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Overstepping Our Bounds: A Critical Examination of Youth Psychopathy

Matthew F. D. Brown*

Recent research highlights the importance of callous-unemotional traits (CU Traits; i.e., lack of guilt, remorse, or concern for others) for causal models of aggressive and violent behaviour in youth; accordingly, a new specifier to the diagnosis of conduct disorder (CD) was included in the DSM-5 (i.e., “*limited prosocial emotions*”; APA, 2013). In addition, several measures have been developed to directly extend the construct of psychopathy to youth samples, most notably the *Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version* (PCL: YV; Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003). Although the incremental utility of CU traits and measures of psychopathy to measurement of youth aggression and violence has been documented within the extant literature base, there is little focus to the pejorative effects of such a diagnosis of CD, including the potential stigmatization, and the developmental insensitivity of measures. Therefore, the present review outlines three main limitations of extant literature pertaining to youth psychopathy; specifically, the negative labeling effect of being classified a psychopath, the developmental inappropriateness of several PCL: YV items, and the lack of clear stability of psychopathy from childhood to adulthood. Future research examining childhood and adolescent psychopathy from a developmental psychopathology perspective (Cicchetti & Cohen, 2006) is necessary, and warranted.

Psychopathy is a personality construct, originally conceptualized in adults, characterized by affective (e.g., shallow emotions), behavioral (e.g., egocentricity), and interpersonal (e.g., manipulative) factors (Hare, 1996). The most common assessment tool of psychopathy is the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 1991). Many researchers and clinicians believe that psychopathic personality traits do not manifest suddenly in adulthood, but rather are stable, and identifiable before adulthood (Johnstone and Cooke, 2004; Lynam, 2002; Saltaris, 2002). Therefore, in recent years, research has focused on developing measures that can assess psychopathy in children as young as 12 years of age, and personality measures that can detect precursors to psychopathy in children as young as six years of age (Andershed, Gustafson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2002; Forth, 2005; Lynam, 1997). The desired goal for many of these measures is to be able

to reliably differentiate subtypes of adolescent offenders, and to inform the legal system about the relative risk of certain adolescent offenders (Gretton, Hare, Catchpole, 2004). However, the question of whether research literature supports extending the construct of psychopathy to youth has been brought up (Edens, Skeem, Cruise, & Cauffman, 2001; Edens & Vincent, 2008; Hart, Watt, & Vincent, 2002; Seagrave & Grisso, 2002). I argue that the construct of psychopathy, in its current conceptualization, should not be extended to youth. First, there are potentially negative effects for youth being labeled as a psychopath (e.g., biased jury decisions). Second, current measurement instruments contain questionable items, which may not be indicative of underlying antisocial and/or violent tendencies, per se. Finally, there is a lack of longitudinal studies showing stability of psychopathic traits throughout childhood and into

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adulthood.

Forever Changed: The Potential Negative Effects of the Psychopathic Label

Statistics show that the youth crime rates in Canada have been declining over the past decade, but politicians and many others still hold the belief that “getting tough on crime” is not enough, and that youth are more violent than they used to be (Statistics Canada, 2011). Are there any consequences to believing youth are more dangerous than they were in the past? Research has shown a risk to labeling an adolescent offender as being a “psychopath”, or having psychopathic traits. Edens, Guy, and Fernandez (2003) conducted a study examining this issue by presenting participants with information about a crime committed by a juvenile, and described the personality of the juvenile as either psychopathic or not. Results showed that approximately 36% of participants recommended the death penalty to the juvenile ‘psychopath’, whereas only 21% of participants recommended the death penalty to the juvenile defendant described as non-psychopathic. Since the only difference between the psychopathic and non-psychopathic juvenile offender was the way in which their personality and behaviour were described, these findings provide alarming support for the claim that there are detrimental effects of labeling youth as being ‘psychopathic’.

The study performed by Edens et al. (2003) may be improved in several ways in future research. First, the crime committed by the juvenile offender was very extreme (i.e., charged for burglarizing a woman’s house and

throwing her off a bridge to her death), and needs to be slightly more commonplace. An example of a more ‘believable’ crime would be a boy who is robbing a house, and is taken by surprise by the owner, so the child kills the owner, and then completes the robbery. Second, Edens et al. performed this study in an undisclosed Southwestern state; studies should be performed in more ‘liberal’ states, as well as in Canada, to determine whether these findings are independent of individuals’ places of residence. Finally, the penalty given to the defendant should be altered. Perhaps a sentence of life in prison with eligibility for parole in 25 years, or a similar type of sentence, would be more believable and realistic for participants. Focus needs to be directed at determining the subtleties of the psychopathic label, for example whether any child described in psychopathic terms faces harsher sentences, or if it is only for very extreme crimes that people consider the psychopathic personality label relevant.

The question of whether psychopathic labeling exists at all has been raised in recent research. Mainly, these studies have suggested that it is not the label of “psychopath” that influences judges’ and juries’ perceptions and decisions regarding the defendant, but rather the characteristics associated with psychopathy (i.e., lying, impulsivity, and irresponsibility) that largely influences decisions and perceptions (Murrie, Boccaccini, McCoy, & Cornell, 2007). Empirical research has tried to resolve this issue by using court judges, and juvenile probation officers (JPOs), but generally studies provide mixed findings. To illustrate this issue, a study was performed by Jones and Cauffman

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(2008) whereby they examined whether the label of psychopathy affected judges' perceptions regarding culpability, dangerousness, and amenability to treatment of an adolescent defendant. In addition, judges' decisions regarding the level of restrictiveness recommended to the defendant was assessed (Jones & Cauffman, 2008). The study found that when the label of "psychopath" was used, the perception of the defendant's amenability to treatment decreased, and the perception of the defendant's dangerousness increased, as opposed to a defendant who did not receive such a label. However, research performed by Murrie, Cornell, and McCoy (2005) assessed the opinions and recommendations of JPOs when presented with information about an adolescent defendant labeled as a psychopath, an adolescent with conduct disorder (CD), or an adolescent with no diagnosable mental condition. They also examined the effect on JPOs opinions and recommendations when the defendant was described as manifesting psychopathic personality traits (e.g., shallow affect) or antisocial behaviours consistent with CD (e.g., "engaged in physical fights with peers"). Results showed there was no significant difference in terms of opinions or decisions of the JPOs when the defendant was labeled as a psychopath, having CD, or having no diagnosis of a mental condition. The authors did find, however, that an individual described as manifesting psychopathic traits was more likely to receive treatment recommendation compared to a defendant described as having traits consistent with CD, or no psychological disorder. This finding seems to contrast that of the study performed by Jones and Cauffman (2008) who found that an

adolescent described as psychopathic was considered to be less amenable to treatment.

Although the studies discussed so far have found mixed results in regards to the effect of psychopathic labeling, one conclusion that can be made is that the perception of a youth defendant changes when they are described as psychopathic compared to when they are not. This result holds true even if the defendant and the crime committed are held constant. Clearly a perception exists that youth offenders, who are described as psychopathic, are more dangerous compared to youth offenders who are not described as psychopathic. Based on these findings, I argue that the personality of youth offenders should not be instituted into a trial proceeding. The judicial system should emulate Wrightsman's legal model when it comes to decision-making, in which decisions are based solely on legal factors (as cited in Jones & Cauffman, 2008).

Kids 'Do' The Darndest Things: Measuring Psychopathy or General Tendencies?

An area that has been of considerable debate in the measurement of youth psychopathy is whether current measurement tools are actually assessing traits that are exaggerated within certain youth and children. Most of this debate centers around the Hare Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL: YV; Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003) because of the popularity of the scale, and the method in which it was created. The PCL: YV was based on a downward extension of the items measured with the PCL-R (Hare, 1991). The authors proposed a four-factor structure for the

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PCL: YV, which consists of an “interpersonal dimension”, an “affective dimension”, a “behavioural dimension”, and an “antisocial dimension” (Forth, 2005). Some items from the PCL-R were not extended to the PCL: YV due to items not being applicable to youth (e.g., many short term marital relationships), and some items were altered in order to be more suitable for youth (e.g., the number of crimes to satisfy the item *criminal versatility* was reduced) (Forth, 2005). However, even after these adjustments some items of the PCL: YV may be unsuitable for determining psychopathy in youth. I will focus on four items within the “behavioural dimension”: *impulsivity*, *stimulation seeking*, *lack of goals*, and *irresponsibility*. There may, however, be potential issues with other items on the PCL: YV (for a review see Edens, Skeem, Cruise, & Cauffman, 2001; Edens & Vincent, 2008).

In regards to *impulsivity* and *stimulation seeking*, Harden and Tucker-Drob (2011) demonstrated, through a longitudinal design, that impulsivity traits decline throughout adolescence and level off as individuals reach their mid-20s. In addition, sensation-seeking traits peaked at around 16 years of age and then continued to decline into adulthood. Harden and Tucker-Drob (2011) provided evidence for a vulnerability to risk taking behaviour and psychopathology through a dual systems model. The dual systems model suggests that impulsivity and sensation seeking are controlled by a specific neurological system (the socioemotional system). The socioemotional system contains structures such as the amygdala and is highly sensitive during early adolescence. The socioemotional system develops independently of the cognitive

control system, which allows the individual to exert control over various impulsive behaviours. The cognitive control system contains structures such as the prefrontal cortex, but does not reach maturity until early adulthood. The authors did highlight that individual differences were found in the developmental course of sensation seeking and impulsivity, such that certain individuals differed from the normal trend in the development of these traits (Harden and Tucker-Drob, 2011). Other studies have provided evidence that the cognitive control system matures much later in development than the socioemotional system (Casey, Getz, and Galvan, 2008; Steinberg, 2008). Extrapolating these findings to the PCL: YV, scores on the items *impulsivity* and *stimulation seeking* may be weakly correlated to psychopathy, and could just be measuring a general developmental trend in youth.

Several studies also support the notion that children and adolescents are less oriented toward the future, and are less able to understand the future consequences of their actions than are adults, drawing into question the items of *lack of goals* and *irresponsibility* (Steinberg, 2008; Steinberg et al., 2009). A recent study performed by Steinberg, Graham, O’Brien, Woolard, Cauffman, and Banich (2009) suggested that the ages of 13-16 are extremely important for future orientation development. To demonstrate, Steinberg et al. (2009) had individuals between the ages of 10 and 30 perform a delay-discounting task, which assesses individuals’ abilities to delay receiving an immediate reward of moderate value, in order to receive a reward of larger value later on. It was found that children aged 16 and younger, as compared to individuals aged 16 and

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older, needed a much larger future reward than to postpone accepting an immediate reward of lesser value.

While the studies mentioned so far were not assessing traits and behaviours in deviant youth specifically, the results do suggest that several items on the PCL: YV and other youth psychopathy measures are assessing traits present in most youth. Generalizability of studies from developmental and neurological fields to the field of youth psychopathy may be questioned due to the fact that samples did not necessarily involve deviant youth. However, Harden and Tucker-Drob (2011) included a sample of over 7000 youth measured from 1994 to 2006, and Steinberg et al. (2009) included over 900 individuals; therefore the samples can be considered representative of the general population. Based on the preceding discussion it appears that there are two distinct lines of research, a developmental/neurological line which suggests that behaviours assessed on the PCL: YV are positively inflated, and a forensic line that suggests certain youth are distinct from the general population in terms of particular behaviours. I argue that both lines of research should converge to help clear up issues within youth psychopathy. Future research would benefit from administering personality inventories and tasks assessing sensation-seeking, impulsivity, future orientation, and responsibility along with psychopathy measures such as the PCL: YV, and seeing if elevated scores on the PCL: YV, or certain factors of the PCL: YV are indeed correlated with elevated scores on the personality measures. For example, to examine impulsivity, studies could conduct a delay-of-gratification (DOG)

task in parallel with the PCL: YV. DOG tasks have been used to distinguish hyperactive boys from non-hyperactive boys, and boys with self-regulation and social adjustment problems from boys who do not exhibit these behaviours (Gordon, 1979; Rodriguez, Mischel, & Shada, 1989). Using these two measures in parallel would allow for PCL: YV ratings to be compared to a well established measure of impulsiveness, as well as whether the two measures combined are better able to predict future criminal behaviour than either alone. Future research may also consider examining which items on the PCL: YV and other measures are the most sensitive to psychopathy. If the removal of certain items does not significantly impact predictive validity of future criminal behaviour, then perhaps some items can be removed from the scale altogether.

Once a Psychopath, Always a Psychopath: Lack of Longitudinal Evidence

An assertion made by several researchers is that psychopathic behaviour does not spontaneously develop in certain adults, but instead develops early on in life and persists into adulthood (Forth, 2005; Johnstone and Cooke, 2004; Lynam, 2002; Saltaris, 2002). However, there is a lack of strong, replicated, longitudinal evidence in support of this claim. Only a handful of studies have even attempted to examine this issue. Lynam, Caspi, Moffitt, Loeber, and Southamer-Loeber (2007) assessed psychopathy in youth between the ages of 10 and 13 (Time 1), and followed up these participants between 22 and 24 years of age (Time 2). Lynam et al. found that there was moderate stability of psychopathic traits

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from Time 1 to Time 2, which the authors suggested provides credence to the notion that psychopathy can be identified in youth and persist into adulthood. Another study performed by Frick, Kimonis, Dandreaux, and Farell (2003) found that psychopathic traits measured using the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD) had fairly high stability over a four-year period. However, there are concerns with both studies in relation to the psychopathic trait stability assertion.

First, in terms of the study performed by Lynam et al. (2007), measurement at Time 1 used parent ratings of psychopathic traits, and measurement at Time 2 used ratings from trained graduates. While this is partly understandable due to time and financial constraints, it does draw into question whether the same results would be found using clinician ratings at both Time 1 and Time 2. Another issue was that positive predictive power (i.e., the conditional probability that an individual was psychopathic at age 24 knowing the individual was psychopathic at age 13) was quite low. To illustrate, only 21% of the boys who scored in the top 10% in psychopathy at age 13 were psychopathic at age 24, which does not provide compelling evidence to suggest that psychopathic personality traits are stable. In terms of the study performed by Frick et al. (2003), although the stability of psychopathic traits was high, the length in which these traits were assessed hardly suggests that psychopathy is stable into adulthood. At best, implications would be that when a child is assessed at 10 years of age, the same traits are likely to be present at 14 years of age. While these limitations do not completely contradict the hypothesis that psychopathy is a relatively enduring

personality construct evident throughout the life course, results do suggest that more research needs to be conducted. This is especially crucial if forensic psychologists have any intention of informing the legal system in regards to particular youth offenders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the above review, I would argue that the concept of psychopathy is valid, and that research in the area should be continued. However, what it does suggest is any use of youth psychopathy measures in relation to legal or clinical settings should not be permitted until there is sufficient empirical evidence supporting this construct. Hart, Watt, and Vincent (2002) suggested that youth psychopathy is like an impressionist painting; they may look “fine from a distance; but the closer you get the messier it looks” (p. 241). This quote sums up the state of the available literature quite concisely. At first glance, youth psychopathy looks like an inherently common sense extension of the adult psychopathy literature. However, as this paper has attempted to argue, this may not be the case.

Psychology must be careful not to promise too much in this situation. Psychologists need to be aware of and acknowledge potential limitations of their measures. The growing rate of research in this field is astounding, even though, as mentioned throughout this review, certain assumptions made by researchers are not necessarily clear cut or valid. Science is a field that desires to provide solutions to problems, and the quicker the problems are solved the better, especially when the problem potentially involves the safety and

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wellbeing of individuals in society. However, there are several issues that must be addressed before psychologists can inform the legal process on this issue. First, they must empirically validate that psychopathy is a relatively stable personality dimension evident throughout the life course in certain individuals. Next, they must create measures that only assess the traits that are sensitive to psychopathy, and not just developmental trends. Once research has answered and addressed these problems, then it may be acceptable to inform the legal system.

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