Psychopathic traits and politics: Examining affiliation, support of political issues, and the role of empathy

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The relation of psychopathy to morality has been extensively examined, yet few studies have considered relations to political attitudes, which involve moral decision-making. We examined how psychopathic traits relate to political affiliation and opinions on political issues, using the triarchic conceptualization of psychopathy (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009) and testing empathy components as mediators. Interpersonal-affective (Boldness and Meanness) traits were higher in Republicans compared to Democrats. Moreover, Boldness was associated with conservative opinions on economic issues, while Meanness evinced stronger relations to conservative opinions on social issues. Triarchic domains also evidenced unique associations to issues concerning minorities or discrimination. Further, empathy mediated relations between Meanness and decreased support for certain issues (e.g., affirmative action). Overall, psychopathy, particularly the interpersonal-affective traits, appear pertinent to political attitudes, while empathy deficits may statistically account for unique effects of Meanness.

1. Introduction

The impact of personality traits on political attitudes has been generally accepted in social science for decades (Cooper, Golden, & Socha, 2013). Psychology has recently moved towards considering how established personality models inform political behavior (e.g., Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010). Among pathological personality traits, psychopathy has not been yet examined regarding affiliation with the United States' (US) predominant political parties (i.e., Democrat, Republican) or support for contemporary political issues along which these parties are sharply divided. Psychopathy appears relevant to political attitudes even beyond normative traits (Jonason, 2014), as certain aspects of the psychopathic personality (callousness) predict inclination towards a political career (Blais & Pruysers, 2017) and varying trait levels hold differential implications for political leadership (Lilienfeld, Latzman, Watts, Smith, & Dutton, 2014); thus, such an examination may assess the contribution of these traits to politicians' ideologies or opinions on a host of multinational issues (e.g., minority rights, military spending). This study aims to bridge the gap in the literature by examining the relationship between psychopathic traits, political affiliation, and attitudes towards contemporary political issues in a US community sample.

Broadly, psychopathy is a constellation of affective (e.g., empathy deficits, egocentricity, fearlessness), interpersonal (e.g., glibness,

manipulativeness), and behavioral (e.g., impulsivity, sensation-seeking) features, commonly categorized onto interpersonal-affective and impulsive-antisocial factors (Benning, Patrick, Salekin, & Leistico, 2005; Hare & Neumann, 2008) and dimensionally distributed (Edens, Marcus, Lilienfeld, & Poythress, 2006). Nevertheless, debate exists on the scope of the construct (antisocial behavior, anxiety). To this end, the triarchic conceptualization of psychopathy was proposed by Patrick, Fowles, and Krueger (2009), with three overlapping but distinct phenotypical traits of boldness (social dominance, venturesomeness, emotional resiliency), meanness (callousness, self-interest, unempathic disposition), and disinhibition (impulsivity, mistrust, emotion dysregulation). With comprehensive coverage of psychopathy (e.g., aggression and antisociality are tapped by meanness and disinhibition) and lower trait interrelations than prior conceptualizations (Patrick et al., 2009), the triarchic conceptualization is particularly suited for examining divergent relations to external correlates.

1.1. Morality and empathy in psychopathic traits

As political attitudes appear influenced by morality (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), psychopathic traits' relations to moral dimensions may extend to political issues. Notably, psychopathic traits appear not associated with deficits in moral judgment - differentiating between right and wrong - per se (Marshall, Watts, Frankel & Lilienfeld, 2017), but,

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rather, the deficits in moral intuitions that inform moral decision-making (Gay, Vitacco, Hackney, Beussink, & Lilienfeld, 2017). Most consistently, psychopathic traits negatively relate to moral intuitions of Harm (concern, compassion about others' suffering) and Fairness (standards of equality, rights and justice) dimensions (Aharoni, Antonenko, & Kiehl, 2011), although interpersonal-affective traits (Glenn, Iyer, Graham, Koleva, & Haidt, 2009) or meanness (Almeida et al., 2015) purportedly drive these relations. Importantly, psychopathy's relations to morality are theorized to involve deficits in empathy (Blair, 2007; Seara-Cardoso, Neumann, Roiser, McCrory, & Viding, 2012). To add to this nuanced understanding, research on how psychopathic traits inform utilitarian decision-making has been unclear (e.g., Koenigs, Kruepke, Zeier, & Newman, 2012; Marshall et al., 2017). Utilitarianism, emphasizing procedural consideration of societal standards for individual rights and the relativism of one's personal values, is postulated as advanced or *postconventional* moral reasoning (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) and may be facilitated by affective deficits (e.g., empathy, guilt) in psychopathy (Blair, 2007). Regardless, utilitarian voting (i.e., rationally considering social utility) tends to be the exception rather than the rule (Kinder, 1998), as political attitudes tend to be based on various social and emotional factors (Westen, 2007). These findings raise the question of how the well-established empathy deficits in psychopathy influence politics.

Lacking or deficient empathy is postulated as the core feature of psychopathy (Verschuere et al., 2017) and is included across different conceptualizations of psychopathy (e.g., Hare & Neumann, 2008; Patrick et al., 2009); the aforementioned research on morality suggests that this particular feature may be instrumental in decision-making of individuals with elevated psychopathic traits. Low emotional reactivity to the distress of others may account for deficits in moral intuitions (Blair, Jones, Clark, & Smith, 1997). Empathy involves cognitive (e.g., perspective-taking) and affective (e.g., subjective experience of another's emotion) components (Davis, 1983), which manifest differently across psychopathic traits. Some studies suggest stronger empathy deficits within interpersonal-affective traits (Glenn et al., 2009) and others within impulsive-antisocial traits (Mullins-Nelson, Salekin, & Leistico, 2006). Moreover, affective empathy appears more impaired than cognitive empathy in psychopathy (e.g., Blair et al., 1997; Mullins-Nelson et al., 2006). Within the triarchic conceptualization (Patrick et al., 2009), Almeida et al. (2015) found meanness to have strong negative relations to perspective-taking (PT) and empathic concern (EC) within a Portuguese sample. Alternatively, disinhibition had weaker and differential relations (negative with PT, positive with EC), while boldness had no significant relations. Notably in Glenn et al.'s (2009) study of the moral dimensions, EC statistically accounted for (i.e., mediated) the relationship of psychopathy to both Harm and Fairness dimensions. The differential associations of psychopathic traits with moral dimensions (Seara-Cardoso et al., 2012), and potentially with political attitudes, may be due to differences in empathy deficits.

1.2. The relation of psychopathic traits to politics

Recent research has forayed into how psychopathic traits relate to politics. Jonason (2014) found psychopathy (assessed via the Short Dark Triad [SDT]; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) to predict conservative ideology in a community sample. Beyond ideology, Arvan (2013) found that conservative opinions on political issues are related to psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism (i.e., the Dark Triad), but psychopathy uniquely predicted stronger support for heterosexual-only marriage and less support for undocumented immigrants' rights and environmental protections. Nevertheless, the SDT measure used in both studies has been criticized for reducing trait variability (Furnham, Richards, Rangel, & Jones, 2014) and lacking construct independence (Persson, Kajonius, & Garcia, 2017). Using the shortened Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005) in a large sample, Lilienfeld et al. (2014) found that all psychopathic traits

evidenced positive, but small, correlations with conservatism. However, differences between conservative stances (e.g., on economic or social issues) or political affiliations were not examined. Moreover, findings appear mixed, as Hodson, Hogg, and MacInnis (2009) found none of the Dark Triad traits to be significantly related to conservatism within a Canadian sample.

In contrast to affiliations or ideology, substantial links between psychopathy and beliefs that may influence political attitudes are indicated. Psychopathy has been linked to racist attitudes towards minorities in Australia (Anderson & Cheers, 2017; Grigg & Manderson, 2015; Jonason, 2015) and towards African Americans in the US (Jones, 2013). Hodson et al. (2009) related the Dark Triad traits to prejudice against immigrants, finding overall significant contributions, but no incremental effects of psychopathy. Regarding other forms of discrimination, psychopathic traits may be associated with generally negative attitudes towards women. O'Connell and Marcus (2016) found psychopathic traits to predict acceptance of sexually predatory behaviors, with stronger relations for interpersonal-affective psychopathic traits within males. Additionally, Watts, Bowes, Latzman, and Lilienfeld (2017) found TriPM Meanness and Disinhibition traits to predict acceptance of rape myths (e.g., blaming the victim).

1.3. The present study

Overall, research has largely not examined how psychopathic traits relate to political attitudes in the US. Empathy deficits appear a strong influence on moral, and potentially political, decision-making. Given that empathy deficits are a core feature of psychopathy, they may account for psychopathy's relations to political attitudes. Using the triarchic conceptualization of psychopathy (Patrick et al., 2009), the present study addresses these gaps by examining the differences in psychopathic traits across US political affiliations, support for contemporary political issues, and mediating effects of empathy.

First, we expected all triarchic constructs to be higher in Republicans relative to Democrats (Lilienfeld et al., 2014). The Democratic party reflects a liberal ideology focusing on issues such as workers' rights, inequality (e.g., economic, minority), clean energy, and protection of civil liberties like voting rights (see Democratic Platform Committee, 2016). Espousing a conservative ideology, the Republican Party prioritizes a free market, a return to Constitutional principles, utilization of natural resources, federal deregulation, and traditional family values (see Republican National Committee, 2016, for the full platform). Due to lacking extant research, analyses regarding the Independent/Libertarian affiliation are exploratory. Second, we expected conservative political opinions (e.g., support for religion in schools) to relate to all psychopathic traits. Further, we hypothesized lower support for issues concerning rights of minorities or anti-discrimination policies (e.g., gay rights, affirmative action) across psychopathic traits (O'Connell & Marcus, 2016; Watts et al., 2017). Finally, we expected empathy components to mediate meanness' relation to political issues (Almeida et al., 2015). Given low or negligible relations of boldness and disinhibition to empathy, these were not tested in mediation analyses.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants included 304 individuals solicited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The mean age was 36.9 years ($SD = 11.34$). The sample was 51.6% ($n = 157$) female and 48.4% male ($n = 147$). Most participants 79.2% ($n = 241$) self-identified as White, while 8.3% ($n = 25$) were African-American, 5.6% ($n = 17$) Asian, 2.6% ($n = 8$) Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native/Indigenous, 0.7% ($n = 2$) Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, 0.3% ($n = 1$) Middle Eastern/North African, 1% ($n = 3$) as Multiethnic, and 0.7% ($n = 2$), as other; note that these categories were not mutually exclusive. Further,