



Psychopathic traits of business and psychology students and their relationship to academic success



Jonathan Hassall^a, Daniel Boduszek^{a,*}, Katie Dhingra^b

^a University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, United Kingdom

^b Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 April 2014

Received in revised form 5 January 2015

Accepted 6 March 2015

Available online 27 March 2015

Keywords:

Psychopathy

Students

Academic success

The self-report psychopathy scale (SRP-III)

ABSTRACT

The notion that high levels of psychopathic trait leads to career success in the business sector has become a popular point of theorising in recent years, with research providing support for the alleged over-representation of psychopathy in the financial sector, and the existence of a relationship between psychopathy and professional success. A cross-sectional design was employed to compare psychopathy scores of business and psychology students, as well as to examine the psychopathy-academic success relationship. Participants were 263 participants recruited from a UK university. Results revealed greater psychopathic traits in business students relative to psychology students on all four factors of psychopathy. Furthermore, hierarchical multiple regression indicated that the four psychopathy factors, gender, age, study hours, and course explain 14% of variance in grade outcome. Two variables made unique statistical contributions to the model with antisocial behaviour and gender (male) negatively related to grade outcome. Theoretical and practical implications of our findings are discussed.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Despite the popular public perception that high levels of psychopathy are inextricably linked to extreme violence and criminality, there are many researchers (Boddy, 2005; Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 1995; Stevens, Deuling, & Armenakis, 2012) who contend that psychopaths exist among us, seldom crossing paths with psychiatric institutions or the criminal justice system. Some (Boddy, 2005; Stevens et al., 2012) go on to suggest that psychopathy may even be adaptive in certain environments; when 'success' is contingent upon distancing oneself from competitors emotionally. One such environment may be the business sector, in which empathising with rival companies may hamper one's ultimate goal of dominating the market, which often involves bankrupting opponents (Ouimet, 2010). It is the link between psychopathy and the potential for success in business that the current study seeks to explore; it represents a sizeable gap in the literature, which only a couple of studies have attempted to empirically explore (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010; Ullrich, Farrington, & Coid, 2008).

It has been proposed by theorists that business is one of the sectors most prone to attracting 'successful' psychopathic individuals,

often dubbing them 'corporate psychopaths' (Babiak et al., 2010; Boddy, 2005; Hare, 1995). While speculation by media and scholars alike (e.g., Boddy, 2011) concerning the role of psychopathic individuals in large scale economic collapse is larger than evidence would substantiate, there is nothing illogical concerning the connection of psychopathic traits with crimes of fraud. Due to the dishonesty, intrinsic self-preservation and callousness featured in many models of psychopathy (Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 2003; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996), crimes such as fraud, which offer a large potential reward for minimal effort, may be the 'logical choice' (Hare, 1995). Measures of psychopathy have been demonstrated to be predictive of various offences (Walters, 2003), including fraud (Hare, Clark, Grann, & Thornton, 2000; Kroner & Mills, 2001), lending this theoretical link some strength.

According to a survey by PriceWaterhouseCoopers. (2014), 37% of 5429 organisations in 40 countries report significant fraud, with the financial services industry being at a 49% overall risk of economic crime. The report found the profile of a 'typical internal fraudster' to be a male, aged 31–40 with a 1st class undergraduate degree plus graduate education. This is interesting because of its parallel with incidence of psychopathy; being male increases the likelihood of having high psychopathic traits significantly (Meloy, 1997; Weizmann-Henelius, Viemero, & Eronen, 2004) as does choosing business/commerce as one's discipline at undergraduate level (Wilson & McCarthy, 2011), and committing fraud (Kroner & Mills, 2001).

* Corresponding author at: Department of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield HD1 3DH, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 (0)1484 47 1887.

E-mail address: d.boduszek@hud.ac.uk (D. Boduszek).

Ullrich et al. (2008) investigated the relationship between psychopathy factors (interpersonal, affective, impulsivity/lifestyle, and antisocial) and 'life-success' in both a professional/monetary sense (operationalised as various wealth/status indicators; social class, income, number of rooms in home, etc.) and a romantic sense (e.g., stability and quality relationship), in a community sample of 304 men. Their findings revealed no significant relationship between the interpersonal factor (e.g., deceitfulness and manipulation) and any form of 'life-success' (professional or romantic), and that the lifestyle (e.g., impulsivity, irresponsibility) and antisociality factors (e.g., social deviance, criminality) of psychopathy negatively predicted professional/monetary success. The affective factor (e.g., lack of empathy, remorse, or guilt) was negatively associated with both aspects of a successful life. These findings may, however, be explained by the low prevalence of individuals with notably high psychopathy levels among the general population (estimated to be about 1%; Boddy, Ladyshevsky, & Galvin, 2010), thus relationships between psychopathy and 'life success' may be less visible at population level. Furthermore, factors such as age and gender, potentially important confounding factors of the psychopathy–life–success relationship were not controlled for.

Babiak et al. (2010) achieved more success in the search for 'successful psychopathy'. Using the psychopathy checklist-revised (PCL-R, Hare, 2003) and '360° assessment' (a popular performance assessment in business contexts), the authors aimed to establish prevalence of psychopathy in their sample of 203 corporate professionals and assess the relationships between psychopathy factors and performance assessments. Results indicated the prevalence of psychopathy was markedly higher in their sample than in community samples. Moreover, individuals with higher psychopathic traits were considered 'high potential' candidates, and occupied positions of greater seniority. A positive correlation was also found between psychopathy scores and *charisma/presentation style*, which is a superordinate category for skills such as good communication, strategic thinking and creativity (Neumann, Hare, & Newman, 2007). Psychopathy was also negatively correlated to *responsibility/performance* ratings, which covers mindfulness of others and managerial skills. Based on their findings, the authors concluded that high psychopathy levels appear to compensate for poor performance, allowing individuals to continue progressing in the business world on merit of their 'style' and interpersonal skills.

Though the dependent variables measuring 'success' in Babiak et al. (2010) study and Ullrich et al. (2008) study differ, the incongruence between the research groups' results and conclusions may be due to the increase in general psychopathy prevalence among business sector workers, estimated to be 3% (Babiak et al., 2010), versus the 1% at general population level (Boddy et al., 2010). This exemplifies the importance of sample selection in studies aiming to uncover a latent interaction, particularly in the context of psychopathy and success. Although gaining access to corporate professionals may be an efficacious way of investigating corporate psychopathy, it is not the only way. Wilson and McCarthy (2011) found that the higher levels of psychopathy associated with the business world (Boddy et al., 2010) were observable at undergraduate level, using a sample of 903 Psychology students, with majors in Commerce, Arts, Law and Science students. A weak yet statistically significant relationship was found between 'primary' psychopathy (manipulative and selfish traits) and choosing Commerce as one's degree.

The present research has two aims. The first is to compare levels of psychopathy between business and psychology students. Based on previous findings of a generally higher prevalence of psychopathy in the financial sector (Boddy et al., 2010; Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013; Wilson & McCarthy, 2011), it was predicted that business

students would report significantly higher levels of psychopathic traits than psychology students. Given the conflicting findings in the existing literature (Babiak et al., 2010; PriceWaterhouse Coopers, 2014), the second aim is to clarify the relationship between the four factors of psychopathy and undergraduate academic success while controlling for covariates.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 263 third year university students, 148 of whom were Psychology undergraduates, and 115 Business undergraduates. The sample consisted of 104 males and 158 females. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 42 years ($M = 21.66$, $SD = 3.61$). The ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 34.2% White (British), 9.5%, White (other), 5.3% Black/Black British, 0.8% British mixed, 6.8% Chinese, 4.2% Indian, 3.4% Pakistani, 1.9% Bangladeshi, 4.2% Asian/Asian British 'other', and 29.7% undisclosed. In addition, 38% of participants indicated their marital status as single, 26.3% in a relationship, 4.6% married, 0.4% divorced, and 30.8% of participants did not disclose this information.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. The self-report psychopathy scale

SRP-III; Paulhus, Neumann, and Hare (in press) was used to measure Psychopathic traits. The SRP-III is a 64-item measure that yields a total score as well as four sub-scale scores:

- (1) Interpersonal manipulation (IPM), 16 items, (e.g., "I think I could "beat" a lie detector"; "I purposely flatter people to get them on my side").
- (2) Callous affect (CA), 16 items, (e.g., "I'm more tough-minded than other people"; "It tortures me to see an injured animal").
- (3) Erratic lifestyle (ELS), 16 items, (e.g., "I always plan out my weekly activities"; "I'd be good at a dangerous job because I make fast decisions").
- (4) Antisocial behaviour (ASB), 16 items, (e.g., "I never shoplifted from a store"; "I was convicted of a serious crime").

Items are scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). In the present sample, Cronbach's alphas were all acceptable: .82 for IPM; .77 for CA; .78 for ELS; .73 for ASB.

2.2.2. Demographic factors

Age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, estimated independent study time per week (in hours), and average mark achieved last year were assessed.

2.3. Procedure

Paper copies of the questionnaire were distributed after approval of relevant tutors in 8 separate classes, along with an oral introduction. The introduction included briefly outlining the primary research aim, what the participant can expect from the questionnaire, and emphasised their anonymity, among other ethical considerations. Participation was voluntary without any form of reward. Participants were debriefed upon completion of the questionnaire.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/890106>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/890106>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)