



The role of symptoms of psychopathy in persistent violence over the criminal career into full adulthood



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The extant criminal career literature supports the assertion that risk factors for violent offending are the same as those for non-violent offending. However, such studies have not examined the role of psychopathic personality disturbance (PPD) in the development of persistent violence across the life course. A situational action theory perspective was used to help illustrate the utility of PPD in explaining persistent violent offending.

Methods: Convictions for violent and non-violent offenses were measured for Canadian male ($n = 262$) and female ($n = 64$) offenders at each year between ages 12 and 28. Semi-parametric group-based modeling was used to identify joint trajectories of violent and non-violent offending. Symptoms of adolescent PPD and other criminogenic risk factors were also measured.

Results: Through the joint trajectory model, five violent and five non-violent trajectories were identified. PPD emerged as a strong predictor of membership in the trajectory associated with chronic violent offending but lower levels of non-violent offending.

Conclusions: Contrary to earlier criminal career research, the most persistent violent offenders were not also the most frequent general offenders. Theories that help explain why individuals are involved in persistent violence are needed. Incorporating PPD into such a theoretical framework appears necessary.

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Introduction

Several criminal career studies have indicated that violent offending and general offending can be explained by the same risk factors (e.g., Capaldi & Patterson, 1996; Farrington, 1989). Not surprisingly, parsimonious theories that view violence as part of a general antisocial tendency are predominant (Capaldi & Patterson, 1996; DeLisi & Vaughn, 2014; Farrington, 1991, 1998). However, as Hart (1998) argued earlier, explanations of violence that did not consider psychopathic personality disturbance (PPD) were incomplete. Given that measures of PPD have been notably absent in criminal career research (Farrington, 2005; McCuish, Corrado, Lussier, & Hart, 2014), it is premature to conclude that specific explanations of violent offending are unwarranted.

The importance of PPD in predicting violence outcomes is well recognized within the literature on risk assessment. Some within this field have argued that PPD is the single best predictor of violent offending (e.g., Douglas, Vincent, & Edens, 2006; Harris, Rice, & Lalumière, 2001). Consequently, symptoms of this construct has been included in several violence risk assessment tools, such as the SAVRY (Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2002), HCR-20 (Webster, Douglas, Eaves, &

Hart, 1997), and VRAG (Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998). Just as the risk assessment literature can help guide criminal career researchers' incorporation of PPD as a key covariate of offending trajectories, the criminal career paradigm can help guide risk assessors' measurement of offending outcomes. Specifically, the typical approach within the violence risk assessment literature is to focus only on the 'next offense' (i.e., recidivism outcomes), instead of on the development of violent offending over the life course. From both a theoretical (e.g., Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visser, 1986; DeLisi & Piquero, 2011) and empirical (Lussier & Davies, 2011) perspective, the former approach is misleading as an indicator of the seriousness of an offender. In addition, focusing more narrowly on recidivism outcomes likely also underestimates the strength of the relationship between PPD and violence. Hart (1998) argued that more sophisticated analytic strategies that better accounted for the complexity of offending over time were necessary to adequately capture this relationship. Modeling violent offending trajectories is one method of capturing the complexity of patterns of violence over time (see Brame, Mulvey, & Piquero, 2001; MacDonald, Haviland, & Morral, 2009; Piquero, Brame, Mazerolle, & Haapanen, 2002). Thus far, however, the role of PPD in helping to explain the unfolding of violence trajectories has not been examined.

Retrospective and prospective longitudinal data from a sample of Canadian male ($n = 262$) and female ($n = 64$) adolescent offenders

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incarcerated between 1998 and 2001 were used to model joint trajectories of violent and non-violent offending. The use of an offender-based sample meant that the full range of violence involvement and the full range of symptoms of PPD were accounted for. Symptoms of PPD were measured using the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL: YV; Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003) to help explain variance in joint trajectories of violent and non-violent offending. The aim of the current study was to bring together one of the most important risk factors for violence according to the risk assessment literature (i.e., PPD), and one of the most comprehensive measures of an individual's criminal career (i.e., measures of offending trajectories).

Evidence for the relationship between PPD and violence

Although not all individuals with PPD are violent, and not all violent offenders have high symptoms of PPD, individuals with PPD are disproportionately involved in violence (Hare & Neumann, 2008; Hart & Hare, 1997; Ribeiro da Silva, Rijo, & Salekin, 2012). The relationship between symptoms of PPD and an earlier time to recidivism has been demonstrated in both youth and adult incarcerated populations (Corrado, Vincent, Hart, & Cohen, 2004; Douglas et al., 2006; Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1991; Serin, 1996; Vaughn & DeLisi, 2008; Vaughn, Howard, & DeLisi, 2008). Despite being one of the most important individual-level risk factors for violent offending, Vitacco, Neumann, Caldwell, Leistico, and Van Rybroek (2006) noted a clear lack of prospective longitudinal studies examining the relationship between PPD and persistent violence. In fact, there has been a general lack of research on the long-term predictive validity of PPD. Recently, McCuish et al. (2014) found that high scores on both the three and four factor models of the PCL: YV were indicative of involvement in chronic general offending from age 12 to 28. Using the same data, Corrado, McCuish, Hart, and DeLisi (2015) found that the influence of PPD symptoms on trajectory membership was maintained after controlling for several important criminogenic covariates. However, in both studies, contrary to expectation the affective and interpersonal factors of the PCL: YV were unrelated to chronic general offending. Corrado, McCuish, et al. (2015) proposed that these prototypical symptoms of PPD (see Cooke, Hart, Logan, & Michie, 2012; Hoff, Rypdal, Mykletun, & Cooke, 2012; Kreis & Cooke, 2011) were more well-suited to explaining persistent violent offending. The manner in which PPD appears to operate on the unfolding of a trajectory characterized by persistent violence is described below.

The relationship between PPD and persistent violence: A situational action perspective

The relatively few violence-specific criminological theories may be due to the assertion that general theories of serious criminality also sufficiently explain violent offending (Capaldi & Patterson, 1996; Farrington, 1991, 1998). Not surprisingly, there are even fewer criminological theories that specify the relationship between personality types, such as PPD, and persistent violence. If a relationship between PPD and persistent violence does exist, theories that help explain the causal mechanisms responsible for this relationship will become critical, as prediction alone cannot sufficiently explain the development of persistent violence (e.g., Laub, 2006). Wikström's situational action theory of violence (Wikström, 2006; Wikström & Treiber, 2007, 2009), at least potentially, provides a framework for specifying the complex hypothesized relationship between PPD and violence. Although situational action theory is an event-based perspective, Wikström and Treiber's (2009) description of the conditions that precipitate violent events are conditions that are also consistently present among individuals with PPD.

In situational action theory, the two main conditions facilitating violence are propensity and situational (e.g., environmental) context (Wikström & Treiber, 2009). In reference to propensity, Wikström and Treiber (2009) asserted that an individual's set of moral rules combined

with low levels of self-control increases their propensity to use violence as an action alternative (e.g., as an alternative to walking away or diffusing the conflict). They also argued that situational contexts such as intoxication, provocation, and peer influence facilitated violent offenses by increasing an offender's level of disinhibition. In a situational context not conducive to violence, an individual with a high propensity for violence will still offend, provided that external deterrent factors (e.g., presence of police, responsible adults) are absent or not recognized by the offender (Wikström & Treiber, 2009). A high-propensity individual, therefore, may be more likely to be involved in persistent violence than individuals with a low propensity, because the latter would be dependent upon the consistent manifestation of situational contexts that are conducive to violence.

Although testing situational action theory is not the purpose of the current study, through its concepts of propensity, situational context, and deterrence, this theory provides a framework for explaining why individuals with PPD are more likely to be involved in persistent violence. Regarding Wikström and Treiber's (2009) concept of violence propensity, Grettton, Hare, and Catchpole (2004) noted that adolescent offenders with PPD were characterized by a strong and long-term risk for violence that distinguished them from other offenders. PPD may also increase the likelihood of situational contexts that are conducive to violence. For example, early research indicated that individuals with PPD tended to commit violence indiscriminately (e.g., against both strangers and persons known to them, against both males and females), and were both instrumentally and reactively motivated. In contrast, individuals without PPD symptoms were more likely to require specific situational contexts to facilitate involvement in violence, such as a victim previously known to them or an event that elicited a strong emotional response (Hart & Dempster, 1997; Serin, 1991; Williamson, Hare, & Wong, 1987). In effect, the conditions necessary for violence are set at a lower threshold for individuals with PPD. Furthermore, regarding Wikström and Treiber's (2009) emphasis on factors that may deter even high propensity individuals in situational contexts conducive to violence, it is noteworthy that several studies have found that individuals with PPD were less sensitive to the possibility of punishment (Lykken, 1995; Newman, MacCoon, Vaughn, & Sadeh, 2005). Thus, factors known to deter other offenders may have less of an impact on individuals with PPD.

Finally, because symptoms of PPD are asserted to be at least moderately stable over time (Lynam, Caspi, Moffitt, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2007; Vachon, Lynam, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2012), from a developmental perspective on violence, it is likely that violence involvement will continue over the life course. In sum, situational action theory, although an event-based perspective, can help guide the specification of how individuals with PPD (a) have a high risk for violence, (b) have personality profiles that create situational contexts that keep them primed for violence, and (c) have personality symptoms associated with a lack of concern for consequences to themselves and others that limits the effectiveness of deterrence. However, there are several conceptual challenges associated with assessing the hypothesized association between PPD and persistent violence.

The association between PPD and persistent violence: Some conceptual challenges

The specific risk factors associated with persistently violent offenders are relatively unknown, in part because this type of offender is rarely found within the samples typically examined in criminal career research (Farrington, 1997; Piquero et al., 2002). Given the low prevalence of both PPD and persistent violence in general population samples, identifying risk factors for persistent violence likely requires research using adjudicated samples with sufficient base-rates of both PPD symptoms and violence (DeLisi, 2001; McCuish et al., 2014). By using a sample of formerly incarcerated serious and violent young

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