

Psychopathy and risk taking: Examining the role of risk perception[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Our work tested associations among psychopathy, risk perception, and risk-taking in multiple contexts using the four-factor model of psychopathy and the Risk-Return Framework of Risky Choice. Study 1 examined direct associations between the four psychopathy factors (i.e., callous affect, interpersonal manipulation, erratic lifestyle, and antisocial behavior) and ethical, financial, health/safety, recreational, and social risk-taking in a sample of undergraduate students. Results showed that erratic lifestyle psychopathy traits (i.e., impulsivity, irresponsibility, and sensation seeking) were linked with risk-taking behavior in all domains. Psychopathic traits were most consistently associated with risk-taking within the ethical domain. Study 2 replicated and extended Study 1 by addressing the role of risk perception in the link between psychopathy and risk-taking. Results concerning direct associations between psychopathy and risk-taking generally mirrored those found in Study 1. Callous affect and interpersonal manipulation were indirectly associated with greater ethical risk-taking via lower risk perception. Erratic lifestyle was indirectly associated with greater health/safety and recreational risk-taking via lower risk perception. Overall, risk perception appears to be one explanatory pathway linking psychopathic traits to engagement in risk-related behavior. Results are discussed in relation to the Dual Pathway and Triarchic models of psychopathy.

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1. Introduction

Psychopathy is characterized by pervasive emotional and interpersonal deficits, impulsivity, and antisociality (Hare, 1993). Theoretical accounts of psychopathy suggest that such traits should be associated with risk-taking (Fowles & Dindo, 2006/2009), and indeed, empirical research has demonstrated that psychopathy is associated with a greater propensity to engage in a variety of risk-taking behaviors (Kastner & Sellbom, 2012; Swogger, Walsh, Lejuez, & Kosson, 2010). However, given the current perspective regarding domain specificity in risk-taking behavior, further research is needed to examine the pervasiveness of this relationship across various situational contexts, and to determine which components of psychopathy are most influential in the psychopathy/risk-taking association. Moreover, research has yet to identify the specific mechanisms that may underlie this relationship. To address these gaps in the literature, Study 1 examined the differential associations between psychopathic traits and risky behavior utilizing a domain specific approach to risk-taking and the four-factor model of psychopathy. Study 2 was designed to replicate and extend the results

of Study 1 by testing a conceptual model based on the Risk-Return Framework of Risky Choice (Blais & Weber, 2006) and the Dual Pathway model of psychopathy (Fowles & Dindo, 2006/2009). As displayed in Fig. 1, this conceptual model identifies risk perception as a potential mechanism linking psychopathic traits to risk-taking behavior.

Research has generally focused on a two-factor conceptualization of psychopathy, which suggests that the construct consists of two related factors including emotional/interpersonal traits (Factor 1) and social deviance characteristics (Factor 2; Hare, 1993). However, recent work on clinical and subclinical samples suggests that a four-factor model is more appropriate (i.e. Hare & Neumann, 2008/2009; Mahmut, Menictas, Stevenson, & Homewood, 2011; Neal & Sellbom, 2012). The four-factor model divides the emotional/interpersonal traits into two factors representing callous affect (i.e., shallow affect, lack of remorse, guilt and empathy) and interpersonal manipulation (i.e., superficial charm, egocentricity, and pathological lying). Social deviance characteristics have been divided into erratic lifestyle (i.e., irresponsibility, impulsivity, sensation seeking) and antisocial behavior (i.e., poor behavior control, early juvenile delinquency, and versatile antisociality). Given the extensive empirical support and the enhanced specificity of the four-factor model, this model was used in the present research.

Extant literature regarding the etiology of psychopathy provides theoretical support for the link between psychopathic traits and risk-taking. The Dual Pathway perspective offered by Fowles and Dindo (2006/2009) may be especially useful in informing this association. This model posits two distinct etiological pathways that interact with

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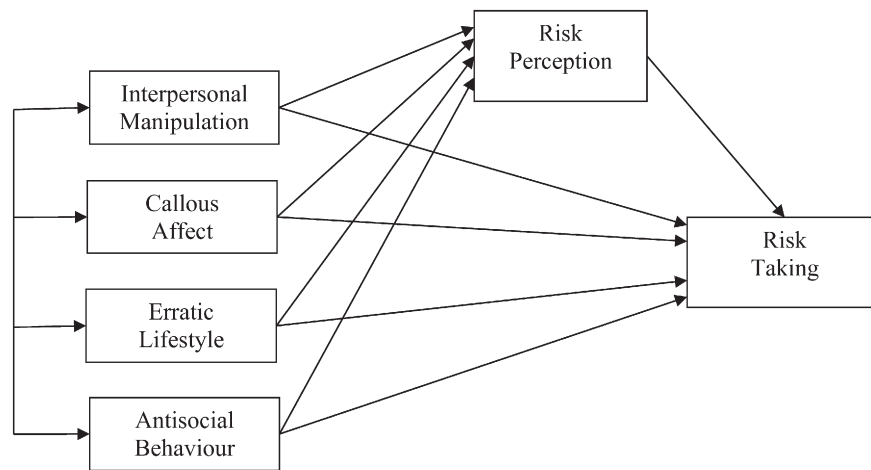


Fig. 1. Path model tested for each risk domain. Sex and age were included in model as covariates, but not shown here for ease of presentation.

social-environmental processes to contribute to the emergence of Factor 1 and Factor 2 traits. Originally proposed to map onto the two-factor conceptualization of psychopathy, this perspective may also be relevant with respect to the four-factor model, whereby one pathway may contribute to the emergence of both interpersonal manipulation and callous affect traits, and the second pathway may be influential in the development of both erratic lifestyle characteristics and antisocial behavior.

According to Fowles and Dindo (2006), Factor 1 traits (callous affect and interpersonal manipulation) are partially the result of a low fear temperament or lack of anticipatory fear. A large body of research supports this perspective (i.e., Benning, Patrick, & Iacono, 2005; Lykken, 1995; Patrick, Bradley, & Lang, 1993; Patrick, Cuthbert, & Lang, 1994). It is possible that this pathway is especially relevant with respect to the callous affect traits that are subsumed under Factor 1 since individuals who exhibit such traits, likely engage in risk-taking due to lack of fear of the potential negative consequences. Indeed, empirical research suggests that callousness is particularly relevant with respect to fear sensitivity (Roose, Bijttebier, Van der Oord, Claes, & Lillienfeld, 2013) and deficient fear conditioning (Veit et al., 2013). For example, Veit and colleagues found that fear conditioning deficits were especially prominent among violent offenders who exhibited callous affect psychopathy traits.

The Dual Pathway model also suggests that Factor 2 characteristics may, in part, reflect information processing deficits resulting in regulatory dyscontrol (Fowles & Dindo, 2009). Indeed, research demonstrates differential cognitive processes among individuals who exhibit psychopathic traits (for review see Hiatt & Newman, 2006). Given the specific traits subsumed within the erratic lifestyle component of Factor 2 (e.g., impulsivity, stimulation seeking, irresponsibility) and the current debate in the field as to whether the antisocial component of Factor 2 should be considered a core feature or an outcome of psychopathy (see Skeem & Cooke, 2010; Hare & Neumann, 2010), this pathway may be especially relevant to the development of erratic lifestyle characteristics. Accordingly, erratic lifestyle traits may be associated with a heightened propensity to engage in risky behavior due to an inability to attend to and cognitively process peripheral situational cues, as well as a lack of consideration/understanding of potential consequences.

More recently, the Dual Pathway model has been subsumed under the Triarchic Model of psychopathy (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009). This model is comprised of Boldness (social dominance, immunity to stressors, and tolerance for danger and uncertainty), Meanness (callousness, exploitativeness, and lack of attachment to others), and Disinhibition or Externalizing Proneness (low frustration tolerance, poor impulse control). Two pathways are still suggested, with disinhibition

being due to problems in the pre-frontal cortex, and boldness related to the amygdala. The difference lies in the cause of meanness. According to the Triarchic Model, this callousness can result from genetic or environmental influences that tend to impair attachment, and can be related to either a tendency toward disinhibition or boldness. While we did not use measures conducive to a full examination of the Triarchic Model, results will be discussed in terms of the four-factor, Dual Pathway, and Triarchic models.

Research demonstrates significant links between psychopathy and risky behavior. For example, studies indicate that psychopathy is associated with self-reported sexual risk-taking (Fulton, Marcus, & Payne, 2010) and hypersexual behavior (e.g., sexual compulsivity, excitation, and sensation seeking; Kastner & Sellbom, 2012). In both studies, Factor 1 and 2 traits were related to engagement in risky sexual behavior. However, Factor 2 characteristics displayed stronger associations. Research has also shown that psychopathy is related to higher incidences of drug and alcohol use (Hemphill, Hart, & Hare, 1994), and substance use disorders (Walsh, Allen, & Kosson, 2007). For example, Walsh et al. (2007) found that erratic lifestyle traits were uniquely associated with drug dependence, whereas both erratic lifestyle and antisocial behavior were uniquely related to alcohol dependence. Conversely, the interpersonal manipulation factor was positively associated with cocaine dependency, whereas the callous affect factor was negatively related to cannabis use. Collectively, this research suggests Factor 2 traits are more relevant for risky behavior related to hypersexuality and substance use.

Given that the erratic lifestyle component of Factor 2 includes traits such as impulsivity and sensation seeking, these findings coincide with the general literature regarding the associations among sensation seeking, impulsivity, sexual risk-taking (Charnigo et al., 2013; Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000), and substance use and abuse (Leeman, Hoff, Krishnan-Sarin, Patock-Petham, & Potenza, 2014; Magid, MacLean, & Colder, 2007). Moreover, given the extant literature linking impulsivity and sensation seeking to risk-taking, it follows that the erratic lifestyle psychopathy traits likely play a substantial role in the psychopathy/risk-taking association.

The strength of the association between each psychopathy factor and risk-related behavior appears to differ as a function of situational context. Swogger et al. (2010) addressed the situation-specific nature of these relationships by examining the association between psychopathic traits, irresponsible and criminal real world risk-taking, and sensation seeking real world risk-taking. Results indicated that Factor 1 traits were most influential in promoting irresponsible and criminal risk-taking, whereas Factor 2 traits were more readily linked to sensation seeking risk-taking behaviors (although this association was attributable to other externalizing psychopathology). Of note, results also

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