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A new model of psychopathy

by

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Introduction

The concept of psychopathy has long been of interest within the criminal justice system, often presented as the causal antecedent to serial violent and sexual offences. Despite this, psychopathy has remained difficult to assess, with research in the area compromised by the absence of an established definition of the disorder. The first comprehensive conceptualisation of psychopathy was proposed by Hervey Cleckley in 1941. Cleckley suggested the prototypical psychopath to be characterised by the following 16 traits: superficial charm, absence of delusions, absence of “nervousness”, unreliability, untruthfulness, lack of remorse and shame, antisocial behaviour, poor judgement and failure to learn by experience, pathological egocentricity, poverty in affective reactions, loss of insight, unresponsiveness in interpersonal relations, fantastic and uninviting behaviour, suicide rarely carried out, impersonal sex life, and failure to follow any life plan.

This Cleckleyan representation of psychopathy served as the foundation for designing widely utilised psychopathic assessment tools, namely the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL) and its updated version, the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R). The PCL-R is most often conceptualised as consisting of four factors: (1) callous affect, (2) interpersonal manipulation, (3) erratic lifestyle, and (4) antisocial/criminal behaviour. Psychopathy, as assessed using the PCL-R and the associated self-reported measures, has been reported to be predictive of recidivism. However, when considering numerous items within the measure pertain directly to criminal and antisocial behaviour alongside the suggestion that future behaviour is best predicted by past behaviour, such findings are not surprising. Indeed, the formulation of psychopathy as grasped by the PCL(-R) and its derivatives, is weighted heavily towards indicators of behavioural expressions of the disorder, such as deviancy and maladjustment, which can have a profound influence on the scales’ predictive utility for criminal behaviour. For instance, the exclusion of factor 4 of the PCL-R (encompassing items that relate to

antisocial behaviour, including poor behaviour controls, early behaviour problems, juvenile delinquency, revocation of conditional release, and criminal versatility) reduces the predictive validity of the measure in regards to future reoffending. Even though the affective and interpersonal manipulation components correspond with Cleckley's original conceptualisation of a psychopathic personality, erratic lifestyle and antisocial behaviour more closely resemble measures of criminal behaviour and Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD). Notably, prior research revealed that only the affective and interpersonal factors' items work equivalently well across race and gender, with poor generalisability of the remaining factors being reported. Further still, antisocial traits were found to diminish over time, suggesting that the generalisability of this element of the construct may also be affected by the age of respondents.

The essence of the psychopathy disorder seems to be captured more successfully through assessments of affective deficits and interpersonal unresponsiveness. The proneness to contravene social and legal norms, on the other hand, appears to be *a possible behavioural outcome* of a psychopathic personality. In line with such a notion, a growing body of evidence suggests that psychopathic personalities can thrive in both criminal and non-criminal contexts. For example, the prevalence of psychopathic traits was demonstrated to be higher in a corporate sample than that found in community samples. Interestingly, heightened psychopathy scores in U.S. presidents were correlated with a better-rated presidential performance. As such, if criminal/antisocial tendencies are just one possible manifestation of psychopathy, other non-criminal/antisocial behaviours in which psychopaths may partake should also be accounted for. A simplified solution, therefore, would be to exclude antisocial items from psychopathy measures altogether.

Our model of psychopathy

Although Cleckley's conceptualisation of psychopathy received the most widespread acceptance among researchers and clinicians, some of the traits listed in his clinical profile, such as pathological egocentricity, are largely missing from the existing psychopathy assessment tools. Further, we have recently suggested that criminal/antisocial tendencies are the consequence of psychopathic traits, rather than an integral part of the disorder, and individuals with increased psychopathic traits may be successful in both criminal and non-criminal endeavours. Thus, given the broad spectrum of activities in which psychopaths may engage, the inclusion of antisocial items in psychopathy scales appears counterproductive. Instead, there is a need for a clean personality model of psychopathy, which could be used among both forensic and non-forensic populations. Accordingly, new generation of research which distinguishes between personality deviation and social deviance is warranted.

In an attempt to address these issues, we sought to create and validate a brief self-report scale of psychopathic personality traits for research purposes (the Psychopathic Personality Traits Scale - PPTS) and are currently working on a diagnostic tool which will be based on the new theoretical model we have devised. This new model grasps the essence of a psychopathic personality regardless of respondents' age, gender, cultural background, and criminal history. Central to our new model of psychopathy are four components: affective responsiveness, cognitive responsiveness, interpersonal manipulation, and egocentricity. The *affective responsiveness* component reflects characteristics of low affective empathy and emotional shallowness. The *cognitive responsiveness* component measures the ability to understand the emotional state of other, mentally represent another person's emotional processes, and emotionally engage with others at a cognitive level. The *interpersonal manipulation* aspect reflects characteristics such as superficial charm, grandiosity, and deceitfulness. Finally, *egocentricity* assesses an individual's tendency to focus on one's own

interests, beliefs, and attitudes. Our research explorations to date have displayed empirical evidence of this new conceptualisation of psychopathy, validating the model's utility in a sample of 1,794 inmates from maximum and medium security prisons, and over 3000 participants from non-forensic settings.

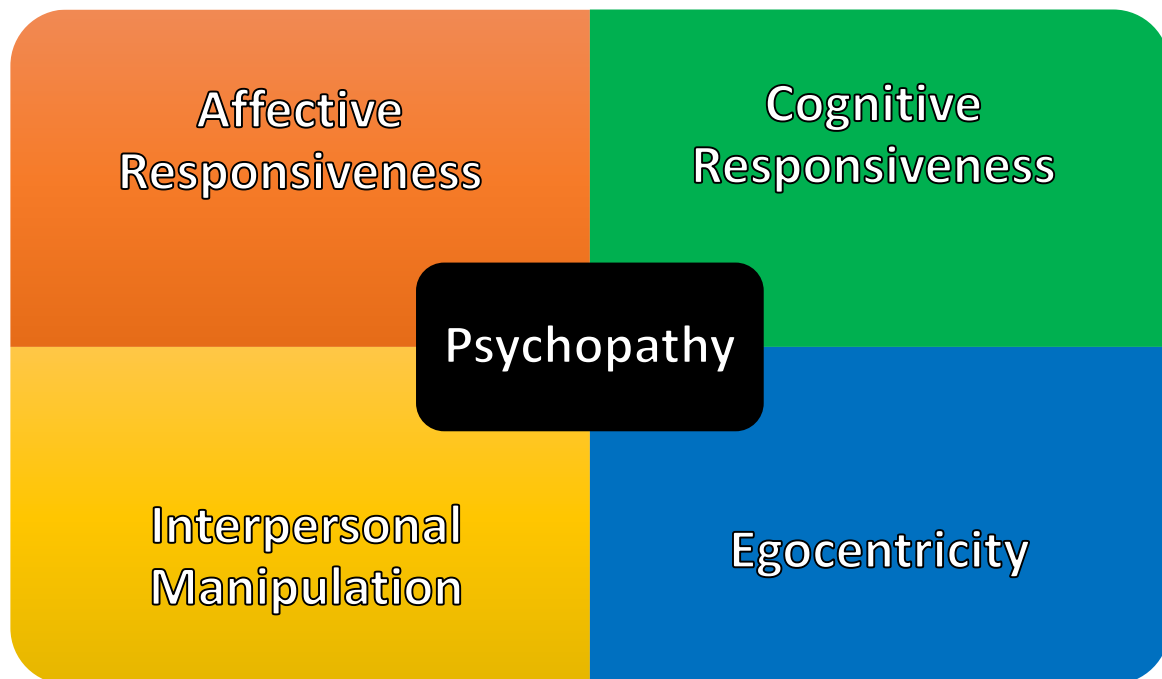


Figure 1. A new model of psychopathy proposed by Professor Dan Boduszek and his colleagues

A noteworthy addition to these recent findings are our earlier results which demonstrated the moderating role that intelligence appears to have in the relationship between psychopathy and emotional responding, indicating that psychopaths with higher intelligence can respond in a socially desirable manner to emotionally provoking stimuli. To verify whether deficiency in cognitive responsiveness to emotional states of others is a universal feature of psychopathy or is contingent on intelligence levels, it is our suggestion that future research which makes use of our newly evidenced model of psychopathy should control for respondents' IQ. Of importance, such research challenging the widely accepted notion of psychopathy and associated factors can also challenge the assumptions on which

current criminal justice practices are based, subsequently leading to improved risk assessment, treatment provision, and prevention strategies.

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Bios:

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