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M.P. Chorney

J.M. Reistad

Scott Risser, Ph.D.

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Parental Abuse, Risky Behavior, and Psychopathic Traits in Adolescents and Early Adults



M P Chorney, J M Reistad, and S Risser



Abstract

This study examines the associations between parental abuse, risky behavior, and affective psychopathic traits. Ninety-one (49% males) rural adolescents and young adults (between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five) participated in an investigations of gene and environment interactions. The sample consisted of individuals currently enrolled in high school in addition to undergraduate college students. These participants provided self-reports of parental abuse, risky behaviors, and psychopathic affective traits. Results suggested that psychopathic traits, especially a lack of remorse, and parental abuse independently account for some risky behavior.

Psychopathic Traits, Risky Behavior, and Parental Abuse

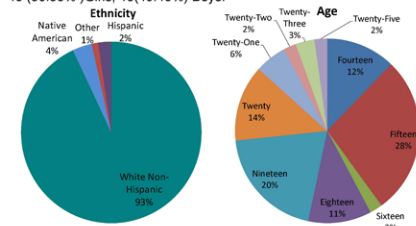
Interest has emerged in using the construct of psychopathology, which contains affective, behavioral, and interpersonal traits that describe some antisocial adults (Hare, 1999), to understand risky and dangerous behaviors in adolescents and young adults. Those who engage in violent acts have been shown to have a significantly greater level of psychopathy than those individuals who have never committed a violent act (Flight & Forth, 2007; Woodworth & Porter, 2002; Murrie et al., 2004). Children who exhibit a preference for new, exhilarating, and most importantly, dangerous activities have often been shown to have higher than average levels of callous and unemotional traits (Barry et al., 2000; Frick, Cornell, Bodin et al., 2003). This study examines the relationship between callous, remorseless, and unemotional traits in adolescents and young adults and the extent to which these individuals engage in risky behaviors.

Over the past century a great deal of research has been done on parental abuse. This research includes not only physical abuse, but also sexual abuse and neglect (Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979). Research into the effects of parental abuse indicates that there is a long-term effect on mental health, alcohol misuse, risky sexual behavior, obesity, and criminal behavior (Gilbert, 2009). Other studies show that physically abused children engage in more stealing behaviors, whereas neglected children engage in slightly more cheating behavior and less rule compatible behavior (Koenig, 2004). This study further examines the relationship between parental abuse and adolescent and young adult behavior.

Because both parental abuse and psychopathic traits have been linked to externalizing, an aim of this study is to examine the relationship between parental abuse and psychopathy. Lastly, this study aims to examine how both of these variables affect risky behaviors in youth and whether they are independent of each other. The prevention of parental abuse is important for future generations and society as a whole. A better understanding of psychopathy in young adults could help to refine treatment methods.

Participants

Gene-Environment Interactions Study (GxE)
91 adolescents and young adults, measured at ages 14-16 and 18-25, from the 103 original GxE Sample.
46 (50.55%) Girls, 45(49.45%) Boys.



Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, and Observed Ranges for Primary Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	Mean(SD)	Range
Risky Behaviors																
1. Stolen Something		.44*	.50**	.25	.71**	.21	-.03	.00	-.03	-.15	.03	.35*	.11	.12	0.87 (1.19)	0.00-5.00
2. Drugs/Alcohol	.03		-.17	.44*	.50**	.49**	.34*	.34*	-.15	.28	.39*	.07	.10	1.68 (1.57)	0.00-6.00	
3. Violence Toward Others	.52**	.08		-.50**	.58**	.38*	.12	-.16	.13	-.14	.16	.44*	.23	.15	2.23 (2.08)	0.00-10.00
4. Dangerous Activities	.62**	.14	.43*		-.36*	.47*	.29*	.40*	.09	-.12	.06	.52**	.36*	.20	4.06 (2.44)	0.00-11.00
5. Trouble with Rules/Laws	.21	.51**	.37*	.09		-.24	-.03	.04	.03	-.16	.15	.38**	.11	.13	1.32 (1.81)	0.00-12.00
6. Poor Relationships	.53**	.09	.51**	.26	.16		-.46*	.45*	.48**	-.12	.43*	.41*	.21	.01	0.54 (1.13)	0.00-6.00
Parental Abuse																
7. Minor Assault	.23	.01	.43*	.23	-.07	.44*		-.60**	.70**	.14	.29	.10	.13	.02	2.19 (0.31)	0.00-15.00
8. Psychological Aggression	.04	-.15	.21	.16	-.10	.15	.64**		-.49**	.06	.36*	.32*	.17	.11	8.56 (0.52)	0.00-18.00
9. Severe Assault	.31*	-.02	.50**	.25	.06	.54**	.79**	.61**		-.24	.45*	.12	-.01	.10	2.22 (0.43)	0.00-20.00
10. Very Severe Assault	.35*	-.03	.49**	.35*	.01	.62**	.67**	.33*	.71**		.00	.01	.22	.21	0.32 (0.17)	0.00-14.00
11. Negligence	.39*	-.20	.36*	.39*	.08	.33*	.36*	.45*	.47*	.66**		.10	-.05	-.11	0.92 (2.11)	0.00-12.00
Psychopathic Traits																
12. Remorseless	.15	.12	.34*	.16	.27	.01	.21	-.09	.10	-.03	-.14		.60**	.48**	4.00 (2.63)	0.00-10.00
13. Unemotional	.10	-.03	.35*	.10	-.06	.08	.08	-.21	.02	-.04	-.17	.54**		.62**	5.81 (3.07)	0.00-14.00
14. Callous	.03	-.16	.28	.13	.04	-.07	.04	-.08	-.01	.03	.12	.50**	.62**		4.77 (2.73)	0.00-10.00

Do Reports of Parental Abuse Predict Level of Psychopathic Affect Traits?

No significant associations emerged between parental abuse and psychopathic affective traits. Results suggest that psychopathic tendencies in young adults and adolescents are independent of parental abuse, and that some theoretical models positing a causal relationship between abuse and psychopathy may need to be reevaluated.

Multiple Regressions Predicting Psychopathic Traits

	Remorseless	Unemotional	Callous
Minor Assault	0.20	0.23	-0.01
Psychological Aggression	0.08	-0.05	0.04
Severe Assault	0.01	0.04	0.08
Very Severe Assault	-0.13	0.01	0.09
Negligence	-0.07	-0.18	-0.09
F _{model}	0.92	1.18	0.32
R ²	0.00	0.01	0.00

Note: Numbers are standardized coefficients (β). *p < .05, **p < .01

Multiple Regression Models Predicting Risky Behavior

	Stolen Something	Drugs Alcohol	Violence Toward Others	Dangerous Activities	Trouble with Rules/Laws	Poor Relationships	
Minor Assault	-0.04	0.10	-0.03	0.03	0.02	-0.19	0.02
Psychological Aggression	-0.15	-0.03	-0.04	0.24	-0.14	0.06	0.06
Severe Assault	0.09	0.15	0.23	-0.19	0.22	0.22	0.22
Very Severe Assault	0.17	-0.16	0.22	0.21	-0.04	-0.10	-0.10
Negligence	0.19	0.02	0.11	0.13	0.13	0.28*	0.28*
Remorseless	0.29*	0.35*	0.22*	0.33*	0.43**	0.37*	0.37*
Unemotional	0.06	-0.09	0.30*	0.11	-0.15	0.05	0.05
Callous	-0.10	-0.14	-0.03	-0.07	0.00	-0.32	-0.32
F _{model}	2.01	1.55	6.60**	3.39**	2.12*	4.68**	4.68**
R ²	0.08	0.05	0.33	0.18	0.09	0.25	0.25

Note: Numbers are standardized coefficients (β). *p < .05, **p < .01

What are the Unique contributions of Parental Abuse and Psychopathic Traits to Risky Behaviors?

Significant models emerged for predicting violence, dangerous activities, rule breaking, and poor relationships. For each model, higher levels of remorselessness were associated with risky behavior, while controlling for reports of parental abuse and neglect. As a whole, these results suggest that psychopathic traits are both independent from parental abuse, and may be better predictors of risky behaviors than abuse.

Measures

Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory-Self Report

Subsot of 15-items from the 50-item YPTI (Andershed et al., 2002)
Rating: "1 Does not apply at all" to "4 "Applies very well"
Affective Remorselessness Subscale – 5 items
"I seldom regret things I do, even if other people feel they are wrong"
Affective Unemotionality Subscale – 5 items
"I usually feel calm when other people are scared"
Affective Callousness Subscale – 5 items
"It's important to me not to hurt other people's feelings"(reflected)

Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales-Child Report

Subsot of 22-items from the 27-item CTSCP (Straus, 1995)
Ratings: "0=This has never happened" to "6= More than 20 times in the past year"
Minor Assault – 5 items
"Mother/Father shook me"
Psychological Aggression – 5 items
"Mother/Father shouted, yelled, or screamed at me"
Severe Assault – 4 items
"Mother/Father hit me with a fist or kicked me hard"
Very Severe Assault – 4 items
"Mother/Father grabbed me around the neck and choked me"
Negligence – 4 items
"Mother/Father was drunk or high on drugs and couldn't take care of me"

Risky Behavior Questionnaire-Self Report

Subsot of 39 items from the 55 item RBQ (Conger & Elder, 1994)
Ratings: "0 = Never" to "2 = Twice or more"
Stolen Something – 6 items
"Broke into a building to take or steal something."
Drugs/Alcohol – 4 items
"Sold Drugs."
Violence to Others – 11 items
"Beat up someone using a weapon."
Dangerous Activities – 7 items
"Ridden a motorcycle without a helmet."
Trouble with Rules/Laws – 8 items
"Been on probation."
Poor Relationships – 3 items
"Been physically hurt by the person you were dating."

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