



Short Communication

Teenagers as temporary psychopaths? Stability in normal adolescent personality suggests otherwise

David D. Vachon^{a,*}, Donald R. Lynam^b, Sarah E. Schell^a, Nicole S.J. Dryburgh^a, Paul T. Costa^c^a McGill University, Department of Psychology, Canada^b Purdue University, Department of Psychological Sciences, United States^c Duke University, School of Medicine, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Psychopathy
Adolescence
Personality
Development
False positives

ABSTRACT

A persistent criticism of assessing psychopathy during adolescence is that it runs the risk of mistaking normal, transient teenage behavior for the enduring characteristics of a future psychopathic adult. If true, early assessments of psychopathy will produce false positives, branding some non-psychopathic youths as psychopaths. Fundamentally, this criticism is not based on the stability of psychopathy during adolescence, which has been well established elsewhere. Rather, it is based on specific claims regarding the ways in which normal personality traits change during adolescence, potentially concealing psychopathy. This preliminary study tests these claims by examining trait differences across adolescence using the NEO-3 trait profiles of 500 youths (242 males and 258 females) aged 14–20. Our results are straightforward: normal personality traits related to psychopathy are virtually unchanging across this period. Thus, to the extent that youth psychopathy is assessed using personality traits rather than transient, age-specific delinquent behaviors, the risk of false positives is low.

Youth psychopathy measures have been developed to detect the antecedents of adult psychopathy among children and adolescents. The importance of these efforts is obvious: early detection means earlier intervention, and effective early intervention will help preclude negative consequences that accumulate during childhood and adolescence, such as alienation, addiction, dropout, injuries, and incarceration. The accretion of these consequences reduces legitimate avenues to success and increases the likelihood of criminal behavior.

However, some have warned that assessing psychopathy in adolescents will yield a high number of false positives, failing to distinguish between the transient teenaged development as the enduring characteristics of a future psychopath (Cauffman, Skeem, Dmitrieva, & Cavanagh, 2016; Seagrave & Grisso, 2002). In support of this argument, several assertions have been made regarding adolescent behavior that may masquerade as psychopathy (Seagrave & Grisso, 2002). First, adolescents are self-centered and have underdeveloped empathy—traits that may easily be mistaken for psychopathic grandiosity and callousness. Second, because adolescents “try out” different personalities as they develop their identity, they may be perceived as insincere and manipulative, other aspects of psychopathy. Third, to establish their autonomy, they may break rules and defy authority, mimicking the antisocial behavior of a psychopath. And fourth, as their independence increases, they may act impulsively, seek new experiences, and fail to

consider the consequences of their actions, tendencies which may be mistaken for the poor behavioral controls associated with psychopathy. From this description of the turbulent teens, several marked changes in personality during adolescence should be evident.

To address these specific predictions, researchers have demonstrated the stability of psychopathy across development: psychopathy is reliably assessed from childhood to adulthood, is stable across short and long intervals, and predicts concurrent and longitudinal antisocial behavior (Loney, Taylor, Butler, & Iacono, 2007; Lynam et al., 2009; Vachon, Lynam, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2012). While these results provide support for the stability of psychopathy across time, they do not directly address Seagrave and Grisso's assumptions regarding the normative development of specific traits, which are based on conventional wisdom rather than empirical data.

This study addresses these assumptions by question by examining age differences in Five-Factor Model (FFM) personality traits relevant to psychopathy. As measured by the NEO Personality Inventory – Revised (NEO PI-R, Costa & McCrae, 1992), the FFM is composed of five broad personality domain traits – Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness to Experience (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C) – each of which is measured by six lower-order facet traits. The 30 more articulated facets of the NEO have also been validly assessed in children and adolescents using the NEO Personality Inventory 3, the measure

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: david.vachon3@mcgill.ca (D.D. Vachon).

used in this study (McCrae, Costa Jr, & Martin, 2005).

When psychopathy is represented as a combination of personality traits found within the FFM, its description is robust across samples, measures, and methods (Lynam & Miller, 2015). The psychopath is untrusting, deceptive, exploitive, aggressive, arrogant, and tough-minded (low A); lacks dutifulness, achievement-striving, self-discipline, and deliberation (low C); is impulsive and angry (high N); lacks self-consciousness (low N); is a dominant excitement-seeker (high E); and lacks interpersonal warmth and positive emotions (low E). When psychopathy is assessed as a configuration of these FFM traits, it behaves the way it does when assessed via more traditional means. For example, FFM psychopathy profiles predict self-reported drug use, delinquency, risky sex, aggression, and behavior on various laboratory tasks (Miller & Lynam, 2003). In addition to being well validated in adult samples, research also supports the use of FFM personality disorder profiles in youth samples (Decuyper, De Clercq, De Bolle, & De Fruyt, 2009).

This preliminary study uses FFM data on 500 youths aged 14–20 collected by McCrae et al. (2005) to determine the degree of normative change in the traits that comprise adult psychopathy. We use these data to test two competing theories: (1) psychopathic traits spike during adolescence, showing marked increases and then decreases, or (2) psychopathic traits are stable throughout adolescence (see Fig. 1). In either case, psychopathic traits are highest in adolescence and then show normative declines across the lifespan consistent with personality maturation (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005; Vachon et al., 2013). The question is whether they spike so high during adolescence as to obscure psychopathy and produce false positives, or whether they are stable through adolescence into early adulthood, when the assessment of psychopathy is considered valid. We expect the second theory is correct; if so, transient developmental phenomena will fail to masquerade as psychopathy, at least to the extent that adolescent psychopathy is assessed using traits rather than developmentally-specific behaviors.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 500 adolescents (51% female, 85% white) aged 14–20, recruited in a study by McCrae et al. (2005) to validate the NEO Personality Inventory-3 (NEO PI-3). This work was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the National Institute of Aging, and

informed consent was obtained for all participants. At a sample size of 500, power is 0.72 to detect linear/polynomial age effect sizes of at least $R^2 = 1\%$, and 0.99 to detect effect sizes of at least $R^2 = 3\%$. Under the spike theory, personality is expected to change drastically across adolescence; the power of this study is sufficient to reveal even small changes.

1.2. Measures

The NEO PI-3 is an updated version of the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992), a standard questionnaire of the FFM. Compared to the NEO PI-R, the NEO PI-3 includes 38 items which were revised to lower the reading level and make the instrument more appropriate for adolescents or adults with lower educational levels. Data on the reliability and validity of the instrument are summarized in McCrae et al. (2005).

2. Results

Of 30 NEO PI-3 facet traits, we selected the 15 facets most relevant to psychopathy (Lynam & Widiger, 2007; Widiger & Lynam, 1998). Scores on these facets were examined as a function of age using regression analyses, with linear and curvilinear trends examined using hierarchical regression analyses. For each of 15 hierarchical regressions (one for each trait), age was entered in Step 1, and the quadratic, cubic, and quartic age polynomials were entered at Steps 2–4 to test for curvilinear relationships. Using an alpha level of 0.01, only one regression was significant in Step 1 (C3: Dutifulness) and one in Step 2 (E6: Positive Emotions), and the effect sizes for these two growth terms were small ($R^2 = 0.02$ in both cases). Fig. 2 displays the regression lines, plotted using coefficients from Step 1, except for E6: Positive Emotions, which used coefficients from Step 2. Overall, traits were consistent across age, with the average trait differing by only 0.03 standard deviations per year.

Because small age differences in individual traits might aggregate to produce sizable changes in psychopathy, we repeated our analyses for FFM psychopathy scores. These scores were calculated using the approach described in Vachon et al. (2013), which computes scores for total, Factor 1 (F1; affective-interpersonal traits), and Factor 2 (F2; impulsive-antisocial traits) psychopathy. The results of these regressions were also non-significant (see Fig. 2) indicating that there were no

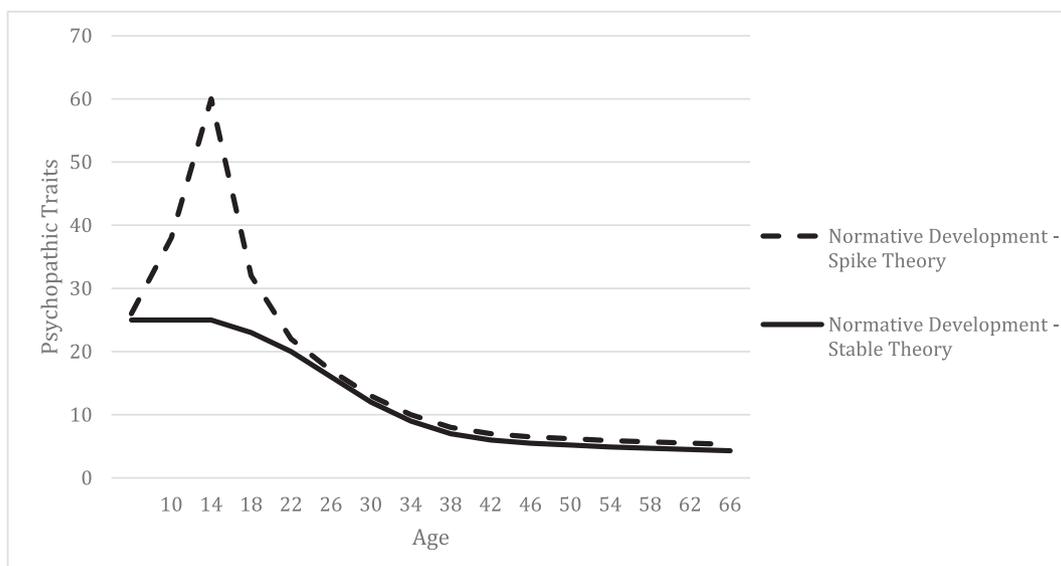


Fig. 1. Two theories of psychopathic trait change in adolescence. Spike Theory: Traits related to psychopathy show a normative spike during adolescence, potentially obscuring true psychopathy and producing false positives. Stable Theory: Traits related to psychopathy remain relatively stable during adolescence. Note: in both theories, psychopathic traits are highest in adolescence and decline across the lifespan (maturation).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7248612>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7248612>

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