



Childhood and Adolescent Characteristics of Women with High versus Low Psychopathy Scores: Examining Developmental Precursors to the Malignant Personality Disorder[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing number of studies on female psychopathy, our understanding of how to prevent and treat this malignant disorder remains limited in large part due to a lack of research on the developmental precursors and correlates. The aim of this study was to compare and contrast childhood characteristics of adult women presenting with high versus low psychopathy scores. We evaluated whether negative childhood characteristics and adverse experiences in four formative developmental time-periods (early childhood, late childhood, early adolescence, and late adolescence) could distinguish women with high PCL-R scores (>25) from women with low PCL-R scores (<25) in young adulthood. The sample consisted of 82 young adult women who had been removed from their family during their childhood, and placed in Youth Centres and were subsequently interviewed in young adulthood. Results suggest that compared to women with low psychopathy scores, women scoring high on psychopathic traits in young adulthood were more likely to manifest psychological, cognitive, and behavioural dysfunction in early childhood, to have been exposed to diverse forms of victimization, and to have a background marred by problematic parent-child relationships. Finally, the presence of a neglectful childhood and mother's mental and personality problems leading to the foster care placement was negatively associated with elevated PCL-R scores while evidence of childhood impulsivity and paternal abuse positively predicted higher scores. The results point to the importance of early intervention as an essential means of reducing the long term and serious detrimental effects of child abuse on vulnerable children.

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Introduction

The recognition of distinctive interpersonal, affective, and behavioural characteristics such as callousness, shallow affect, lack of empathy, irresponsibility, manipulation, impulsivity, and violation of societal rules and conventions among female offenders have made mental health professionals aware of the applicability of the concept of psychopathy to female offenders (Cleckley, 1941; Forouzan & Cooke, 2005; Nicholls & Petrila, 2005; Verona & Vitale, 2005). Recent clinical and empirical studies have also provided evidence of the existence of female psychopathy (e.g., Neumann, Schmitt, Carter, Embley, & Hare, 2012). The disorder is now recognised to be even more prevalent among female offenders than what had been suspected previously by mental health professionals and to represent a comparable phenotypic

manifestation in women as has been evident in men (cf., Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002; Hamburger, Lilienfeld, & Hogben, 1996; Phillips, Sellbom, Ben-Porath & Patrick, 2014; Sprague, Javdani, Sadeh, Newman, & Verona, 2011). Despite the growing number of studies on the prevalence and predictive utility of female psychopathy as a risk marker for reoffending and violence, our understanding of this disorder remains limited in large part because there has been a lack of research focused on developmental precursors/correlates of psychopathy, this is particular true of the omission of research on girls and women. (See Fig. 1.)

An examination of the state of the literature reveals that different lines of theory and research have elaborated on the etiological factors of some correlates of psychopathy, such as antisocial personality disorder, delinquent and violent behaviours. Such studies have improved our understanding of the antecedents of these disorders and have provided models of treatment and prevention (e.g., Polaschek & Daly, 2013; Salekin, Worley, & Grimes, 2010; Wong & Hare, 2005). The study of the developmental factors associated with psychopathy may similarly lead to a deeper and more detailed understanding of its causal origins, and could therefore provide the basis for therapeutic interventions and even early prevention to reduce the individual and societal burden of this malignant disorder, and specifically, dangerous and high rates of offending.

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Summary of Significant Difficulties of Young Women with High PCL-R Scores across four Developmental periods

DOMAIN	Early Childhood	Late Childhood	Early Adolescence	Late adolescence
Problematic Individual Characteristics	Temperamental problems High anxiety Psychological follow-up	Temperamental Behavioural difficulties Mood instability Suicidal ideation	Suicidal ideation	Temperamental Conduct disorder, Aggression
Victimization		Verbal abuse Psychological abuse Physical abuse	Incest Sexually abusive fathers	Physical abuse Verbal abuse
Problematic Parenting				
Father	Absent	Aggressive/abusive	Conflictual	Aggressive/abusive
Mother				Conflictual Aggressive
Parental Dysfunction	-----Mental and Personality Problems -----			
School Performance	Learning problems Speech problems Concentration problems Conflicts with teachers Conduct disorder Lies	Learning problems Concentration problems Intolerant to frustration Disrespect of authority Conflicts with teachers Referred to specialized school Verbal & physical abuse Lies	Learning problems Concentration problems Victimizing others Referred to specialized school Treatment for alcohol/drug addiction	
Antisocial Behaviours	Inappropriate sexual behaviours	Irresponsibility Impulsivity Manipulation Control		Inappropriate sexual behaviours Impulsivity Crime Gang membership

Fig. 1. Summary of Significant Difficulties of Young Women with High PCL-R Scores across four Developmental periods.

The lateral and downward extension of the construct to females

There has been a “lateral and downward extension” of the construct of psychopathy and related measures to women and girls with little consideration given to the possibility that there may be marked gender differences in the manifestation of the disorder in females. So far, studies on etiological and developmental factors of psychopathy have mainly concerned male samples. Some of these studies support the hypothesis of a biological predisposition as a potential contributor to the development of psychopathy (Ishikawa, Raine, Lencz, Bihrlé, & LaCasse, 2001; Kiehl, Smith, Hare, & Liddle, 2000; Kiehl et al., 1999; Morgan & Lilienfeld, 2000; Newman & Lorenz, 2003; Raine, Lencz,

Bihrlé, LaCasse, & Colletti, 2000; Soderstrom, Blennow, Manhem, & Forsman, 2001). Other research supports the hypothesis of familial (Forth & Burke, 1998; Harris, Rice, & Lalumière, 2001; Marshall & Cooke, 1999; Neighbors, Forehand, & Bau, 1997; Widom & White, 1997) and environmental contributions to the development of male psychopathy (Aultman, 1980; Raine, 1993; Rutter, 1978, 1979). Finally, some authors suggest that various childhood conditions (e.g., hyperactivity, impulsivity, attentional deficits, sensation seeking) may lead to an increased probability of delinquent violence and adult psychopathy (Dalteg, Lindgren, & Levander, 1999; Frick, 1995, 1998; Lynam, 1996, 1998; Vitacco & Rogers, 2001; Vitelli, 1998). In direct contrast to these lines of theory and research, some findings suggest that no genetic factors (Fallon, 2006), family background variables (Hare, McPherson, & Forth, 1988), environmental variables (De Vita, Forth, & Hare, 1990), or childhood behaviour problems (Martens, 2000) are related to psychopathy. In summary, the evidence drawn from studies on the association between diverse genetic, familial, environmental, and particular childhood characteristics and the development of psychopathy in males provide mixed, inconclusive, and even contradictory results. Some authors suggest that such inconsistency may be due to the fact that there are multiple developmental pathways to psychopathy and different causal origins contribute to the development of different facets of psychopathy (i.e., affective, interpersonal, behavioural) (Forth & Burke, 1998; Hicks, Vaidyanathan, & Patrick, 2010; Marshall & Cooke, 1999).

Interaction of nature and nurture?

More recent studies on male psychopathy suggest the existence of an interaction between biological predispositions (e.g., brain damage, lowered serotonergic activity, and prefrontal deficits, personality traits, specifically, high impulsivity, and high behavioural activation) and aversive environmental factors (e.g., abuse, neglect, exposure to antisocial parents and/or to chaotic family environments) that are evidenced at greater rates among individuals who exhibit high levels of psychopathic characteristics (Harris, Rice, et al., 2001; Lykken, 1995; Marshall & Cooke, 1999; Paris, 1998). Although some predictors of psychopathy are reported, no single individual, familial, or social childhood behaviour problem seems to be a particularly good predictor of psychopathy in males (Martens, 2000).

Gender as a moderator

Recent research on risk factors for delinquent and antisocial behaviour suggests that the predictors of such behaviours, their manifestation, their quality, and their associations may vary across gender due to varying relationships between development and social expectations, social norms and social control experienced by male versus female children and youths (Catalano, Kosterman, Hawkins, & Newcomb, 1996; Farrington & Painter, 2003). Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that specific risk factors may enhance different developmental pathways resulting in the expression of psychopathy in males and females (Eley, Lichtenstein, & Stevenson, 1999; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Pugh, 1986; Henggeler, Edwards, & Borduin, 1987; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996; Widom & Ames, 1988). Alternatively, experts have postulated that the same variables may have a differential effect on the development and expression of antisocial behaviors in boys versus girls (Nicholls, Greaves, Greig, & Moretti, in press). As a specific example, in an examination of the implications of childhood separation from primary caregivers in an at risk sample of youth (i.e., engaged in truancy, substance use, behavioural problems; described as lying “midway along the continuum of risk” p. 1029) aged 11 to 16 years, Ang et al. (2014) concluded that gender moderated the relationship between separation from parents and psychopathy. Specifically, the boys who had experienced early separation (prior to age 3) from their parents received

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