



Can the causal mechanisms underlying chronic, serious, and violent offending trajectories be elucidated using the psychopathy construct?



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In Dawson, McCuish, Hart, and Corrado (2012), a case study was performed on two adolescent males involved in intensely violent offenses. Hours of interviewing both youth, separately, indicated a callous and unemotional disposition, extreme desire to exert interpersonal dominance over others, and contemptuous attitudes towards individuals whom they felt were 'low functioning', 'ignorant', and 'histrionic'. They viewed their relationships as 'temporary', 'replaceable', and 'contingent on a lack of expectation and personal opinion'. They viewed themselves as 'on a different intellectual level', 'able to project whomever they wanted to be', 'manipulative', and deserving of special treatment due to 'exceptional abilities'. Although lower levels of self control were present in both youth, this construct central to criminological theories insufficiently explained their offenses, which were often thoroughly planned. Greater precision appeared necessary to explain why these specific types of offenders were involved in crime. This revelation serves as part of the motivation for writing this article as well as part of the motivation for compiling this special issue on psychopathy.

Introduction

A concern that emerged from the case studies in Dawson et al. (2012), as well as from the lead author's experience as the Principal Investigator of the Incarcerated Serious and Violent Young Offender Study (ISVYOS), a multi-decade long study of over 1,400 incarcerated young offenders, was that low self control was typical of almost all offenders and therefore would be rather ineffective in helping explain differences

among offenders in the 'deep end' of the criminal justice system. Missing from contemporary criminological models of offending are constructs that can explain within-group variation among offenders, especially variations between relatively minor offenders and the small group of offenders responsible for the majority of all crime (e.g., Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972). We are interested in the question of why some are involved in chronic offending, persistently serious offending, or persistently violent offending, whereas others are involved in relatively ubiquitous, minor offenses and do not continue offending in adulthood. Based on the strong symptoms of psychopathy identified in the two cases discussed above as well as more recent studies on psychopathy and offending trajectories (e.g., Corrado, McCuish, Hart, & DeLisi, 2015; McCuish, Corrado, Hart, & DeLisi, 2015; McCuish, Corrado, Lussier, & Hart, 2014), the perspective that offenders constitute a homogenous group (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) seems inaccurate even when only looking at offenders in the deep end of the justice system. Psychopathy seems necessary, though not sufficient, for explaining the causal mechanisms associated with chronic, serious, and violent (CSV) offending trajectories.

The articles in this special issue illustrate both strengths and weaknesses concerning psychopathy and (a) its integration into existing criminological theories (DeLisi & Vaughn, 2015; Fox, Jennings, & Farrington, 2015) and neuropsychological models of offending (Umbach, Berryessa, & Raine, 2015), (b) its use as a risk factor for the development of offending over time (Corrado et al., 2015; Walters, 2015), and (c) its use as a risk factor for specific types of offenders, including female offenders (Forouzan & Nicholls, 2015), institutional offenders (Shaffer, McCuish, Corrado, Behnken, & DeLisi, 2015), sexual offenders (Cale, Lussier, McCuish, & Corrado, 2015), and violent offenders (McCuish et al., 2015). Given the research in this special issue and elsewhere (e.g., DeLisi, 2009; DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Vaughn & DeLisi, 2008; Vaughn, Howard, & DeLisi, 2008), we believe that the construct is necessary, though not sufficient, for identifying causal mechanisms underlying CSV offending trajectories.

We also recognize the importance of scaling back the expectation that psychopathy can explain 'all crime, all the time'. Psychopathy represents a narrow, specific, and rare form of personality in the general population (e.g., Skeem & Mulvey, 2001), whereas general offending represents a broad, generic, and common form of behavior in the general population (e.g., Le Blanc & Fréchette, 1989; Moffitt, 1993). Using a precise instrument to hit a broad target is easy, but implies that much

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of the target is left to be explained. It therefore seems inappropriate to argue that psychopathy is useful for understanding the causal mechanisms underlying offending in general, given that the former cannot capture the scope of the latter. Similarly, as the target narrows and becomes rarer (e.g., from offenders to 'chronic' offenders), hitting that target requires a level of precision greater than that provided by broader, more common constructs such as low self-control (see Fig. 1 for an illustration of this discussion). However, there does appear to be an overlap between the prevalence of psychopathy and the prevalence of chronic offenders (Vaughn & DeLisi, 2008). At least tentatively then, psychopathy provides the type of construct precision necessary to explain the causal mechanisms responsible for rare but extremely important CSV offending trajectories.

This introductory article is divided into seven sections that provide the rationale behind why it is asserted that symptoms of psychopathy are needed to explain the causal mechanisms responsible for CSV offending trajectories. We begin first by providing some examples of *why* it would be beneficial to reconsider some of the existing approaches to measuring and studying psychopathy within the field of criminology. Data from the ISVYOS are used to help demonstrate why concerns about existing approaches are warranted. In the remaining sections, we focus on how psychopathy can be better utilized within criminological research. Specifically, in the second section, we detail discrepancies between psychopathy as a clinical construct and tools used to measure this construct, such as the *Psychopathy Checklist*¹ (PCL). In the third section, the extant literature on psychopathy as a predictor of offending is reviewed, with a specific emphasis on the limitations of existing measurement instruments. In the fourth section, given the measurement limitations identified, the *Comprehensive Assessment of Psychopathy Personality* (CAPP; Cooke, Hart, Logan, & Michie, 2004) is introduced as a conceptual map of psychopathy that has utility as a way forward for measuring psychopathy and identifying the causal mechanisms responsible for CSV offending trajectories. In the fifth section, in light of the rarity of psychopathy and commonality of offending, the rationale behind why it is necessary to limit the scope of the types of offending that psychopathy can explain is further elaborated. Also in this section, we define CSV trajectories to clarify what the psychopathy construct is hypothesized to predict. In the sixth section, although admittedly ambitious, specific symptoms of psychopathy from the CAPP concept map are hypothesized to be able to identify whether an individual will be associated with a chronic offending trajectory, a serious offending trajectory, or a violent offending trajectory. In the seventh section, this (tentative) proposed relationship between psychopathy and offending and its alignment with existing developmental life course (DLC) theories is discussed (see Fox et al., 2015 for a more

complete discussion) and limitations and directions for future research are provided.

Due to our wariness of the potential misuse or misinterpretation of the importance we give to psychopathy, some specific assertions that are central to the arguments put forth in this manuscript are first clarified:

1. The assertions made regarding psychopathy are based on our view of psychopathy as a construct, not based on existing measures of psychopathy.
2. Based on information theory, explaining a relatively rare phenomenon requires a greater deal of precision. Chronic, serious, and violent offending are rare phenomena, and psychopathy is precise.
3. Psychopathy is not appropriate as an explanation of general offending. The former is rare and narrow, whereas the latter is typical and broad.
4. Although psychopathy is *necessary* to explain the causal mechanisms underlying CSV offending trajectories, it is not a *sufficient* explanation.
5. Psychopathy is a dimensional construct, and it is necessary to treat the construct as such to successfully explain CSV offending trajectories.
6. By causal mechanisms, we mean the factors responsible for an offender's disinhibition, destabilization, and motivation to offend (e.g., Wikström and Treiber's (2009) propensity, situational context, and deterrence factors in their situational action theory).
7. Chronic offending trajectories describe a high rate of offending across the life course.
8. Serious offending trajectories describe persistent involvement in violence, serious property offenses, and drug trafficking across the life course.
9. Violent offending trajectories describe persistent involvement in violence across the life course (does not preclude involvement in other types of offenses).
10. Established measures of psychopathy like the PCL family inadequately represent the construct. Testing assertions made here using such measures is therefore inappropriate.

Concerns Regarding the Measurement of Psychopathy within Criminology

Since Farrington (2005a) advocated for greater efforts to integrate psychopathy into explanations of offending, criminologists have been rather productive. No longer is psychopathy research specific to the

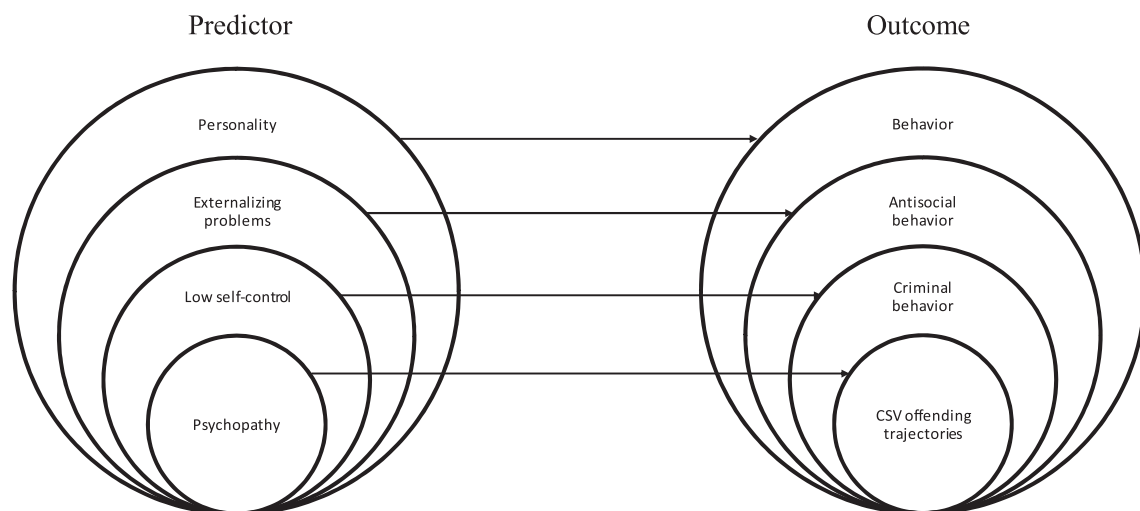


Fig. 1. An illustration of the specificity of psychopathy and the similar specificity of chronic, serious, and violent offending trajectories.

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