



The ends justify the meanness: An investigation of psychopathic traits and utilitarian moral endorsement



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ABSTRACT

Although psychopathy has traditionally been synonymous with immorality, little research exists on the ethical reasoning of psychopathic individuals. Recent examination of psychopathy and utilitarianism suggests that psychopaths' moral decision-making differs from nonpsychopaths (Koenigs et al., 2012). The current study examined the relationship between psychopathic traits (PPI-R, Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005; TriPM, Patrick, 2010) and utilitarian endorsement (moral dilemmas, Greene et al., 2001) in a college sample ($n = 316$). The relationships between utilitarian decisions and triarchic dimensions were explored and empathy and aggression were examined as mediating factors. Hypotheses were partially supported, with Disinhibition and Meanness traits relating to personal utilitarian decisions; aggression partially mediated the relationship between psychopathic traits and utilitarian endorsements. Implications and future directions are further discussed.

1. Introduction

1.1. Psychopathy and morality

Historically, the psychopathy construct emerged out of the concept of “moral insanity” (Prichard, 1835). Early theory painted the psychopath as a sadistic immoral figure; indeed, several of the earliest psychopathy scholars condemned these seemingly remorseless criminals and recommended their exile from society (Krafft-Ebing, 1965; Prichard; Rush, 1812). Psychopathy is now understood as a personality construct including affective, interpersonal, and behavioral dimensions. Although the explicit moral prescriptions of the disorder have been lost to time, there has been little research on the moral judgments of these individuals.

One promising ethical framework employed to examine the moral decision-making of psychopaths is utilitarianism. Utilitarianism stipulates that moral action is one that maximizes the good and minimizes harm for the greatest number of people (Bentham, 1948); it is based on a mathematical “cost-benefit” system that involves rational and cognitive reasoning (Cushman & Greene, 2012). Despite the initial assertions by philosophers (e.g., Bentham), that moral decisions should be based on rational thought rather than clouded by emotional influence, modern moral psychology argues that emotional experience is necessary for morality (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001).

Greene et al. (2001, 2009); Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, and Cohen (2004) took the affective and rational approaches to moral decision making into consideration and developed a dual-process model. This model states that affective reactions are immediately elicited by moral stimuli but may be overridden by cognitive reasoning. A moral-decision making test developed from this model differentiates between “personal” and “impersonal” harms in utilitarian judgment scenarios; “personal” harms involve direct physical contact, whereas “impersonal” harms involve remote indirect actions (Koenigs, Kruepke, Zeier, & Newman, 2012). The quintessential utilitarian dilemmas involve the participant choosing to save five people from an oncoming train by either pushing someone off of a bridge (personal) or by pulling a lever to divert the train to instead hit only one individual (impersonal; Thomson, 1985). In both instances, the right moral action, based on utilitarianism, is to sacrifice one individual to save five. Yet, individuals often do not choose the utilitarian response in the personal case (Côté, Piff, & Willer, 2013; Greene et al., 2001, 2004, 2008; Koenigs et al., 2012). Presumably, personal situations evoke visceral emotional responses in the dual-process model that the impersonal dilemmas do not (Koenigs, Young, Adolphs, et al., 2007). In this sense, personal utilitarian dilemmas pit one's emotions against the morally correct decision; although both impersonal and personal dilemmas require the sacrifice of few to save many, one must be able to divorce their emotional aversion from their ethical commandment to act. Clinical populations with social and emotional processing deficits, such as patients with

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ventromedial prefrontal cortex lesions or frontotemporal dementia, seem to separate emotions from moral decisions as demonstrated by making significantly more utilitarian moral judgments in personal dilemmas than those without (e.g., Koenigs et al., 2007; Mendez, Anderson, & Shapira, 2005). This evidence suggests that certain affective and interpersonal deficiencies can increase one's willingness and/or ability to make utilitarian decisions.

1.2. Psychopathy and utilitarianism

Given the social and affective deficits of psychopaths (Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 2003), they too may demonstrate high levels of utilitarian moral judgment. One study found no differences between forensic psychopaths (indexed via Psychopathy Checklist Revised: PCL-R; Hare) and non-psychopaths' utilitarian endorsements (Cima, Tonnaer, & Hauser, 2010). The authors took this finding as evidence that: 1) emotional processes are not causally necessary for moral decision-making and 2) psychopaths can understand morality as well as the general population but simply do not care. Although their first conclusion has significant implications about the nature of moral capacity, their second assertion did not take other potentially relevant factors into consideration such as the heterogeneous nature of psychopathy (Koenigs et al., 2012)—namely the distinction between the primary psychopath, characterized by an innate emotionlessness and lack of anxiety and fear, and the secondary psychopath, demonstrating excessive emotionality and high levels of trait anxiety (Karpman, 1946; Lykken, 1995). Primary psychopaths endorse more personal utilitarian choices compared to secondary psychopaths and non-psychopaths (who did not differentiate from each other; Koenigs et al.). Only primary psychopaths would sacrifice one to save many as frequently in impersonal and personal dilemmas, perhaps because they may not experience the affective aversion that normally accompanies this sacrifice. The authors did not comment on the implications of the surprising notion of superior moral decision-making in primary psychopaths; closing remarks only questioned the affective deficits which “plague” psychopaths (p. 713).

Extending this inquiry to a college sample Gao and Tang (2013) found that Factor 2, not Factor 1, psychopathic traits (indexed via Psychopathic Personality Inventory Short Form: PPI-SF; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996), were associated with elevated utilitarian endorsements, with aggression mediating the relationship. These incongruent findings suggest that in non-forensic samples, Factor 2 psychopathic traits can be useful when endorsing emotionally aversive decisions. Indeed, some subscales that constitute Factor 2 of the PPI-SF, such as Machiavellian Egocentricity and Rebellious Nonconformity, might identify important attributes related to utilitarianism, which are not indexed by the PCL-R. Another explanation might be a failure to consider the recent Triarchic Model of Psychopathy (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009) wherein psychopathy consists of three phenotypically distinct constructs: *Boldness*, *Meanness*, and *Disinhibition*. Importantly, the model places increased emphasis on callousness and lack of empathy (Meanness), which, although integral to the overall construct of psychopathy (Benning, Patrick, Salekin, & Leistico, 2005), have been neglected in studies utilizing popular self-report measures (Miller & Lynam, 2012). Perhaps previous researchers failed to adequately assess the role of Meanness in utilitarian decision-making in forensic (Koenigs et al., 2012) and non-forensic (Gao & Tang) samples.

1.3. Current study

The present study examined the relationship between psychopathic traits and utilitarian decision-making in a non-forensic student sample, with the aim to resolve the inconsistent previous findings and further investigate the role of Meanness, empathy and aggression. Assessment of aggression as a mediating variable is crucial, given that Greene's personal moral decisions involve inherently aggressive behavior (e.g.,

physically pushing someone to their demise), individuals may be more likely to endorse an action not only because it is considered moral but because they are comfortable with performing an aggressive act. An important addition to the present study involves the assessment of whether empathy mediates the relationship between psychopathic traits and utilitarian choices, an interaction previously evidenced with social class and utilitarian decisions (Côté et al., 2013). The lack of empathy in psychopathy and social class may stem from different factors, therefore this question is exploratory.

The current study measured personal/impersonal utilitarian judgments using hypothetical ethical dilemmas (Greene et al., 2001). The PPI-R (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005) and Triarchic Psychopathy Measure (TriPM; Patrick, 2010) were used to assess the three dimensions of psychopathy. It was hypothesized that 1) participants would endorse impersonal utilitarian decisions more than personal decisions; 2) psychopathic traits would be positively related to impersonal utilitarian decisions; 3) personal utilitarian decisions would be positively related to psychopathy in PPI-R and TriPM total scores, and affective/empathic deficits of PPI-Coldheartedness and TriPM-Meanness; 4) the relationship between personal utilitarian decisions and psychopathic factors (i.e., Fearless Dominance, Self-Centered Impulsivity, Boldness, and Disinhibition) was explored; and 5) the potential mediating roles of empathy and aggression were explored.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Participants included 316 undergraduates (23.8% male; 76.2% female) at a large metropolitan college who participated for course credit. Ages ranged from 18 to 46 ($M = 20.33$, $SD = 3.01$). The racial and ethnic composition of the sample was: 14.6% Caucasian ($n = 46$), 15.8% African American ($n = 50$), 45.6% Hispanic ($n = 144$), 10.8% Asian ($n = 34$), and 9.5% other ($n = 30$). All Institutional Review Board approved procedures were followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants who completed measures via a secure online system for undergraduate research.

2.2. Measures

The Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005), a 154-item self-report measure of psychopathic traits, includes items rated on a four-point Likert-scale (1 = *False*, 4 = *True*). Eight Factor analyzed subscales load on three factors: Social Influence, Fearlessness, and Stress Immunity subscales load on the “Fearless Dominance” factor (PPI-R-I), whereas Machiavellian Egocentricity, Rebellious Nonconformity, Blame Externalization, and Careful Nonplanfulness subscales load on the “Self-Centered Impulsivity” factor (PPI-R-II); Coldheartedness is a stand-alone factor (Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003). In range of other samples, in the current sample, $\alpha = 0.89$ (PPI-R-Total); $\alpha = 0.89$ (PPI-I); $\alpha = 0.92$ (PPI-II); and $\alpha = 0.80$ (PPI-R-Coldheartedness).

The Triarchic Psychopathy Measure (TriPM; Patrick et al., 2009), a 58-item self-report inventory of psychopathy, includes items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *true*, 4 = *false*). The TriPM yields a total score with three domains: Boldness, Meanness, and Disinhibition. In range of other samples, in the current sample, $\alpha = 0.87$ (TriPM-Total); $\alpha = 0.77$ (Boldness); $\alpha = 0.89$ (Meanness); and $\alpha = 0.88$ (Disinhibition).

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983), a 28-item self-report measure of empathy includes items rated on a five-point scale (A = *Does Not Describe Me Well*, E = *Describes Me Very Well*). The IRI contains four subscales: perspective taking (PT), empathic concern (EC), personal distress (PD), and the fantasy scale (FS). Internal consistency for the current study was in range of previous research, $\alpha = 0.85$ (IRI-Total).

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