Title: Do Criminal and Successful (Non-institutionalized) Psychopaths Differ on Internal, Environmental, and Contextual Characteristics?

Abstract

Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by shallow emotions, particularly social emotions such as guilt, remorse, and empathy, as well as an arrogant and impulsive interpersonal style that involves the manipulation and domination of others. Despite the long history of theory and research on psychopathy, there continues to be a disagreement as to whether antisocial tendencies and criminal behaviors are an inherent part of the construct or are one possible byproduct of the aforementioned traits. In an attempt to resolve this disagreement, some researchers have shifted their efforts towards the study of psychopaths who reside beyond the walls of prisons and institutions – these psychopaths have come to be known as “successful” psychopaths. The extant literature not only suggests that successful psychopaths exist, but that they possess fundamental differences, as well as similarities, relative to criminal psychopaths. Comparisons between these two groups, however, have been limited to the domain of neurological functioning. In addition, while several theories have emerged to explain the differences between groups, the explanatory powers of these theories have not yet been empirically assessed. To address these shortcomings, this study involves secondary analysis of data previously collected as part of a larger prospective study of the consequences of child abuse and neglect. Consistent with the moderated expression model of successful psychopathy, comparisons between criminal and successful (noninstitutionalized) psychopaths revealed that the two groups are more similar than expected, as both exhibited a similar severity and configuration of psychopathic traits. Perhaps one of the most intriguing similarities was the level of antisocial tendencies exhibited by both groups - surprisingly, noninstitutionalized psychopaths were found to have engaged in a similar number of antisocial acts over the courses of their
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Analogous to the lifetime as that of criminal psychopaths, all while managing to avoid being convicted for these offenses. Although the two groups shared more similarities than differences on various internal, environmental, and contextual characteristics, two differences emerged between the groups that could aid in understanding how successful psychopaths manage to avoid being detected or convicted for their behavior relative to criminal psychopaths. More specifically, noninstitutionalized psychopaths were found to exhibit higher levels of intelligence and a greater proportion of them were steadily employed compared to criminal psychopaths. While more research is necessary to establish a causal relationship between these characteristics and the different manifestations of psychopathy, various potential mechanisms by which intelligence and steady employment work to give rise to different psychopathic manifestations, are proposed. For example, a greater degree of intelligence may allow noninstitutionalized psychopaths to develop enhanced strategies for engaging in antisocial behaviors while reducing the likelihood of being detected. Meanwhile, steady employment may provide noninstitutionalized psychopaths with increased funds that reduce their incentive to engage in certain high-risk antisocial behaviors that are financially motivated, such as robberies or burglaries, and in turn, reduces the chance that they will be detected by law enforcement officials. Finally, the popular misconception that treatment makes psychopaths worse is discussed, and the potential value of utilizing the aforementioned characteristics that are unique to non-institutionalized psychopaths to inform treatment and rehabilitation programs for psychopathy is explored.