that abnormalities in integrative functioning of neural systems – and, in particular, underdeveloped connectivity within emotion-related neural circuitry – would underlie deficits in emotional awareness that characterize psychopathy. In this context, it has been proposed that what is problematic in psychopathy is the lack of initiation of emotional self-regulation, rather than its effectiveness (Vitale & Newman, 2009).

An alternative perspective, developed in the context of the dual-pathway model of psychopathy (Fowles & Dindo, 2009), proposes that emotion dysregulation may have opposite relations to distinct psychopathic traits. Some scholars have argued that indices of emotion dysregulation are related to behavioral (i.e., antisocial-lifestyle, corresponding to the earlier PCL-R Factor 2) traits of psychopathy because they are associated with externalizing symptoms and general psychological distress. In contrast, the dual-pathway model assumes that emotion dysregulation is not relevant to the interpersonal-affective traits of psychopathy (i.e., PCL-R Factor 1), which were theorized to be associated with intact emotion regulation, largely based on inverse associations between Factor 1 traits and low levels of negative emotionality and internalizing symptoms (Fowles & Dindo, 2009; Hicks & Patrick, 2006; Long et al., 2014).²

Both these models were based on the earlier two-factor conceptualization of the PCL-R. However, parsing interpersonal and affective traits into separate components, studies have provided emerging evidence for a positive link between affective traits of psychopathy and both negative emotionality (e.g., other-directed negative emotions; Benning, 2013; Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003; Jackson, Neumann, & Vitacco, 2007; Lishner et al., 2012; Lynam & Widiger, 2007) and general psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression; Colins, Fanti, Salekin, & Andershed, 2016; Neumann & Pardini, 2014). Thus, following the arguments of the dual-pathway model, affective features of psychopathy may also be related to greater emotion dysregulation.³ Moreover, in the recently developed triarchic model of psychopathy, Patrick et al. (2009) identified difficult temperament – that is, a blend of negative affectivity, poor effortful control and poor emotion regulation – as a developmental precursor of meanness and disinhibition (akin to the affective and behavioral traits of PCL-R-assessed psychopathy, respectively), but not boldness, that

¹ For the sake of consistency with the main scope of the present study, we do not address here near-neighbor concepts of emotion regulation, such as emotion generation/reactivity. We refer readers interested in the relation between emotion generation and regulation to the thorough discussions published in the emotion literature (e.g., Gross & Barrett, 2011; Tamir, 2011). These insightful writings have clarified how the consideration of emotion generation and regulation as separable entities depends on the commitment to different theoretical schools in emotion research (Gross & Barrett, 2011), and concluded that most authors would agree that ‘emotion regulation can and should be studied, regardless of whether it is viewed as separate from emotion generation’ (Tamir, 2011, p. 5). For the purpose of the present study, we therefore refrain from reviewing the vast literature on psychopathy and emotional reactivity or processing, which could bear only indirect relations with the main focus of this investigation (see Garofalo & Neumann, 2018, for some considerations on this issue).

² This perspective parallels the traditional distinction between primary and secondary psychopathy, whereby secondary psychopathy was related to greater emotional problems, whereas primary psychopathy was not (Karpman, 1948). Yet, this perspective does not come without conceptual challenges, as it appears to confound variable associations with a person-centered approach. Indeed, recent advances in the study of psychopathy subtypes have shown that primary psychopathy is likely characterized by elevations on psychopathic traits that involve both interpersonal-affective, and lifestyle-antisocial features (Neumann et al., 2016).

³ Importantly, drawing inferences regarding emotion regulation based on findings involving negative emotionality may not be warranted, given that emotion regulation can occur irrespective of extreme levels of negative emotionality, and negative emotionality and emotion regulation can interact in predicting relevant outcomes, including aggression and antisocial behavior (DeLisi & Vaughn, 2014; Garofalo & Velotti, 2017).

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