

Comparison of murderers with recidivists and first time incarcerated offenders
from U.S. prisons on psychopathy and identity as a criminal: An exploratory
analysis

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Abstract

Purpose: Previous research conceptualized murderers as highly callous and self-gratifying individuals, offending as a result of psychopathic tendencies. The current exploration sought to verify whether murderers differ on psychopathy and criminal social identity from recidivistic and first time incarcerated offenders.

Methods: The study compared an opportunistic sample of murderers ($n = 94$), recidivists ($n = 266$), and first time offenders ($n = 118$) on criminal social identity (3 factors: cognitive centrality, in-group affect, and in-group ties) and psychopathy (4 factors: callous affect, interpersonal manipulation, erratic lifestyle, antisocial behavior).

Results: Recidivists scored significantly higher on cognitive centrality and in-group ties than murderers. Recidivists score significantly higher than first time incarcerated offenders or murderers on the erratic lifestyle and interpersonal manipulation factors of psychopathy. Additionally, recidivists scored significantly higher on antisocial behavior compared to first time offenders. All three groups of prisoners did not differ in terms of callous affect.

Conclusion: Contrary to previous research and media portrayals of homicide perpetration being rooted in psychopathic tendencies such as callous affect, the present findings found no support for such a conceptualization of the crime. Moreover, unsurprisingly, it appears murderers have less developed criminal cognitions than other offending groups.

Keywords: Murderers; Recidivists; First time incarcerated offenders; Psychopathy; Criminal social identity

Introduction

According to legal definitions, murder (i.e., the unlawful killing of a person with malice aforethought) and manslaughter (i.e., voluntary or involuntary killing without malice) are the two offenses that constitute homicide (18 U.S.C. §§ 1111, 1112). Homicide offenders, especially those with the intent to kill, receive the most severe sentences, including life and death sentences (Cassel & Bernstein, 2007). Further, while homicide cases, and serial homicide offenses in particular, tend to attract much media attention, scientific research into psychological factors associated with committing such crimes is limited (Kraemer, Lord, & Heilbrun, 2004). In considering the fact that the average cost of murder has been estimated at \$24 million (DeLisi *et al.*, 2010), this lack of empirical investigation is somewhat surprising.

Throughout history, murder has received widespread attention within popular culture, often the central storyline in many successful crime fiction works and the currency of media outlets throughout the world. Media portrayals of murderers as psychopaths, alongside the public's fascination with the crime, particularly in the aftermath of high profile cases, has led to a common distorted view of a murderer in public perception. Lilienfeld and Arkowitz (2007) exploring the depth of this popularized view found that searching the term “psychopathic murderer” within online search engines attests to such a misconception, resulting in over 12,500 different article hits, based largely upon sensationalized conjecture. Whilst framing murder as rooted in callous and premeditated features perpetrated by psychopathic offenders seeking out victims is arguably, the result of artistic license afforded to the entertainment industry, Babiak, Neumann and Hare (2010) highlight when this is the public's only exposure to psychopathy, widespread misunderstanding is to be expected. Clearly, the lack of distinction between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ within popular culture portrayals, has led to the notion of a psychopath becoming synonymous with that of a murderer.

Psychopathy, often conceptualized as a constellation of interpersonal (e.g., deceitfulness, superficial charm, grandiosity), affective (e.g., lack of empathy, remorse, or guilt), lifestyle (e.g. impulsivity, irresponsibility), and behavioral (e.g., social deviance, criminality) features (Hare & Neumann, 2008), has been recognized as a crucial psychological construct within the criminal justice system (DeLisi, 2016; Hart & Hare, 1997). Thirty five percent of homicide offenders (Hodgins, Mednick, Brenann, Schulsiger, & Engberg, 1996) were noted for increased psychopathy scores. With a prevalence rate oscillating between 15 to 25 percent in the federal offender population (Lilienfeld & Arkowitz, 2007; Woodworth & Porter, 2002), psychopathy is also a significant risk factor for violent recidivism (see Dhingra & Boduszek, 2013 for a review). In a sample of 52 homicidal and non-homicidal child molesters, Firestone, Bradford, Greenberg, Larose, and Curry (1998) revealed that murderers scored significantly higher (two *SDs* above the mean) on total psychopathy than non-murderers. Moreover, laboratory based research reported evidence of diminished negative reactions to violence in psychopathic murderers (Gray, Hayward & Snowden, 2003), which appears to suggest abnormal belief systems surrounding violence and may explain the perpetration of homicide. Beyond the proposed relationship between a lack of affective responsiveness and the perpetration of homicide, statistics reveal prisoners categorized as psychopaths to be five times more likely to engage in violent recidivism than non-psychopaths (Serin & Amos, 1995). Given the proposed but unclear causal nature of psychopathy upon the perpetration of homicide, further empirical exploration is warranted in order to clarify the reliability of such a relationship.

Another salient psychosocial factor in explaining criminal behavior appears to be the concept of criminal social identity (CSI; Boduszek & Hyland, 2011; Boduszek, Dhingra, & Debowska, 2016). The model of CSI was proposed to comprise three facets: cognitive centrality, in-group affect, and in-group ties. Cognitive centrality emphasizes the cognitive

importance of belonging to a criminal group. Criminal identity for those with increased scores on this aspect of CSI is interpreted as central to their self-concept; they are thus more likely to accept and act in accordance with norms established by the reference group. In-group affect pertains to the positive emotional valence of belonging to a criminal group. Finally, in-group ties refers to the psychological perception of resemblance and emotional connection with other members of a particular group.

It has been suggested that criminal social identity may vary across groups of offenders (Walters, 2003). For instance, Boduszek, Hyland, Bourke, Shevlin, and Adamson (2013b) studied the role of criminal social identity in predicting violent offending within a sample of male recidivistic offenders from a maximum-security prison. Violent offenders, in comparison with non-violent offenders, were significantly more likely to score high on cognitive centrality and low on in-group affect. These findings reveal the importance of the different aspects of criminal social identity for building a better understanding of violent criminal behavior. Nonetheless, even though homicide offenders were included in Boduszek *et al.*'s (2013b) sample of violent offenders, they were not distinguished from perpetrators of non-homicidal violent acts. Given the standing of homicide as the most extreme form of violent offending and murderers' disregard for the life of others, it appears that perpetrators of this particular offense may be unique in their construction of social identity.

The Current Focus

Although in psychological terms murder differs considerably from manslaughter because it involves the *intent* to kill, prior studies tended to utilize mixed samples of homicide offenders. Additionally, there is a paucity of studies into psychosocial factors which could elucidate intentional killing (Kraemer *et al.*, 2004). In recognizing the utility of psychopathic traits and criminal social identity dimensions in explaining offending behavior

in general, the current focus was specifically on these constructs. Finally, in an attempt to verify whether murderers differ on the above aspects from other groups of offenders, we recruited two comparison samples, including recidivistic and first time incarcerated offenders.

Method

Sample

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PA DOC) research review committee granted approval for this project. Four hundred and seventy-eight ($N = 478$) offenders incarcerated in three prisons (one women's maximum security prison, one men's medium security prison, and one men's maximum security prison) in the state of Pennsylvania were opportunistically selected for participation. Participants completed an anonymous, self-administered, paper and pencil questionnaire within the prisons in their living units. The sample included 94 murderers (all with life sentences or on death row; males $n = 69$, females $n = 25$), 266 recidivistic offenders (males $n = 142$, females $n = 124$), and 118 first time incarcerated offenders (males $n = 72$, females $n = 46$). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 76 years ($M = 39.53$, $SD = 11.79$). Further demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Offenders

Variable	Murderers (<i>n</i> = 94)	Recidivists (<i>n</i> = 266)	First time (<i>n</i> = 118)
Gender			
Male	69 (73.4%)	142 (53.4%)	72 (61%)
Female	25 (26.6%)	124 (46.6%)	46 (39%)
Location			
Urban	49 (65.3)	119 (54.3%)	52 (54.7%)
Rural	26 (34.7)	100 (45.7%)	43 (45.3%)
Ethnicity			
White	42 (48.3%)	131 (56.7%)	65 (58.6%)
African American	29 (33.3%)	62 (26.8%)	21 (18.9%)
Hispanic	3 (3.4%)	12 (5.2%)	9 (8.1%)
Others	13 (14.9%)	26 (11.3%)	16 (14.4%)
Family background			
Both parents	45 (47.9%)	125 (47.7%)	64 (55.7%)
One parent	37 (39.4%)	77 (29.4%)	32 (27.8%)
Step parents	7 (7.4%)	23 (8.8%)	6 (5.2%)
Without parents	5 (5.3%)	37 (14.1%)	13 (11.3%)
Socioeconomic status			
High	2 (2.9%)	6 (4.1%)	0
Middle	48 (70.6%)	94 (63.9%)	55 (68.8%)
Low	18 (26.5%)	45 (32.0%)	24 (31.2%)

Note. The difference in frequencies and total number in categories reflect missing values.

Materials

The Measure of Criminal Social Identity (MCSI; Boduszek *et al.* 2012) consists of eight items scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“*strongly disagree*”) to 5 (“*strongly agree*”). Scores range from 8 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher levels of criminal social identity. The scale is composed of three factors: cognitive centrality (3 items;

$\alpha = .69$), in-group affect (2 items; $\alpha = .70$), and in-group ties (3 items; $\alpha = .71$).

The Self-Report Psychopathy Scale—Short Form (SRP-SF; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2016) is a 29-item scale scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“*strongly disagree*”) to 5 (“*strongly agree*”). The measure consists of four subscales: interpersonal manipulation (IPM; $\alpha = .77$), callous affect (CA; $\alpha = .72$), erratic lifestyle (ELS; $\alpha = .72$), and antisocial behavior (ASB; $\alpha = .69$). Scores for the IPM, CA, and ELS subscales range from 7 to 35 and the ASB subscale from 8 to 40, with higher scores reflecting increased levels of psychopathic traits.

Results and Discussion

ANOVA results for the three groups of inmates on three factors of criminal social identity and four factors of psychopathy are presented in Table 2.

In the current investigation, we found that recidivists, compared with murderers, are more likely to receive enhanced ratings on cognitive centrality and in-group ties of CSI dimensions. It appears, therefore, that ‘career criminals’ develop cognitive structures which render their identity as a criminal salient to their self-perception, which could partially explain their re-offending. Strong bonds with other lawbreakers, in turn, may be an outcome of collaboration in criminal activities. Murderers, it would appear, are not affected by such social processes because the crimes they commit do not usually involve accomplices. Moreover, in considering murderers’ disregard for the life of others, their lack of strong social ties with other criminals seems unsurprising.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA Results for Murderers (n=94), Recidivists (n=266), and First Time Offenders (n=118)

Variable	Murderers (M)		Recidivists (R)		First time (FT)		F-ratio	Significant differences (Cohen's d)
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Cognitive Centrality	7.26	3.14	8.21	2.41	7.72	2.54	5.11*	R>M (.35)
In-group Affect	2.57	1.27	2.59	1.22	2.51	1.03	.18	
In-group Ties	6.87	2.68	7.72	2.61	7.07	2.58	4.86*	R > M (.32)
Erratic Life Style	16.05	5.34	19.41	5.08	16.63	5.31	20.10*	FT < R (.53); R > M (.64)
Anti-Social Behaviour	2.69	5.80	21.64	5.73	19.46	5.77	5.84*	FT < R (.38)
Callous Affect	14.30	4.40	15.38	4.50	14.54	4.35	2.74	
Interpersonal Manipulation	13.05	4.71	14.92	5.03	13.59	4.69	6.18*	FT < R (.27); R > M (.38)

Note. * $p < .007$ (Bonferroni correction adjustment)

The current study revealed that murderers, compared with recidivistic and first time incarcerated offenders, did not score significantly higher on any of the four psychopathy dimensions. Quite the opposite, murderers in the present sample received significantly lower scores on erratic lifestyle and interpersonal manipulation psychopathy dimensions than recidivistic offenders. One potential explanation for this finding is that individuals with enhanced erratic lifestyle traits develop and become committed to ‘criminal careers’ in order to support their irregular lives. As such, a significant association between the commission of murder, which is not usually driven by financial gain, and inconsistent pattern of living would be atheoretical. Further, according to Walters’ (2006) lifestyle theory, the principal features of a criminal lifestyle include social rule-breaking, irresponsibility, self-indulgence, and interpersonal intrusiveness, i.e., characteristics largely parallel with those assessed by the erratic lifestyle psychopathy subscale. This indicates that the relationship between recidivism and the erratic lifestyle factor could be due to a significant conceptual overlap between them. Yet another possibility is that erratic lifestyle develops during the course of a criminal career. This, in turn, would suggest that the erratic lifestyle psychopathy factor should be treated as a consequence rather than an integral part of the psychopathy construct (see Boduszek & Debowska, 2016; Cooke & Michie, 2001; Skeem & Cooke, 2010a, b). As for the interpersonal manipulation dimension, it appears that those skilled at manipulating others are better “predisposed” to become ‘career criminals’ and use others to their own advantage. Surprisingly, murderers in the current sample, compared with other groups of offenders, did not score higher on callous affect traits. It may be that the inability to feel for others is associated with violent offending in general, regardless of the intensity of such behavior. In order to verify this supposition, future studies should compare murderers with violent and non-violent offenders separately.

Limitations and Conclusion

As with all research, the current study presents some limitations. First, self-report measures have been criticized for their lack of reliability due to response bias. Given psychopaths' increased manipulateness, the use of a self-report psychopathy measure could have also resulted in skewed findings. However, the same limitation pertains to evaluations performed by trained raters, who may be misled by skilled participants. Second, we failed to control for the number of crimes committed by our sample of murderers. Since important psychosocial differences may exist between those who intentionally kill a number of individuals as opposed to one person, it is recommended that future studies account for this aspect. Nonetheless, in spite of these limitations, the present research has some important strengths and practical implications. Namely, this is the first study to examine how murderers drawn from the general prison population (i.e., those without a diagnosed mental illness) construe themselves in relation to other criminals. Such knowledge appears important for the development and implementation of appropriate prevention and treatment programs delivered in the prison context. To elaborate, as long as focus on breaking social bonds with other criminals and developing a more structured lifestyle would benefit recidivistic offenders, this is not something that has to be addressed with murderers.

In summary, contrary to previous research and theorizing to date, findings display murderers in fact score lower on psychopathy than other offending groups. Despite being popularized in contemporary media portrayals and sustained by previous research, the notion that murder is intrinsically connected with psychopathic tendencies, is not supported within the present exploration. In fact, the use of criminal social identity and psychopathy constructs offers a very different conceptualization of murderers.

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