

IDENTIFYING PSYCHOPATHIC TRAITS IN YOUNG OFFENDERS AND IN COMMUNITY-BASED SAMPLES

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A b s t r a c t

The emergence of psychopathy as a well-established construct in the assessment of adult criminal offenders has stimulated great interest in measuring psychopathy traits in adolescents. The most useful role for a brief measure of psychopathy might be self-report questionnaire. On the other hand, screening for adolescent psychopathy traits is a particularly sensitive undertaking, because the label Psychopath can influence treatment plans and juvenile justice determinations. Therefore, this study assesses the validity of the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI), a self-reported measure of psychopathic traits in a Lithuanian offender population and in community-based adolescent sample. We assess the validity of the YPI by internal consistency analyses of scale and subscale item sets and the discriminant validity identifying psychopathic personality traits among incarcerated juveniles (N=207) compared with community – based population (N=276). Findings from this research suggested both strengths and weaknesses associated with YPI as a psychopathy assessment instrument in adolescent population.

Introduction

The concept of psychopathy has a long and prominent history in psychiatric and psychological literature. Adult psychopathy represents a distinct cluster of affective, interpersonal, and behavioural characteristics (Hare, 1991). Cleckley (1976), in his seminal work, *The Mask of Sanity*, provided the classic conceptualisation of psychopathy, describing the prototypical psychopath as an individual who was superficially charming and intelligent, but dishonest and manipulative. In accordance to the description provided, a psychopathic individual is extremely egocentric, rarely feels empathy, and tends not to form lasting attachments to people or principles. The psychopath is prone to inadequately motivated antisocial behaviour, and shows a blatant lack of remorse for harm done to others and a failure to learn from prior experiences. The criminal psychopath has a pattern of offending

that is more persistent, severe, violent, and versatile than other criminals (Kosson, et al., 1990), tends to recidivate more quickly and more frequently than non-psychopathic offenders (Hart et al., 1988; Serin, et al., 1995), and tends to be less amenable to treatment (Ogloff et al., 1990; Rice, 1997; Rice, et al., 1992).

There is a large body of research suggesting that there are quantitative and qualitative differences between psychopathic and non-psychopathic offenders in terms of the violence they perpetrate. Psychopathic offenders are engaged in more frequent violence, and carried out in a callous, calculated manner without the emotional context that usually characterizes the violence of other offenders (Hare, 2003). Psychopaths tend to begin their antisocial activities at a very early age, and their violent and aggressive tendencies remain relatively constant throughout their lives (Hare, McPherson, Forth 1988, Hare, 1999).

Identifying youth with psychopathic traits is critical to understanding the factors that contribute to the development of adult psychopathy. However, the assumption of an early childhood onset and unremitting course through adulthood is a controversial aspect of psychopathy (Forth & Burke, 1998). Some adolescents continue antisocial behaviour throughout their lives (Moffit, 1993). According to Harris, Rice, and Quinsey (1994), its early onset is the distinguishing feature of psychopathy. In particular, children with a combination of hyperactivity, attention deficits, impulsivity, and conduct problems have been categorized as „fledgling psychopaths“ (Lynam, 1998). Adolescents with high levels of psychopathy are more impulsive (Vittaco & Rogers, 2001) and are at greater risk for perpetrating violent crimes (Brandt, Kennedey, Patrick & Curtin, 1997).

Despite these positive findings, the developmental perspective of psychopathy faces several challenges. First, severe conduct problems represent a spectrum of disorders, which may not be specific to psychopathy (Lambert, et al., 2001). Second, the temporal stability of psychopathy from childhood to adolescence and early adulthood has not been rigorously tested and cannot be simply assumed (Edens, et al., 2001). Recently, Edens et al. (2001) raised cautions about the growing use of juvenile psychopathy measures and called for more research on their reliability and validity. Screening for adolescent psychopathy traits is a particularly sensitive undertaking, because the label *Psychopath* can influence treatment plans and juvenile justice determinations. On the other hand, the court is in search of ways to “predict” violence or to determine which adolescents will be our long-term (life-course) criminals.

These considerations raise several questions for researchers trying to understand youth criminality. First of all, adolescence is a pivotal period in the life course, marking the transition from childhood to responsibilities of adult life. Classic accounts of adolescence describe it as a period of psychological “storm and stress” for the vast majority of persons. It is possible that some general characteristics of adolescence, such as impulsiveness or irresponsibility, contribute to the higher score.

The worry is that many behaviours we associate with normal adolescent development are the same behaviours we associate with psychopathy in adults. Some of the items used to judge psychopathy likely apply to younger as well as older offenders. These include pathological lying, manipulativeness, shallow affect, and poor anger control. Mostly, these constructs mean similar things when observed in an adolescent as they do when observed in an adult. But many items that are central to the definition of psychopathy among adults may erroneously be viewed as indicators of psychopathy in an adolescent population and confused with normative adolescent development. These items include grandiosity, proneness to boredom, lack of remorse or guilt, impersonal sexual behaviour, goallessness, impulsivity, irresponsibility, failure to accept responsibility for one’s actions, and unstable interpersonal relationships.

The solidification of personality by age 30 (James, 1890/1983; McCrae & Costa, 1990) suggests that early adulthood may be the last stage of the life – course during which significant personality change may occur. Adolescents don’t have well-formed personality,

their personality traits are not yet “crystallized”. An adolescent who appears normal now may be psychopathic in a few years. Therefore, it is imperative that we learn more about the stability, nature, and manifestations of psychopathy during the adolescent years before embracing the use of this construct as a valid component in the evaluation of juvenile offenders, when making predictions of risk-taking and antisocial behavior.

Assessment of psychopathy in children and adolescents requires both for referred and non-referred samples specialized methods. Forth, Kosson, & Hare (1994) developed the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL-YV) that parallels the PCL-R with minor modifications to make its content more applicable to adolescent populations. The PCL-YV is designed to measure psychopathy in youth and consists from 20-item rating scale for the assessment of psychopathic traits in male and female offenders aged 12 to 18. In this procedure, a clinician assigns scores on the various psychopathic traits after carefully reviewing the institutionalised person’s file after conducting a semi-structured interview. But because non-referred children and adolescents do not have files to review, this important part of the PCL methodology cannot be transferred to general population. The Antisocial Process Screening Device (Frick, & Hare, 2000) was developed for use on non-referred samples. This instrument is a 20-item behaviour rating scale that was designed to tap each of the 20 items in the PCL-R with a youth appropriate version of the same behaviour. The items ask directly about psychopathy - like behaviour, such as “Lies easily and skilfully”, “Uses or “cons” other people to get what he/she wants”. The APSD was reworded for use a self-reported measure, but it has certain limitations, because the items a straightforward measures of traits that are obviously negative, and this will likely increase response biases. Second, the APSD contains only one item per trait.

The Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI, Andershed, Kerr, Sattin, Levander, 2001) is a self-report instrument of psychopathic personality traits, which was designed specifically to overcome the problems inherent in measuring psychopathic traits through self-report. One of the main problems is that deceitfulness, lying, and manipulation are core symptoms of the psychopathic personality, which makes it difficult to get truthful responses to questions about such characteristics such as shallow affect, lack of remorse or guilt, and grandiose sense of self-worth.

Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (Andershed, Kerr, Sattin, Levander, 2001) cover each of core psychopathic personality traits, in accordance to Cleckley’s definition and Hares Psychopathy Checklist Revised. Personality characteristics include Interpersonal aspects, Affective aspects, and Behavioural aspects. The items were developed that did not tempt people with psychopathic traits to lie, as they are presented indirectly. The authors of the instrument developed the items that people with psychopathic traits would see as positive and admirable, but that other people would not. For example, “I usually feel calm when other people are scared” make a lack of emotionality sound like a good thing to a people whose emotions are shallow and who have a grandiose sense of self-worth and which should predispose them to seeing their own qualities as admirable strengths and other people qualities as deplorable weaknesses (Andershed, Kerr, Sattin, Levander, 2001).

The validity of Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory is well-established in Swedish samples. However, when the instrument is translated to another language and is applied in a new culture, it requires reliability and discriminant validity analysis.

The primary objective of the current study is to assess the validity of the Lithuanian version Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI) via scale reliability analysis and some validity criteria as anxiety/depression, aggression and delinquency. Next, we aim to compare ratings on psychopathic personality traits in young offenders, incarcerated in secure youth detention institutions group with ratings on psychopathic personality traits in a community-based adolescents sample.

Method

Subjects

The study sample was composed of (1) 207 male young offenders ages 14 – 18, incarcerated in two secure youth detention institutions and (2) community-based adolescents (N=276), ages 14-18, from a larger longitudinal study.

Measures

Self-reported measures psychopathic traits. Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI, Andershed, Kerr, Sattin, Levander, 2001) consists of ten subscales with five items each (total 50 items). Specifically, the subscales in the YPI intend to measure different aspects of glibness and superficial charm (*Dishonest charm*), the grandiosity/egocentricity aspect of the psychopathic personality constellation (*Grandiosity*), the tendency to lie frequently and with ease (*Lying*), the conning and manipulative traits (*Manipulativeness*), callousness and lack of empathy (*Callousness*), the shallow affect/poverty in affective reactions (*Unemotionality*), the relative lack of adequate feelings of remorse and guilt (*Remorselessness*), impulsivity (*Impulsivity*), the need for stimulation and excitement, and proneness to boredom (*Thrill-seeking*), and irresponsibility (*Irresponsibility*). Respondents are asked to rate the degree to which the individual statements or items apply to them, using 4-point Likert-type scales (1- *does not apply at all*, 2 – *does not apply well*, 3 - *applies fairly well*, 4 - *applies very well*).

Self-reported measures of emotional and conduct problems. Youth Self Report (YSR/11-18, Achenbach, 1991) obtains reports from child himself/herself regarding his/her competencies and behavioural/emotional problems (withdrawn, somatic complaints, anxious/ depressed, delinquent behaviour aggressive behaviour social problems, thought problems, and attention problems). The items are scored on a 3-point scale, (0 if the item is “not true” of the child, 1 if the item is “somewhat or sometimes true”, and 2 if the item is “very true or often true”). Aggression and delinquency scales were used to measure antisocial activity, and anxiety/depression scale was used to measure emotional problems.

Procedure

Male young offenders completed the self-reported measures in the presence of specially trained research assistant. They worked three persons in the group each time, separated from each other with enough space so that they could not see each other’s ratings. Subjects were informed that their responses were confidential and nor any authority would see their ratings. The questionnaires were completed in about 90 minutes in each group. In schools, the adolescents completed the self-reported measures during 60 minutes of regular school time. They worked in their ordinary classroom, separated from each other with enough space so that they could not see each other’s ratings. Subjects were told that their responses were confidential.

Results

Internal consistency and Descriptives

The internal consistencies for two Lithuanian samples and Swedish sample (N=1024) of the YPI are presented in Table 1. As shown, most of the subscales in Lithuanian samples had acceptably high alpha reliabilities, except rather low but acceptable reliability of Remorselessness scale in community sample and Grandiosity, Unemotionality, Thrill-seeking scales in young offenders group. However, in young offenders group the reliability of Remorselessness scale was un-acceptably low. Overall, the reliabilities of most scales in

Lithuanian community sample were on similar and some – on somehow lower level then in Swedish sample.

Table 1. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for ten subscales of YPI in (1) Swedish, (2) Lithuanian community (3) Young offenders samples

	1 (N=1024)	2 (N=276)	2 (N=207)
Dishonest charm	0.82	0.73	0.69
Grandiosity	0.73	0.70	0.57
Lying	0.81	0.77	0.69
Manipulation	0.80	0.69	0.76
Callousness	0.67	0.69	0.62
Unemotionality	0.66	0.64	0.55
Remorselessness	0.68	0.54	0.27
Impulsivity	0.71	0.73	0.49
Thrill-seeking	0.74	0.67	0.59
Irresponsibility	0.73	0.61	0.61

Next, we investigated whether there were differences between community-based sample and young offenders in their scores on the ten different subscales of the YPI. As shown in *t*-tests (Table 2), young offenders were found to score significantly higher than adolescents from community sample on Lying, Manipulation, Callousness, Unemotionality, Impulsivity and Irresponsibility. No significant differences were found on levels of Dishonest charm, Grandiosity, Remorselessness and Thrill-seeking. However, because significant differences were found on the majority of the scales of the YPI, further analysis were conducted separately for young offenders and community-based adolescent samples.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and t-test results for Equality of Means in young offenders and in community-based adolescent samples. Note: **p<0.01, *p<0.001**

	Young offenders sample	Community sample	t
Dishonest charm	11.9 (3.1)	11.6 (2.8)	0.99
Grandiosity	11.3 (2.5)	11.5 (2.5)	-0.756
Lying	12.4 (1.1)	9.9 (3.1)	7.81***
Manipulation	11.1 (3.0)	10.4 (2.6)	2.67**
Callousness	12.1 (3.1)	9.7 (2.7)	8.18***
Unemotionality	12.7 (2.4)	11.6 (2.6)	4.62***
Remorselessness	11.2 (2.3)	10.9 (2.5)	1.32
Thrill-seeking	13.9 (2.7)	13.6 (2.9)	1.262
Impulsivity	13.9 (2.9)	12.7 (2.7)	4.41***
Irresponsibility	13.5 (3.1)	10.2 (2.8)	10.94***

Validation with other self-reported measures

Previous research has shown that delinquents with psychopathic personality traits display the most frequent, violent and versatile criminal behaviour (Hart & Hare, 1997). In many samples, psychopathic individuals make an extreme subset that demonstrates the highest levels of problematic behaviours. Next, there is an evidence that juvenile offenders are plagued with emotional difficulties, namely, with and anxiety disorder and depression. The comorbidity between behavioural and emotional problems is well proved in many studies. Moreover, the lack of anxiety could be the additional indicator, confirming the lack of emotionality when measuring psychopathic personality traits. As already has been shown earlier, unemotionality is one of the core traits of psychopathic personality.

Hence, correlations between these personality dimensions as measured by the YPI and conduct problems (aggression and delinquency) and emotional problems would suggest that the YPI measure psychopathic traits. Table 3 shows significant correlations between the personality dimensions measured by the YPI and self-reported conduct and emotional problems for young offenders sample and community-based sample. Consistent with past research, study indicates that psychopathic traits are associated with aggression and delinquency. However, more associations and on higher levels were found in community-based adolescents sample.

Unemotionality was negatively related with anxiety/depression both in young offenders and in community – based adolescents’ samples.

Table 3. Significant Pearson’ correlations between psychopathic traits and behavioural/emotional problems for young offenders and adolescents from community - based sample. Note: * p<0.01, **p< 0.001, ns. – non significant.

	Young offenders			Community sample		
	Anxiety/ Depression	Aggression	Delinquency	Anxiety/ Depression	Aggression	Delinquency
Dishonest charm	ns.	ns.	0.21*	ns.	0.41**	0.36**
Grandiosity	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.	0.29**	0.16*
Lying	0.29**	ns.	0.42**	0.23**	0.44**	0.45**
Manipulation	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.	0.44**	0.44**
Callousness	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.	0.36**	0.36**
Unemotionality	-0.24*	ns.	0.21*	-0.17*	0.20*	0.23*
Remorselessness	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.	0.15*
Thrill-seeking	ns.	ns.	0.29**	0.15*	0.53**	0.45**
Impulsivity	ns.	ns.	0.21*	0.27**	0.49**	0.42**
Irresponsibility	0.24*	0.22*	0.35**	0.24**	0.46**	0.58**

Discussion

In this initial test of validity of Lithuanian translation of YPI, the instrument was found to be internally consistent on most of the scales, and to be related to conduct and emotional problems in theoretically meaningful ways. Importantly, the YPI seems to be working well among young offenders and adolescents from community – based sample. Significant difference on equality of means between young offenders and adolescents from community – based sample on most of the scales, with higher levels of psychopathic traits for young offenders group proves the discriminant validity of the instrument. Higher levels of psychopathic traits for young offenders group are in line with other studies showing that adolescents with higher levels of psychopathy are at greater risk for perpetrating violent crimes (Brandt, Kennedy, Patrick & Curtin, 1997). Also, the associations between psychopathic traits and conduct and emotional problems were found to be significant. For juvenile offenders these associations were fewer and on lower level then expected, however, six of ten psychopathic traits were associated with delinquency, but not with aggression. For adolescents from the community sample, most of the psychopathic traits were associated with aggression and delinquency. This is showing that the YPI could be very useful for assessment of non-referred children and adolescents, as screening instrument.

Such findings raise concern about the correspondence among psychopathy and emotional/behavioural measures in incarcerated juveniles. Probably, low instrument associations between psychopathic personality traits and conduct problems in young offenders sample may lie in the nature of the psychopathy construct. Psychopathy is characterized by dishonesty and a deceptive self-presentation, presenting a considerable

challenge for self-report assessment. Psychopathic individuals are known to be inconsistent in their self-presentation; at times they are dishonest, but at other times they are brutally honest. Adolescents who have relatively pronounced psychopathic traits also might have some difficulties with self-insight. Therefore, further studies, with additional validity measures and bigger samples are needed.

Next, it is possible that some general characteristics of adolescence, such as impulsiveness or irresponsibility, contribute to the higher scores in both samples. The absence of significant differences on Dishonest charm, Grandiosity, and Thrill-seeking behaviour in young offenders and community – based adolescents sample confirms the argumentation by Edens, et al., (2001) that these items can be viewed as quite normal in adolescence.

Overall, our findings provide support for the internal and construct validity of Youth Psychopathy Inventory, and in possibility to assess the psychopathic traits in adolescence.



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Psichopatinių asmenybės bruožų identifikavimo galimybės jaunuų teisės pažeidėjų ir bendrosios populiacijos jaunuolių grupėse

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Pagrindinės sąvokos: psichopatija, tyrimo metodai, paauglystė.

SANTRAUKA

Psichopatijos kaip gerai įtvirtinto konstrukto taikymas vertinant suaugusius nusikaltėlius, sukėlė didelį susidomėjimą ir paskatino bandyti diagnozuoti psichopatinius bruožus jau paauglystėje. Vienas iš tinkamiausių psichopatijos tyrimo būdų gali būti savistata paremtas klausimynas. Kita vertus, negalima pamiršti, kad asmenį įvardijus psichopatu, gali keistis intervencinių programų pobūdis, tai gali turėti įtakos priimant nuosprendį.

Šiame tyrime siekiama nustatyti Jaunimo psichopatinių bruožų inventorius (YPI), Savistata paremto psichopatinių asmenybės bruožų klausimyno validumą jaunuų Lietuvos teisės pažeidėjų ir bendrosios populiacijos jaunuolių grupėse. Validumas tikrinamas nustatant vidinį skalių suderinamumą ir diskriminantinį patikimumą, identifikuojant įkalintų teisės pažeidėjų psichopatinius asmenybės bruožus (N =207), lyginant juos su mokyklose besimokančiais paaugliais (N =276). Tyrimo rezultatai rodo YPI klausimyno lietuvių kalba pranašumus ir trūkumus, taikant šį klausimyną jaunuų teisės pažeidėjų ir bendros populiacijos paauglių tyrimuose.

