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All Walks of Life: Editorial for the Special Issue on “The Impact of Psychopathy: Multidisciplinary and Applied Perspectives”

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Abstract

We are grateful for the opportunity to serve as Guest Editors of this Special Issue on “The impact of psychopathy: Multidisciplinary and applied perspectives.” Psychopathy is a serious public health concern that has long attracted scholarly and clinical interest in both mental health and criminal justice fields. However, given its robust link with criminal behavior, research on psychopathy has largely developed with a primary emphasis on (male) adults within correctional settings. While the preponderance of work remains focused on these adult offenders, research on psychopathy has expanded in recent decades to include studies within a variety of more diverse populations and contexts. The goal of this Special Issue has been to highlight some of the most recent research in these areas, toward a more deliberate emphasis on the broad impacts that psychopathy can impart across all walks of life. To this end, while only two of the papers included in the Special Issue focused on forensic samples (and more specifically on treatment and recidivism), all 10 papers have nonetheless offered a clear focus on the detrimental impacts that individuals with psychopathic traits can impart within society. Indeed, included manuscripts focused on the impact of psychopathy within romantic relationships (in both middle and older adulthood), within parent-child dyads, within the workplace, and within society at large. Across these studies, the significant, detrimental impact that individuals with heightened psychopathic traits impart is highlighted, not only for their victims, but also for their

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family, friends, and colleagues. In this Editorial, we would like to emphasize some main themes that emerged from their contributions.

Keywords

psychopathic personality, interpersonal, impact, mediators, moderators, treatment

We are grateful for the opportunity to serve as Guest Editors of this Special Issue on *“The impact of psychopathy: Multidisciplinary and applied perspectives.”* Psychopathy is a serious public health concern that has long attracted scholarly and clinical interest in both mental health and criminal justice fields. However, given its robust link with criminal behavior, research on psychopathy has largely developed with a primary emphasis on (male) adults within correctional settings. While the preponderance of work remains focused on these adult offenders, research on psychopathy has expanded in recent decades to include broader study within a variety of more diverse populations and contexts. The goal of this Special Issue has been to highlight some of the most recent research in these areas, toward a more deliberate emphasis on the broad impacts that psychopathy can impart across all walks of life. To this end, while only two of the papers included in the Special Issue focused on forensic samples (and more specifically on treatment and recidivism; Polaschek et al., 2021; Rojas & Olver, 2021), all 10 papers have nonetheless offered a clear focus on the detrimental impacts that individuals with psychopathic traits can impart within society. Indeed, included manuscripts focused on the impact of psychopathy within romantic relationships (in both middle and older adulthood; Andersen et al., 2022; Forth et al., 2021; Uzieblo et al., 2022), within parent-child dyads (Fanti & Lordos, 2021; Kuay et al., 2021), within the workplace (Kranefeld et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2021), and within society at large (Jurjako et al., 2021). Across these studies, the significant, detrimental impact that individuals with heightened psychopathic traits impart is highlighted, not only for their victims, but also for their family, friends, and colleagues. In this Editorial, we would like to emphasize some main themes that emerged from their contributions.

The Interpersonal Impact of Psychopathy

A common theme that emerged across several papers was that psychopathic traits can interfere significantly with the quality of interpersonal relationships, invoking not only physical but also psychological harm on close others. For instance, Forth et al. (2021) reported increased post-traumatic and depressive symptoms related to the level of psychopathic traits in an intimate partner; and Uzieblo et al. (2022) described reductions in the overall perceived quality of intimate relationships when one partner has heightened psychopathic traits. These findings may not surprise, but these psychological harms represent important, under-demonstrated impacts that can manifest as a result of heightened psychopathic traits. Particularly convincing is that, across the various

papers included in the Special Issue, demonstration of these harms spanned different assessment methods (including clinical interviews, self-, and informant-reports), manifested as bi-directional effects in parent/child dyads (e.g., influence of parental psychopathic traits on adolescent children's adjustment, Fanti & Lordos, 2021; influence of child callous-unemotional traits on aggression toward parents, Kuay et al., 2021), and emerged at different stages across the lifespan. This latter point may be particularly noteworthy, as it counters the widespread belief that harms associated with psychopathy decrease with age, and also stresses the importance of age-sensitive assessment of psychopathic traits (e.g., Andersen et al., 2022). These findings also support Lilienfeld et al., (2019) contention that what most specifically makes psychopathy a form of psychopathology is the degree to which it impacts the social adaptability of both self and others (see also Jurjako et al., 2021). On the other hand, in Stewart et al.'s (2021) study, alleged psychopathic traits in the co-worker were associated with *stronger* post-traumatic growth, suggesting that longer-term *positive* outcomes associated with the presence of psychopathic traits may also be possible.

The Implications of Examining Overall Levels of Psychopathy or Its Lower-Order Components

Papers included in this special issue differed in their focus on total psychopathy scores or scores of lower-order psychopathy dimensions (i.e., factors/facets). Interestingly, papers that utilized total scores tended to focus on overall risk prediction levels, and on evaluating how the unique combination of characteristics that comprise the disorder manifest in a given individual. For instance, Rojas and Olver (2021) reported that overall levels of psychopathy—as assessed with the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version—predicted non-sexual violent, general violent, and any other recidivism, as well as treatment noncompletion. Additionally, Forth et al. (2021) found that perpetrators' psychopathic traits measured with an informant-report version of the Self-Report Psychopathy scale were related to increased post-traumatic and depressive symptoms in survivors of abusive relationships with psychopathic individuals. In contrast, papers that considered dimensions of the disorder tended to offer more granular insights into potential underlying mechanisms. For instance, Fanti et al. (2021) reported that the level of parental impulsive-irresponsibility traits specifically predicted increased risk of psychopathology in adolescent children. Notably, in one study (Kranefeld et al., 2021), the different components of psychopathy—at least as conceptualized in the triarchic model—bore opposite relations with outcomes in the workplace. Specifically, while meanness and disinhibition had positive relations with counterproductive work behavior, boldness traits had positive associations with career success (although this was contingent on high levels of political skills as well). These findings are important on conceptual and practical grounds, as they highlight the importance of refined theoretical predictions about psychopathy and of effective interventions for curtailing its impacts. Taken together, these findings emphasize the importance of both approaches (those focusing on total psychopathy scores, and those focusing on lower-level

dimensions of the disorder), and also on the need to consider carefully the relevance and significance of each approach. For instance, research that focuses on total scores may be encouraged—when possible—to also examine whether it is the shared or unique variance across components that is driving the main findings; while research that focuses primarily on lower order components may be encouraged to be mindful of the implications for psychopathy as a broader construct. Ultimately, both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, and the choice between them may inevitably hinge on the specific research question being asked.

The Quest for Relevant Mediators and Moderators

An important point that emerges from this Special Issue is that the impacts of psychopathic traits do not occur in a vacuum. An important focus for future research may thus be to investigate the mediators and moderators of these impacts. Chief examples from the present Special Issue are that buffering factors can reduce the detrimental effects of psychopathy on others (e.g., as in the case of coping; Forth et al., 2021), providing some hope that fostering individual and environmental resilience is effective—if not in targeting psychopathy directly—in reducing its negative impact. Another example is from Fanti et al. (2021), who showed that the impact of maternal psychopathic traits (specifically, impulsive irresponsibility traits) on adolescent offspring’s psychopathology was mainly exerted indirectly through the mediating role of maternal antisocial behavior. Further, Polaschek et al. (2021) reported that the link between recidivism and the triarchic component of disinhibition was partially explained by poorer subjective well-being. Crucially, these mediating or moderating roles appear to differ across context, age, and individual components of the broader psychopathy constructs (e.g., Kranefeld et al., 2021). Research on mediators and moderators of the impact of psychopathy is vital to inform theoretical models of its developmental pathways, and to facilitate the development of targeted preventive and treatment efforts. An important challenge for research of this type is to adopt designs that afford causal mechanisms (as much as possible in social sciences; Rohrer, 2018), such as longitudinal or experimental components.

Targeting Psychopathy: A Way Forward

A longstanding question asked by scholars and clinicians in the area of psychopathy is: “*What can we do about it?*” In a thought-provoking theoretical piece in this Special Issue by Jurjako et al. (2021), the notion that psychopathy may be conceptualized as a form of disability was put forward. The authors concluded by providing novel considerations regarding how society could intervene to minimize impacts of the disorder. The idea that emerges from this was that effective interventions in adulthood may not only need to target psychopathic tendencies directly, but may also benefit by influencing the social contexts within which psychopathic individuals live. This offers an interesting connection to recent work, which has increasingly demonstrated that the

psychopathic individuals' emotional abnormalities may be more contextualized than previously appreciated. For instance, individuals with heightened psychopathic traits can show higher levels of fear if the fear-eliciting stimulus is made salient (Hamilton et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2010); can show higher levels of empathy if they are provided with an explicit goal to try to do so (Shane & Groat, 2018); and can show significant variation in their motivation to experience and regulate both positive and negative emotions (Spantidaki-Kyriazi et al., 2021). From the perspective of the harms committed by psychopathic individuals, one may wonder whether they occur because psychopathic individuals *have difficulty refraining from* harmful behaviors, or because they are *more motivated to engage in* harmful behaviors. This distinction may have critical implications for both forensic practice and public policy, as a deficient skill (i.e., difficulty refraining) versus a motivational disposition (i.e., increased motivation to engage) is likely to require very different interventional approaches. This is a topic that we believe should represent a priority for future theoretical and empirical work focused on the disorder, and we hope that the studies included in this Special Issue will help to kickstart further investigations in this direction.

Conclusion

Psychopathy was the first formal personality disorder recognized in the field of psychiatry (Millon et al., 1998) and has attracted a remarkable amount of scholarly interest since that time. Nonetheless, the studies included in this Special Issue are a testimony to the fact that the field is far from being saturated. In fact, this collection of studies shows that work focused on the impacts of psychopathy remains in its relative infancy, and that much has yet to be uncovered regarding when, how and why the psychopathic personality imparts such harms. At the same time, these studies also provide refreshing and inspiring perspectives for pursuing these goals and offer considerable promise for the future of this interdisciplinary field, which has much potential for facilitating significant, tangible impacts on policy making and society at large.

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