

We need to talk about development and victims

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Abstract

The paper by Lilienfeld and colleagues proposes that the study of personality disorders could be substantially advanced by viewing at least some of them as emergent interpersonal syndromes. This commentary considers the need for a developmental approach in understanding how the emergent interpersonal syndromes emerge. It also highlights the importance of systematically studying individual differences in victimization. We need to understand why some are more likely than others to be exploited, victimised or remain in a dysfunctional relationship with an individual with a personality disorder.

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In their paper '*Personality disorders as emergent interpersonal syndromes: Psychopathic personality as a case example*' Lilienfeld and colleagues (2019) provide a thoughtful overview of the history of personality disorders (PDs) – both in terms of PDs as folk concepts (e.g. Gough, 1965; Buss & Craik, 1980; McCrae, Costa, & Piedmont, 1993), as well as their uneasy ride within psychiatric diagnostic systems and research (e.g. Livesley, 2012; Wygant et al., 2016; Zachar, Krueger, & Kendler, 2016). Against this backdrop, the authors propose that the study of PDs could be substantially advanced by viewing at least some of them as emergent interpersonal syndromes (EISs).

The authors start with the premise that PDs are reflections of folk concepts that are not syndromes as we commonly conceptualise them in psychiatry (Lilienfeld et al., 2019). Not all PDs consist of symptoms that consistently co-vary across individuals, reflecting a latent, underlying construct (*classical syndrome*). Nor do we have strong support for any PDs constituting a *taxonic syndrome*, a discrete, qualitatively different disease entity. Instead the authors contend that if PDs are conditions of interpersonal impact, then at least some of them should be understood in terms of their noteworthy impact on other people, i.e. as EISs. The crux of this proposal is that some trait/symptom constellations may be interpersonally salient precisely because they do not typically co-occur in the population (or may even be negatively associated). Because of this, such constellations may be misleading and confusing to other people –at least until they spend more time with the individual who has a PD and get to know them better.

Lilienfeld and colleagues argue that if their model is correct, both trait based and prototype based models are needed to capture different types of PDs. The prototypes are needed,

because some PDs, i.e. those that are EISs, reflect more than the sum of their parts. If this position is correct, variable centred approaches need to be complemented by person centred approaches when conducting PD research and may be particularly pertinent for the study of certain PDs, such as psychopathy. The EISs model offers explanatory power regarding why latent predispositions for particular personality disorders have been so difficult to find and makes a convincing argument that we ought to investigate multiple, rather than single latent predispositions underlying some PDs.

Lilienfeld et al. (2019) have commendably put forward four testable, falsifiable hypotheses that should guide the evaluation of their model: i) some PDs are characterised by co-occurrence features that are typically independent in the general population; ii) features of certain PDs have different external correlates; iii) cooperative suppressor effects characterise associated features of certain PDs; and iv) traits of some PDs interact statistically when predicting relevant interpersonal outcomes. They then provide an overview on psychopathy research against the back drop of these hypotheses.

The evidence to date is promising, but mixed – in part hinging on the conceptualisation and measure of psychopathy. This is transparently acknowledged in the article. For example, Lilienfeld and colleagues highlight that there is disagreement in the field regarding whether ‘boldness’ should be viewed as a core feature of psychopathy or not (e.g. Lynam & Miller, 2012; Murphy, Lilienfeld, Skeem, & Edens 2016). It is difficult to say how this question could be definitively answered, given the different theoretical and analytical approaches, and we may have to make our peace with a certain level of circularity here. Interpretation of data will always be constrained by the model of the syndrome that is deployed (or the items that

are entered into analyses). If researchers are looking for a 'classical syndrome', they will evaluate their data differently from those who might adopt an EIS view (and possibly collect different data). If one takes the EISs approach, then boldness appears to be an adaptive feature that confers the 'mask of sanity' for individuals with psychopathy, and engenders particular danger and harm to unsuspecting others. However, one might also contend that although someone without boldness may not as readily fool or charm people, they can behave in ways that are pre-mediated, particularly callous and cold-hearted - and which are distinct from impulsive or reactive antisocial acts – so that we might still classify their behaviour as psychopathic. Lilienfeld and colleagues allude to this by discussing 'successful' vs. 'unsuccessful' psychopathy. I was curious whether these would be viewed as different PDs under the EIS model? Presumably the interpersonal impact (although not pleasant in either case) would be at least partly different in the two cases. On the other hand, many neurocognitive and personality features are clearly common across 'successful' vs. 'unsuccessful' individuals with psychopathy and some of the interpersonal impacts may also be shared. The proposed model will no doubt motivate studies that will move the field forward and address these questions and many more. In this vein, I would like to consider two possible lines of research in relation to EISs.

Aetiology and development of EISs?

Lilienfeld and colleagues call for longitudinal work evaluating whether boldness enables people to manage favourable first impressions (the mask of sanity), which are then unmasked over time, because of the other symptom dimensions of psychopathy. I endorse that line of enquiry, but would additionally call for longitudinal, aetiologically informative studies beginning in early childhood (or infancy) (Viding & McCrory, 2019). To date there are

limited longitudinal data on development of PDs, including psychopathy, and I do not know of any sample spanning from infancy to adulthood with good quality measures of trait dimensions of interest. We have very little person-centred, longitudinal data on the development of psychopathy or traits predisposing to this PD (Fontaine, McCrory, Boivin, Moffitt, & Viding, 2011; Fontaine, Rijdsdijk, McCrory & Viding, 2010). We are a long way off reliably quantifying different genetic and neurocognitive dispositions underlying different trait dimensions, how these develop over time, what their knock-on effects are over development and whether they are modified by context (or themselves modify the context) (Viding & McCrory, 2018). Furthermore, what does interpersonal impact look like over development? Do young children with certain trait combinations have the same impact in their social networks than adults with these trait combinations? At the moment we do not know, but the article by Lilienfeld et al. (2019) will no doubt inspire new studies that address these questions.

Victims of PDs

One central hypothesis put forward by the EIS model is that the EISs are comprised of traits that do not typically co-occur, and that this unusual combination of traits will give people an 'off' reading of the character of someone with an EIS-PD. For example, Lilienfeld and colleagues argue that when social boldness is combined with other features of psychopathy, we can perceive a person with this constellation of features as charming and fascinating, until some of the other characteristics emerge. In other words, someone with psychopathy can successfully impersonate a nice person in the short term, before the full impact of their character emerges.

Traditionally, we have focused on studying individuals with PD in the hope that we can develop interventions that address their difficulties. This is no doubt an important effort. Developing a more comprehensive picture of the ways in which those with PD differ from the rest of us, is likely to enable us to tailor more effective preventative and treatment programmes, which focus on modifying particular thinking and feeling patterns or harness compensatory mechanisms for promoting prosocial behaviour in these individuals.

However, even under the most optimistic scenario, this approach is unlikely to eradicate the PDs or their impact. Given the unusual combination of traits seen in EIS-PDs, one would predict that 'accurately reading' these individuals (at least in the short term) should be a lot more variable than 'accurately reading' individuals who have another type of PD or who are not disordered.

This should lead to there being substantial individual differences in the likelihood of being victimised by someone with an EIS, which is presumably in part driven by the information processing of the victims. I would argue that we need to conduct systematic research into characteristics of victims of EIS-PD, not just into the individuals with EIS-PD. Why are some people better or faster at detecting the 'off' reading from someone with EIS-PD? Why are some people repeatedly victimised? Could we help people to more effectively recognise warning signs? Systematic research addressing these questions is a natural complement to the research into EIS-PDs. We know that there are individual differences in people's ability to judge trustworthiness from perceptual cues (Baccolo & Macchi Cassia, 2019). There are also no doubt substantial individual differences in the capacity and accuracy of representing other minds, although this is yet to be sensitively investigated (Conway, Catmur, & Bird, in press). We know that likelihood of being victimised is not random (Schoeler et al., 2019) and

individuals with high levels of psychopathic features may be particularly apt at picking up signals that denote 'easy prey' for victimisation (Richie, Blais, & Forth, 2019). Any research focusing on victims must be framed carefully, so that it is clear that it is not implied the victims are to 'blame' for their misfortune. Instead, the emphasis should be on the importance of empowering people to minimise their risk of forming or repeating destructive relationships.

I welcome new, developmental, multi-disciplinary research investigating psychopathy and other PDs as emergent interpersonal syndromes and I hope that this research will include a systematic study of those who are most affected by encountering these individuals.

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