

# Primary and secondary psychopathic-traits and their relationship to perception and experience of emotion

Ariel L. Del Gaizo, Diana M. Falkenbach\*

*Department of Psychology, City University of New York at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 445 West 59th Street, New York, NY 10019, United States*

Received 5 October 2007; received in revised form 19 March 2008; accepted 27 March 2008

## Abstract

Deficits in the ability to perceive and experience affect are associated with psychopaths. However, past research is inconsistent, perhaps because it measures psychopathy homogeneously rather than using the two-factor structure. This study considered psychopathic-like-traits in college students as heterogeneous (primary and secondary), and evaluated their relationship to the processing and experience of positive (PE) and negative affect (NE). Results generally indicated that primary psychopathic-traits were positively correlated with accuracy of perception of fearful faces and PE, and negatively associated with NE, while secondary psychopathic-traits were not related to emotional recognition or PE, but positively associated with NE.

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Psychopathy; Psychopathic-traits; Successful psychopaths; Psychopathy and emotion; Emotional perception; Emotional experience; Affective processing; Affect recognition

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Psychopathy

Cleckley (1941) describes the psychopath as lacking a conscience. Subsequently, primary and secondary psychopathy (associated with Factor 1 (F1) and Factor 2 (F2), respectively of psychopathy measures; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995) have been distinguished (for a review see Skeem, Poythress, Edens, Lilienfeld, & Cale, 2003). For example, primary psychopaths are thought to have a constitutional deficit that leads to callous and manipulative behavior, superficial relations, and a lack of negative affect such as guilt, fear or anxiety; they plan their behavior and socially rank themselves higher than others. Secondary psychopathy develops from environ-

mental causes, such as parental abuse or rejection, resulting in an underlying emotional problem associated with neuroticism, impulsivity, aggression and emotional reactivity (Blackburn & Maybury, 1985; Karpman, 1941; Kosson & Newman, 1995; Lykken, 1995; Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones, 1999; Mealey, 1995; Morrison & Gilbert, 2001). Their “disturbed emotional capacities may often manifest in hostile reactivity that interferes with stable relationships and adaptive functioning” (Poythress & Skeem, 2005, p. 178). Research utilizing cluster analyses confirms the existence of groups that parallel theoretical descriptions of primary and secondary psychopathy (Falkenbach, Poythress, & Creevy, 2008; Hicks, Markon, Patrick, Krueger, & Newman, 2004; Vassileva, Kosson, Abramowitz, & Conrod, 2005). Despite these findings, most research treats psychopathy as a homogenous concept, while greater validity and reliability of results may stem from evaluating it heterogeneously (Hicks et al., 2004).

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 212 237 8361; fax: +1 212 237 8930.  
E-mail address: [dfalkenbach@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:dfalkenbach@jjay.cuny.edu) (D.M. Falkenbach).

### 1.2. Psychopathy and emotional recognition

Theory indicates that psychopaths may process emotions differently than non-psychopaths (Cleckley, 1976; Lykken, 1995); psychopaths are believed to be incapable of efficiently understanding, utilizing, or grasping the meaning of affective aspects of language (Williamson, Harpur, & Hare, 1991). These emotional deficits may interfere with moral socialization and therefore, make an individual susceptible to engaging in antisocial behavior (Wootton, Frick, Shelton, & Silverthorn, 1997). Research (Blair, 1995; Hare, 1999; Lorenz & Newman, 2002) generally supports a link between the antisocial standard of living of psychopaths and difficulty processing emotional facial and vocal expressions of distress (i.e., fear and sadness). However, there is inconsistency in the findings. Some research demonstrates that juveniles (Blair, Budhani, Colledge, & Scott, 2005) and adults (Blair, Mitchell, & Richell, 2002) with psychopathic-traits in forensic (Blair et al., 2004) and college samples (Montagne et al., 2005) have difficulty identifying fearful faces and voices, other research has found difficulty identifying only sad voices (Stevens, Charman, & Blair, 2001), while facial affect recognition research has found they have difficulty recognizing both sadness and fear (Blair & Coles, 2000; Blair, Colledge, Murray, & Mitchell, 2001; Stevens et al., 2001). These researchers hypothesize that psychopaths do not recognize distress cues from their “victim” and therefore do not pair their antisocial behavior with the distress of others (Blair, 1995). However, Hastings (2005) found that psychopathy was related to a deficit in recognizing happy and sad faces at low intensity levels. Additionally, Kosson, Suchy, and Mayer (2002) found that an adult psychopathic group was more likely to be deficient in identifying the emotion disgust and better at recognizing anger on faces than non-psychopaths. Book (2005) also found that psychopathic inmates were better at identifying emotional facial cues, specifically fear. The authors hypothesized that psychopaths might have this sensitive awareness because, in order to be deceitful they must be skilled at identifying emotions that indicate distress.

These inconsistencies in findings may be because past research evaluates psychopathy homogeneously ignoring indications that the two types of psychopathy may be differentially associated with the perception of emotional cues. Research investigating other aspects of emotional perception (e.g., startle reflex to pictures or sounds) shows different relationships between the subtypes and emotional processing (e.g., Vanman, Mejia, Dawson, Schell, & Raine, 2003). One possibility is that those with primary psychopathic-traits, who are callous, but charming and foster relationships for manipulation and conning purposes, may need to, as Book (2005) suggested, be better at identifying emotional facial cues, specifically fear and anger, in order to be successfully deceitful or know when to change strategies. However, secondary psychopaths, who tend to be

reactively aggressive and demonstrate hostile attribution biases, demonstrate more errors in emotional perception.

### 1.3. Psychopaths and emotional experience

Psychopaths are also believed to lack the capacity to feel emotions, such as fear, guilt, or anxiety (Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 1970; Mealey, 1995). These unpleasant emotional states combined together are considered negative emotionality (NE; Hicks & Patrick, 2006; Levenston, Patrick, Bradley, & Lang, 2000). When the types of psychopathy are differentiated in terms of affective experience, primary psychopaths are defined by deficient anxiety, guilt and fear, which suggests a low NE profile, and secondary psychopaths are characterized as having more neuroticism, impulsivity, depression, anger, and distress (Karpman, 1941; Lykken, 1995), which suggests a high NE profile. The empirical research in this area is somewhat inconsistent. The most prominent results are consistent with primary psychopathy traits being negatively related to NE (Patrick, 1994; Verona, Patrick, & Joiner, 2001) and secondary psychopathy traits being positively associated with NE (e.g., Hale, Goldstein, Abramowitz, Calamari, & Kosson, 2004; Hicks & Patrick, 2006; Shine & Hobson, 1997). However, other results suggest that F1 (Hale et al., 2004; Vitale, Smith, Brinkley, & Newman, 2002) and F2 are unrelated to NE (Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989).

There has been little research considering psychopathy and positive emotionality (PE), or the experience of emotions associated with extraversion, dominance, ambition and engagement with others. However, PE is important as it typically reflects lack of psychological distress and problems, and has implications in terms of treatment amenability and strategies. When typologies are considered, PE is uncovered in definitions of primary psychopathy which includes high social dominance, determination, extraversion, and striving for maximum extrinsic gain (Karpman, 1941), and these same people who lack empathy and anxiety may present a particular type of risk to society, different than secondary psychopaths who may have less PE resulting from rejection, alienation and difficulty in social situations (Karpman, 1941). Research suggests that F1 is positively related to PE, whereas, F2 is negatively correlated with PE (Hicks et al., 2004; Verona et al., 2001).

### 1.4. Current study

The current study evaluated the relationship between emotional perceptual abilities, emotional experience (NE and PE), and psychopathic-traits in a non-forensic sample. Recent research with these samples has found evidence for diverse expressions of psychopathic-traits across the population; (Skeem et al., 2003), exploring psychopathy as a dimensional construct (Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003; Levenson et al., 1995), and consequently, research on noninstitutionalized samples is important for making results generalizable to more individuals (Lilienfeld,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/892223>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/892223>

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