

Dark Minds: A Critical Review on Criminal Psychopathy

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ABSTRACT

Psychopathy is among the few phenomena in the intricate tapestry of human behaviour that manages to instil both fascination and fear in academic discourse and popular culture. While psychopathy is an amalgamation of personality traits, criminal psychopathy delves on the behavioural consequences of psychopathy. The objective of this paper is to synthesize key insights on understanding of criminal psychopathy by examining evolutionary perspectives, violence, emotions, and treatment considerations, we aim to contribute to an integrated comprehension of this intriguing phenomenon.

Keywords: *Criminal Psychopath, Evolutionary perspectives on psychopathy, Treatment of criminal psychopathy*

Psychopathy is a clinical phenomenon consisting of a pool of affective (lack of empathy, remorse, or guilt), interpersonal (deceitfulness, manipulative, superficial, grandiosity), and behavioural (impulsivity, antisocial) characteristics (Hare and Neuman, 2008; Hare, 2003). Several etiological factors have been researched on psychopathy which is attributed to genetic influence, trauma in early childhood experiences, etc, organicity, etc, and it is said to be relatively stable over time.

Psychopathy has been associated with an essential psychological construct when it comes to the criminal system. According to Vaughn and Howard (2005), psychopathy is an ideal construct to understand serious, violent, and chronic criminal behaviour as rightly commented by DeLisi (2009), psychopathy is “*the unified theory of delinquency and crime and the purest explanation of antisocial behaviour*”. It is essential to note though that not all sorts of criminal behaviour can be attributed to psychopathy and that “only a small minority of those who engage in criminal conduct are psychopaths” (Hart and Hare, 1997).

Early research on psychopathy has attempted to understand psychopathy through two, three, and four-factor models. (Cooke and Michie, 2001, Brinkley, Diamond, Magaletta, & Heigel, 2008). It is popularly measured through Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) or the Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (LSRP).

Criminal psychopath is the term used to denote psychopaths who engage in antisocial activities that are against Law. Psychopathic offenders begin offending at a rather early age and are said to engage in criminal antisocial behaviour than other offenders (Simourd and

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Hoge, 2000). Adolescent psychopathic offenders are more likely than other offenders to commit a violent crime on release from juvenile detention. (Stafford and Cornell, 2003). Another pattern identified is that the victims of psychopaths are more strangers in comparison to known persons (Häkkinen-Nyholm and Hare, 2009; Weizmann-Henelius et al, 2002) and are more resistant to therapeutic input than other offenders. In a study conducted by Gretton et al., (2001), it was found that higher psychopathic scores are also related to an increased likelihood of escape from custody, violation of the conditions of probation, and the accumulation of more total, violent, and nonviolent offenses after release from treatment programs.

EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES ON CRIMINAL PSYCHOPATHY

Evolutionary explanations of antisocial and criminal behaviour, highly rooted in Darwin's theory of natural selection, have been studied extensively across various dimensions. Boisvert. D., (2018) review of the literature suggested that antisocial and criminal behaviours evolved as a way for our ancestors to tackle obstacles concerning survival and /or reproduction. The evolutionary perspective on antisocial behaviour enhances our current understanding of psychopathic traits. Numerous theoretical perspectives in Evolutionary psychology such as Conditional adaptation theory, and Evolutionary Neuroandrogenic theory have attempted to explain criminal or antisocial behaviour, particularly concerning psychopathic traits.

Conditional adaptation theory

Buss, (2009), referred to the term contingent shifts or conditional adaptation to understand the flexibility of change in psychological mechanisms concerning the environment or one's characteristics. It may occur in an early stage of life resulting in a change in the developmental trajectory to fit the local conditions of the social and physical environment (Del Giudice et al., 2011). This theory particularly sheds light on the individual variation in psychopathic mechanisms rather than pathological processes.

Following on similar lines, Gao et al. (2010) findings suggested that poor parental bonding and childhood physical abuse were significantly associated with increased psychopathy scores in adulthood. Additionally, it was also found that the children who experienced separation from their primary caregivers during the first three years of life were significantly more psychopathic at age 28 than children who were not separated from their parents. Victims of childhood abuse and neglect serve to exhibit higher psychopathic scores in adulthood. (O'Neill, Lids, & Heilbrun, 2003). Therefore, this study appears to provide insight into the role of early trauma as one of the environmental factors leading to a shift in faster life history strategy particularly associated with psychopathic traits.

Another identified aspect of the conditional adaptation model is the Low-stress responsivity in the psychopathy literature. Cima et al., (2008) suggested that in adult psychopathic offenders, lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol were identified in comparison to the non-psychopathic offenders. Another study done by O'Leary et al. (2007) found similar findings in undergraduate males who scored high in psychopathy and showed less cortisol reactivity to a social stressor than individuals with lower scores. Low-stress responsibility in psychopathic individuals may result in a calm demeanor and vigilance during aggressive encounters. Thus, it suggests that early environmental factors may act via the stress response system concerning a shift towards faster life history strategy in some individuals with psychopathic traits.

Evolutionary Neuroandrogenic theory

Lee Ellis, (2005) in his paper “A Theory Explaining Biological Correlates of Criminality” introduced the evolutionary neuroandrogenic conceptual framework toward understanding trends in violent and criminal behaviour from an evolutionary and biological perspective. The ENA theory posits two propositions: a) Males are more likely to display competitive behaviours in comparison to females to increase the chances of mating and acquisition of resources, b) genes associated with the Y-chromosome result in different development of male brains in comparison to the female brains, resulting in increasing of competitive behaviour (Ellis, 2005). It accounts for the explanation of criminal behaviour specifically among males between the ages of 13 to 30 (Ellis, 2017; Ellis, 2005).

Numerous types of research have found that psychopathy is more prevalent among males in comparison to females (Sellbom et al., 2017; Kreis & Cooke, 2011; Blanchard & Lyons, 2010; Hare, 2003). Characteristics of callousness, egocentricity, disruptive behaviour, recklessness, aggression, physical violence, reduced anxiety, and empathy were found in males with both primary and secondary psychopathy (Sellbom et al., 2017). Additionally, Guerra & White, (2017) found a significant association between primary psychopathy and proactive aggression resulting in instrumental violence amongst males compared to females which suggested reduced emotionality in primary psychopathy.

ENA theory also suggests that the male hormone i.e., testosterone plays a vital role in promoting competitive behaviour (Ellis, 2005) along with reduced pain sensitivity and empathy leading to increased aggression and violent behaviours (Ellis, 2001). Thus, shedding light on the sex differences in criminal behaviour. Psychopathic traits are shown to be male traits predominantly, indicating that there may be sex-related antecedents responsible for this trait putting males at increased risk of developing antisocial and criminal behaviour.

VIOLENCE AND PSYCHOPATHY

The relationship between Violence and Psychopathy has been well-researched over the past decade. As per Checkley (1976), violence perpetrated by psychopaths is likely to be more instrumental in comparison to offenders with non-psychopathic traits. Instrumental violence can be understood in terms of “predatory” violence, which is controlled, purposeful, and highly goal-oriented (money, drugs, or power). To assert this claim, Williamson, et al., (1987) identified the characteristics of violent offenses committed by 101 Canadian offenders. The findings of the study indicated that psychopaths’ violent criminal behaviour is significantly more likely to be a result of a desire for an external goal (45.6%), in comparison to those of non-psychopaths (14.6%). In nearly half of the cases, psychopaths did not possess any desire for external goals, and it was also found that psychopaths were less likely (2.4%) to have been in a state of heightened emotional arousal at the time of their crimes as compared to non-psychopaths (31.7%).

Another study by Cornell and Colleagues, (1996) attempted to investigate the history of violent offenses of 106 male offenders held in a medium-security state prison. The results suggested that psychopathic offenders were more likely to have perpetrated an instrumentally violent crime at some point in their criminal history in comparison to non-psychopathic offenders who usually committed reactive violence. Reactive violence can be understood in terms of being emotion-driven and impulsive in the face of a perceived threat or provocation (Meloy,1998). It was also noted that victims of instrumental violence were typical strangers, whereas victims of reactive violence were known to the offenders.

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Therefore, the level of a psychopath can be screened in terms of the nature of violence i.e., instrumental, or reactive violence. Furthermore, Chase et.al., (2001), also found a relationship between psychopathy and the use of instrumental violence by non-incarcerated male spousal assaulters.

Similarly, Loper et al., (2001) indicated that male and female juvenile offenders scored high on psychopathy traits, particularly those who have committed instrumentally motivated violence (Murrie et.al., 2004). Kruh and colleagues (2005) found that higher psychopathy scores were associated with a history of unprovoked violence in a sample of juveniles (aged 16 to 21 years old). Numerous researchers have also associated sadistic violence with psychopathy (Porter et al., 2003; Porter et al., 2001; Meloy, 2000).

A meta-analysis by Eden, Campbell, and Weir (2007) suggested that psychopathy showed a significant relationship between general and violent recidivism in male youths, indicating a strong predictive of violent recidivism. Additionally, it was also noted that individuals with psychopathic personalities were more common in prison and substance use populations (Tellegen & Waller, 2008).

EMOTIONS AND PSYCHOPATHY

One of the common characteristics of psychopathy is the lack of effective factors (e.g. Lack of empathy, remorse, or guilt). Studies suggest that the increase in instrumental aggression is due to the poor interpretation or empathy in the victim's emotional distress or lack of aversive perspective towards violence in general (Nestor et al., 2002; Blair, 2001). It may be a result of reduced amygdala functioning in the brain. (Blair, 2007). Emotional detachment prevents experiencing feelings, which naturally inhibit the acting out of violent impulses (S. Herpertz & H. Sass, 2000). This claim was backed by the study of Gray et al., (2003), which suggested that psychopathic offenders committing homicide failed to associate violence with aversion and show diminished adverse reactions to violence concerning non-psychopathic offenders.

Additionally, individuals with psychopathic traits were found to have impaired facial recognition, particularly fear and disgust (Hastings et al., 2008; Munro et al., 2007; Blaire, 2004). They do not show the expected startled reflex that occurs during the processing of aversive stimuli (C. Patrick,1994). These deficits in emotional processing may contribute to the behavioral and cognitive disturbances observed in psychopathy (Kring, 1999).

Contrary to popular belief, psychopathic traits characterized by deviant behavior and antisocial personality are associated with low emotional intelligence (Brackett, Mayer & Warner, 2004). A study conducted by Petrides et al., concluded that emotional intelligence is positively correlated with narcissism, emotional control and manipulation which are often associated as aspects of psychopathy (Nagler, Reiter, Furtner, and Rauthmann, 2014; Petrides et al., 2011).

TREATMENT OF CRIMINAL PSYCHOPATHY

Psychopathic offenders are a challenging population to treat, often associated as a pessimistic clinical exercise (M. Olver, 2016; W. Reid & C. Gacono, 2000). A meta-analysis of the psychopathy treatment literature was published by Salekin, (2002) reviewing 42 studies traversing 60 years of therapeutic research consisting of dozens of psychotherapeutic interventions attempted with individuals identified with psychopathic traits. The intervention techniques employed ranged from psychoanalytic interventions (k=17), therapeutic

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communities (k=8), cognitive behavioural therapy programs (k=8), eclectic, pharmacotherapy, and electroconvulsive shock therapy (k=2 for each), and actional procedures, personal construct therapy, rational emotive therapy, psychodrama, and unspecified interventions (k=1 for each). Additionally, k=8 of the studies were no treatment control conditions. The findings reported that approximately 62% of patients benefited from the treatment, excluding 60% of case studies. Single interventions featuring a single case design were identified among the highest success rates. Psychoanalytic (56% success rate) and CBT (62% success rate) were found whereas Little to no improvement was found for ECT (22% success rate), and the unspecified intervention (17% success rate).

Many limitations were identified from these studies such as methodological limitations of the design and the reliability of the results due to single-case designs leading to a lack of replication. It was also noted by the author that most of the studies did not use PCL-R or other validated instruments to identify psychopathic traits and most of the studies also failed to employ an untreated or comparison group as well as fewer follow-ups or post-treatment examination was conducted by the researchers. This led to the conclusion by Salekin, (2002) stating “there is a little scientific basis for the belief that psychopathy is an untreatable disorder”.

Further down the decade Salekin, Worley, and Grimes, (2010) investigated several psychopathy treatment studies that managed to overcome the methodological limitations of the earlier Salekin (2002) review. Eight treatment studies on an adult sample and five studies on child and youth samples were investigated using a coherent standardized instrument (PCL-R), treatment outcomes were investigated using forensically relevant criteria, as well as a temporary model such as CBT was employed. It was found that the treatment yielded smaller effects and more benefits were derived by the child and youth population. At the same time, it was found that not all the intervention programs were equally effective, or evidence informed. (Olver, 2016). Thus, there is no significant evidence that suggests that appropriate treatment programs make psychopathic offenders worse; however, there is some evidence that suggests that early intervention may potentially benefit if retained in an evidence-informed intervention program.

At the same time, Lewis (2018), suggested the importance of identifying underlying cognitive-affective dysfunction in treatment of psychopathy using behaviour therapy approaches such as Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) suggested by Galietta (2012) and applied behaviour analysis (ABA) (Sturme, 2012). These studies highlighted the importance of a multifaceted approach in targeting both the core deficits and the associated behaviour as an effective therapeutic modality in treating psychopathy.

Additionally, Wong’s (2015) two-component model for the treatment of psychopathy attempted to provide a framework for managing the interfering behaviours of individuals with psychopathic traits during treatment at the same time retaining the treatment integrity of effectively addressing the core risks and needs to reduce recidivism and promotion of reintegration of those individuals in the community. Thus, providing a positive approach to dealing effectively with the psychopathic population.

CONCLUSION

The present review of literature is an attempt to shed light on the understanding of criminal psychopathy in terms of the Evolutionary perspective, Violence, Emotions, and Treatment approaches to criminal psychopathy. Criminal Psychopathy has remained a popular field of

study among the forensic population. Various researchers have attempted to understand criminal behaviour, particularly adhering to the psychopathy population through varied perspectives. Evolutionary theories of Conditional Adaptation and Evolutionary Neuroandrogenic theory attempted to explain the inherent behavioural mechanism at play directing psychopathic traits in an individual as an evolutionary adaptive strategy. At the same time, violence and emotions also play a vital role in determining criminal behaviour in individuals with psychopathic traits. Various limitations were identified while reviewing the treatment approaches in reducing recidivism in incarcerated psychopathic offenders, reciting a need to develop efficient and evidence-based intervention plans in dealing with criminal psychopathy in society.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Patel, M. (2024). Dark Minds: A Critical Review on Criminal Psychopathy. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(1), 2598-2606. DIP:18.01.237.20241201, DOI:10.25215/1201.237