



Under the surface of adolescent psychopathic traits: High-anxious and low-anxious subgroups in a community sample of youths



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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined subgroups of adolescents based on their levels of psychopathic traits and anxiety. Participants were 914 youths from a community sample, with a mean age of 14.28 ($SD = .94$) years. We used adolescents' self-reports of psychopathic traits and their parents' reports of the adolescent's anxiety to identify distinct subgroups of youths. Using latent class analysis, we identified five groups that varied in levels of psychopathic traits and anxiety. Two groups were characterized by high levels of psychopathic traits and high or low scores on anxiety. Validation of these subgroups revealed that they differed significantly from each other in theoretically meaningful ways—the low-anxious subgroup reported higher levels of psychopathic traits, lower levels of impulsivity and hyperactivity, and lower levels of aggression than the high-anxious group. These findings are in line with previous empirical research and provide support that anxiety discriminates between two subgroups of adolescents with psychopathic traits.

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Psychopathy is a syndrome characterized by a combination of interpersonal, affective, and behavioral traits (Cooke & Michie, 2001). People high on psychopathic traits are described as callous, dishonest, manipulative, and impulsive—characteristics that contribute to a lifestyle often characterized by antisocial behavior and violence. Over the past decade, scholars interested in understanding the etiology of serious antisocial behavior have focused on the expressions of the disorder in younger populations in order to identify those at risk of becoming antisocial adults. There is today ample evidence that psychopathic traits can be identified in adolescents and that their presence is linked to antisocial behavior and violence both concurrently and prospectively (for reviews, see Forth & Book, 2010; Salekin & Frick, 2005; Salekin, Rosenbaum, Lee, & Lester, 2009). There is also increasing support that youths with psychopathic traits are a heterogeneous group (e.g., Skeem, Poythress, Edens, Lilienfeld, & Cale, 2003). Hence, there is a need to identify, describe, and understand subgroups of youths with psychopathic traits.

Theoretically, it has been suggested that the development of psychopathy can originate from innate biological dispositions as well as environmentally influenced factors (e.g., Cleckley, 1976; Lykken, 1995; Karpman, 1941). Karpman (1941) was among the first to propose a distinction between two subtypes of psychopathy. The primary subtype of psychopathy is hypothesized

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to reflect individuals whose behavior is the result of a congenital emotional deficit, while the secondary subtype is believed to be the result of an environmentally acquired emotional disturbance. Karpman (1941) argued that the difference in etiology had implication for both research and practice, because he believed that only the secondary type might be responsive to treatment efforts. Several researchers have further developed Karpman's distinction and outlined models of primary and secondary subtypes of psychopathy (Blackburn, 1998; Lykken, 1995; Mealey, 1995; Porter, 1996). These models generally converge with Karpman's idea that both subtypes are similar in terms of showing high levels of antisocial behavior, but differ in their etiological underpinnings. Thus, the body of theoretical literature suggests that psychopathy is a heterogeneous construct.

According to the abovementioned theories, the core difference between the primary and secondary type relates to anxiety. Compared to the primary type, secondary psychopaths are believed to be capable of experiencing and expressing emotional reactions—they are anxious, impulsive, and they engage in reactive aggression and hostility (Skeem et al., 2003). This emotional instability is hypothesized to stem from environmental distress and is believed to result in an impulsive and aggressive behavioral style (e.g., Lykken, 1995; Skeem et al., 2003). The primary type, on the other hand, is described as the prototypical psychopath who is incapable of emotions, such as empathy and guilt, and so appears callous, fearless, and relatively free of anxiety (e.g., Karpman, 1941). This combination of traits is believed to result in a stable personality style characterized by proactive aggression and antisocial behavior (Skeem et al., 2003). In short, although equally prone to antisocial behavior, the key difference between the primary and the secondary subtype seems related to anxiety.

In keeping with this tradition, empirical findings have shown that primary and secondary subtypes can be identified in forensic settings among individuals scoring high on psychopathic traits (Hicks, Vaidyanathan, & Patrick, 2010; Newman, MacCoon, Vaughn, & Sadeh, 2005; Skeem, Johansson, Andershed, Kerr, & Eno Loudon, 2007; Swogger & Kosson, 2007). Consistent with theoretical ideas, the high-anxious secondary subtype showed more aggression, reactive hostility, impulsivity, and had more histories of violence and criminality than the low-anxious primary subtype (Hicks, Markon, Patrick, Krueger, & Newman, 2004). Moreover, there is some support to suggest that the primary subtype, compared to the secondary, shows somewhat higher levels of core psychopathic traits (Newman et al., 2005; Skeem et al., 2007), which is consistent with the theoretical ideas. Given current knowledge then, it is possible to distinguish between variants of psychopathic offenders that parallel theoretical descriptions of primary and secondary psychopathy.

Only a few studies have examined whether similar subgroups can be identified among adolescents. In some of these studies, measures of anxiety were used to identify subgroups of adolescents with extreme levels of psychopathic traits (Kimonis, Frick, Cauffman, Goldweber, & Skeem, 2012; Kimonis, Skeem, Cauffman, & Dmitrieva, 2011; Lee, Salekin, & Iselin, 2010; Vaughn, Edens, Howard, & Smith, 2009; Veen, Andershed, Stevens, Doreleijers, & Vollebergh, 2011; Wareham, Dembo, Poythress, Childs, & Schmeidler, 2009). In support of the distinction, studies have shown that juvenile offenders with high scores on psychopathic traits and anxiety reported more negative emotionality, attention problems, impulsivity, anger, childhood abuse, and were more affected by distressing emotional stimuli than their low-anxious counterparts (Kimonis et al., 2011, 2012). Similarly, juvenile offenders characterized with high levels of psychopathic traits and anxiety report more psychiatric symptoms, drug use, delinquent behavior, and trauma history than the low-anxious group (Vaughn et al., 2009; Veen et al., 2011). Other findings are less conclusive, however. For instance, Lee et al. (2010) found that anxiety did not discriminate between a primary and secondary subtype in a sample of male adolescent offenders. There was only support for a high-anxious group, which most closely resembled the secondary variant, and no low-anxious (i.e., primary) group emerged. Wareham et al. (2009), on the other hand, found a low-anxious group of adolescent offenders but did not identify a high-anxious subgroup. In general, then, there is some, albeit inconclusive, empirical support that high-anxious and low-anxious subgroups can be identified among adolescents in forensic settings.

To our knowledge, no previous studies have examined whether the primary and secondary subgroups can be identified among youth in normative community samples. Instead, previous studies have focused on institutionalized youth populations who are at the high end of the distribution of psychopathic traits (e.g., Kimonis et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2009; Veen et al., 2011; Wareham et al., 2009). This strategy, although informative for initial exploration, has several limitations. First, only selecting individuals who meet a certain cut-off score restricts the variation in psychopathic traits and excludes potentially important subgroups that, despite lower mean scores, may have similar profiles. This knowledge could help identify factors that protect youths with less extreme levels of psychopathic traits from negative development, and facilitate effective prevention strategies (e.g., Poythress & Skeem, 2006). Second, it is increasingly understood that psychopathic traits are distributed across a continuum rather than constituting a discrete category (for review, see Poythress & Skeem, 2006). This, in itself, suggests that there is variation in the expression of the traits, and is an argument for studying the full range in samples with normative distributions. Finally, in their review of the literature on subtypes of psychopathic traits, Poythress and Skeem (2006) concluded that community samples are ideal populations for studying the nature and prevalence of subgroups because they provide important information about both normative and non-normative development. Hence, the purpose of the current study is to examine whether subgroups similar to primary and secondary subtypes can be identified in a community sample of adolescents.

Consistent with theoretical conceptualizations, we examined whether anxiety discriminates between subgroups of youths with high levels of psychopathic traits. Notably, to the extent these subgroups are identified, we will refer to them as low-anxious and high-anxious *subgroups* rather than primary and secondary *subtypes*, in order to avoid pejorative labeling and conflation with the clinical construct of psychopathy. Based on previous research and theory, we expected that these subgroups would differ significantly from each other on measures assessing aggression, delinquent behavior, attention problems,

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