



If not fear, then what? A preliminary examination of psychopathic traits and the Fear Enjoyment Hypothesis[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Psychopathy is characterized by emotional and interpersonal dysfunction, an erratic lifestyle and antisocial behaviour. Research suggests that psychopaths lack fear (Fowles & Dindo, 2009; Lykken, 1995). Accordingly research demonstrates that psychopathy is associated with impaired fear acquisition/conditioning (Lopez et al., 2013), diminished fear-potentiated startle, (Patrick et al., 1993) and atypical physiological responses to fear-provoking stimuli (Benning et al., 2005). While one possible explanation is a lack of fear, another would be that psychopaths simply have a different interpretation of fear. The current study examined whether psychopathic traits are associated with positive experience and appraisal of fear-inducing situations. A sample of 114 students completed the SRP-III (Paulhus et al., 2015), described their own experience of fear (affective and physiological symptoms), and rated the extent to which they experienced positive and negative emotions in response to an excitement-inducing and a fear-inducing video stimulus. After viewing the “fear” video, people scoring higher on psychopathy gave higher ratings to positive affect items, and lower ratings to negative affect items. Further, when asked to define fear, individuals with psychopathic traits listed more positive descriptors of emotional and physiological experiences of fear. Findings provide preliminary support for the Fear Enjoyment Hypothesis.

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Much research has examined the role of fear within the construct of psychopathy. The consensus appears to be that individuals with psychopathic traits lack fear and this perspective is integral in several theoretical conceptualizations (i.e. Lykken, 1995; Fowles & Dindo, 2009). If people with psychopathic traits lack fear, the question then becomes: What *are* they experiencing in situations that would typically evoke a fearful response? The current study was designed to evaluate an alternative theoretical conceptualization, the Fear Enjoyment Hypothesis, which we developed to address this question.

Psychopathy is characterized by emotional and interpersonal dysfunction and antisocial tendencies (Hare, 2003), and can be operationally defined as consisting of two related, but independent factors. Factor 1 includes emotional and interpersonal traits, such as callousness, superficial charm, deceitfulness, manipulative tendencies and a lack of remorse and empathy. Factor 2 characteristics include early behaviour problems, poor behavioural control, irresponsibility and impulsivity. The two factors can be further divided into a four-factor model whereby Factor 1 can be subdivided into Interpersonal Manipulation, and Callous Affect, and Factor 2 can be subdivided into Erratic Lifestyle, and

Antisocial Behaviour (Hare & Neumann, 2008). Psychopathy has also been conceptualized as comprising three factors (e.g. Hall, Benning, & Patrick, 2004), but the measure that we have chosen follows the traditional factor structure.

Fear is thought to play a definitive role in the construct of psychopathy. Broadly defined, fear represents an individual's response to physical and/or psychological threat (Lang, Davis, & Ohman, 2000). Drawing on the evolutionary perspective, Lykken (1995) suggested that psychopathy reflects a lack of innate fear and/or dysfunction in the brain mechanisms responsible for fear conditioning. The Low Fear hypothesis suggests that the anticipation of punishment contingencies as a consequence of misdeeds prevents such behaviour. Likewise, people may avoid innately fear-inducing stimuli as the outcome of such interaction may be detrimental. According to Lykken individuals with psychopathic traits lack the anticipatory fear that is generally associated with threat or punishment. In typical fear provoking situations, individuals who exhibit psychopathic traits should not display a normative fear response (i.e. changes in physiology). Of note, several alternative theoretical perspectives of psychopathy including The Dual Process Model (Fowles & Dindo, 2009), The Integrated Emotions Systems Model (Blair, 2006), and The Triarchic Model (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009), also suggest fearlessness is an integral part of psychopathy.

Support for the Low Fear Hypothesis has been found using many methodologies, including fear potentiated startle (Patrick, Bradley, & Lang, 1993), physiological arousal (Benning, Patrick, & Iacono, 2005;

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Patrick, Cuthbert, & Lang, 1994), and Pavlovian conditioning paradigms (Birbaumer et al., 2005; Flor, Birbaumer, Hermann, Ziegler, & Patrick, 2002). One of the earliest studies examining psychopathic traits and fear arousal in anticipation of punishment was conducted by Hare (1965). Results demonstrated that psychopathic traits were related to lower and delayed arousal (as measured by electrodermal activity) when anticipating an electric shock, suggesting a lack of anticipatory fear.

Benning et al. (2005) found that individuals who were high on emotional interpersonal psychopathy traits (e.g. lack of empathy, shallow affect, deceitfulness) failed to demonstrate normal fear related response patterns. In fact, they showed a fear potentiated startle response deficit (i.e. they did not demonstrate the increased startle magnitude that is typical in response to aversive stimuli) and did not exhibit the increase in skin conductance that is typically associated with aversive stimuli. Conversely, the antisocial features of psychopathy (e.g. impulsivity, lack of behavioural controls) were associated with a relatively normal startle response pattern, suggesting that “abnormal” responding to aversive/fear-relevant stimuli may be specific to the emotional interpersonal psychopathy traits.

More recently, Lopez, Poy, Patrick, and Molto (2013) found that Factor 1 alone was associated with impaired fear acquisition, using a conditioning paradigm. Results were interpreted as lending support to the notion that low fear may represent a specific etiological pathway in the development of emotional interpersonal psychopathic traits. The deficit in fear conditioning demonstrated in this study has also been shown in a number of other empirical research investigations utilizing Pavlovian fear conditioning paradigms (Birbaumer et al., 2005; Flor et al., 2002). It should be noted that findings regarding subjective experiences of fear are mixed. There is some research that does not support the idea of a general lack of fear, suggesting that the subjective evaluation of fear stimuli is similar for psychopathic and nonpsychopathic participants (e.g. Pham & Philippot, 2010). However, other studies have indeed found that subjective evaluations of fear stimuli do differ as a function of psychopathic traits (e.g. Birbaumer et al., 2005; Marsh & Blair, 2008).

If, as existing theory and research suggests, individuals high in psychopathy do not experience a typical fear response, then what are they experiencing when exposed to fear provoking stimuli? The cinematic legend Alfred Hitchcock (1949) proposed that people actually enjoy the experience of fear. Whether it is engaging in thrilling and fear-provoking activities such as skydiving or riding a roller coaster, or attending a horror movie, people often seem drawn to situations that may provoke a fearful response. According to Hitchcock, the reason individuals enjoy such activities is in part due to the fact that they do not have to “pay the price” and do not feel exposed to any actual danger. Hitchcock’s perspective on the enjoyment of fear is consistent with the low fear hypothesis (Lykken, 1995) in that if individuals high in psychopathy lack the anticipatory fear response, they are unlikely to experience forewarning, and thus they do not believe that a threat or punishment represents any real danger. In addition, they would also be unlikely to demonstrate the typical physiological and motor reactions that have been associated with the fear response. Hitchcock’s perspective extends this approach by suggesting that when one does not believe there to be a possibility of danger, that one then actually enjoys the experience, which may indeed be the case among individuals who exhibit psychopathic traits. As research suggests that the low fear response may be specific to Factor 1 traits (e.g. Benning et al., 2005), it may also be the case that the Fear Enjoyment Hypothesis is specific to these features of psychopathy.

Some previous research on fear and psychopathy lends support to the Fear Enjoyment Hypothesis. For example, Patrick et al. (1993) found that psychopathic individuals did not demonstrate a normative fear response pattern when exposed to pleasant and unpleasant images. In fact, the startle response magnitude and latency for individuals with psychopathic traits did not differ as a function of exposure to pleasant

and unpleasant visual images and this pattern was specific to the emotional and interpersonal traits of psychopathy. The authors suggested that these findings indicate a fear deficit, but the similar responses to pleasant and unpleasant stimuli may suggest enjoyment of the unpleasant stimuli.

Levenston, Patrick, Bradley, and Lang (2000) similarly found that psychopathic offenders demonstrated a diminished startle response to aversive images (threat and victim scenes). Further, during the time period at which a shift occurs between attentional and emotional processing the startle response pattern of the psychopathic group was the same for pleasant and aversive stimuli. Further, they rated aversive images as less unpleasant and showed heart rate deceleration in response to pleasant and aversive stimuli. One potential explanation presented by the authors suggested that these findings could be interpreted as “a pleasurable response to the distress of others” (p. 381).

The purpose of this study was to directly test the Fear Enjoyment hypothesis. We expected that people with higher psychopathy scores (specifically Factor 1) should 1) experience more positive emotion and less negative emotion in response to a fear-inducing stimulus, 2) report similar positive affective experiences in response to both fear-inducing and exciting stimuli, and 3) be more likely to utilize positive descriptors when describing experiences of fear.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The sample was comprised of 114 undergraduates who received course credit in exchange for participation. Participants were predominantly first year (78.9%, $n = 90$), Caucasian (82.5%, $n = 94$), and female (69.3%, $n = 79$).

1.2. Measures

1.2.1. Fear/excitement videos

Participants watched two short videos (approximately 2 min). The first clip was intended to elicit feelings of excitement/positive affect, and the second to elicit feelings of fear/negative affect. The excitement-inducing clip was from YouTube (www.youtube.com) and depicted a woman skydiving. The fear-inducing clip depicting a man being buried alive was from the movie “The Vanishing” (Brezner & Sluizer, 1993).

1.2.2. Affective appraisal

A questionnaire assessed positive and negative emotional reactions to the videos. After viewing each video, participants rated the extent to which they experienced various positive and negative emotions (1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*)). Positive and negative adjectives were chosen from dictionary lists of synonyms for “fear” and “excitement” (Miriam-Webster, 2014; see Table 1 for adjectives). The positive and negative affect subscales demonstrated high reliability for the fear ($\alpha = .85$ & $.80$ for positive and negative, respectively) and excitement ($\alpha = .91$ for both subscales) videos. Maximum-likelihood factor analyses with direct oblimin rotation (one for each video) indicated a two-factor solution that supported the “positive” and “negative” labels.

Two maximum likelihood factor analyses (one for each video stimulus) with direct oblimin rotation were conducted to examine the factor structure of the affect appraisal items. Eigen values over 1.0, inspection of scree plots, and parallel analyses converged on a two factor solution. All items assumed to be positive loaded on one factor, and all negative items loaded on the other. There were some items that had relatively high secondary loadings (between .3 and .4); however loadings on the expected factor were much higher (see Table 1). Factor scores were used as positive and negative affect scores in the correlational analyses.

Participants answered open-ended questions regarding personal experiences of fear; “What does fear feel like for you?”, “What kind of

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