Psychopathy in Youth: Pursuing Diagnostic Clarity

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Psychopathy in youth has received increased recognition as a critical clinical construct for the evaluation and management of troubled adolescents (e.g., Frick, P. J. (1998). In Cooke, D. J., Forth, A. E., and Hare, R. D. (eds.), Psychopathy: Theory, Research and Implications for Society. Kluwer Academic Publishers, Boston, MA, pp. 161–187; Lynam, D. R. (1998). J. Abnorm. Psychol., 107: 566–575). To date, clinical research has examined psychopathy simply as a global construct rather than focusing on its specific criteria. In addition, researchers have tended to utilize downward extensions of adult conceptualizations of psychopathy to understand this syndrome in youth. This study was designed to assist in clarifying the construct of psychopathy in youth from a fresh perspective via prototypical analysis. Psychologists from the Clinical Child Psychology Section of the American Psychological Association (i.e., Division 53; N = 511) rated the prototypicality of the psychopathy construct for both male and female youth. Factor analyses for both genders resulted in 2 dimensions that reflected both personality and behavioral components of the disorder. Prototypicality ratings revealed important adult-to-child and male-to-female differences. In addition, child psychologists’ views of their effectiveness at treating psychopathy in youth was surveyed. Contrary to the prevailing pessimism, clinical child psychologists reported that children and adolescents made moderate gains in psychotherapy. These results provide a framework for clinical child psychologists in their evaluations and treatment of psychopathic youth.

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INTRODUCTION

Psychopathy has a long and prominent history beginning with Philippe Pinel’s introduction of the construct approximately 200 years ago (Stone, 1993). Since that time, considerable theoretical and empirical attention has been directed toward understanding the psychopathic personality. Despite disagreements on whether psychopathy represents primarily a behavioral- or personality-based construct (Lilienfeld, 1994), most contemporary conceptualizations are linked, at least in part, to the seminal work of Cleckley (1941). Cleckley’s book, The Mask of Sanity, provided extensive clinical descriptions of the most salient characteristics of psychopathy; these descriptions have received widespread acceptance as capturing the concept of psychopathy.

An important development since Cleckley has been the construction of the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL; Hare, 1985, 1991). Hare and his colleagues (Hare, 1991; Hart et al., 1992) developed the PCL by adapting components of Cleckley’s conception of psychopathy and other theoretical models (see Rogers, 1995). As a result of these research efforts, substantial empirical evidence exists regarding the nature of the adult psychopathic individual within criminal institutions. Much of this research indicates that adult psychopaths are prone to both violent and nonviolent recidivism (Hare and Jutai, 1983; Hare and McPherson, 1984; Hare et al., 1988; Harris et al., 1991; Hart et al., 1988, 1994; Salekin et al., 1996).

The excessive costs that psychopathic individuals exact on society, including violence, general criminality, family dysfunction, and state and federal incurred expenses for welfare and imprisonment, as well as the difficulties that psychopathic individuals cause themselves, have resulted in an increased interest in detecting this syndrome early in its development (Lynam, 1998). Over the past decade, dramatic increases in youth violence and serious juvenile offending suggest that the early identification of psychopathy might be even more important now than was previously thought (Allen-Hagen and Sickmund, 1993; Grisso, 1996; Puzzanchera, 1998; Salekin, in press a). Research has shown that a small percentage of offenders are responsible for the majority, approximately 50–60%, of offenses (Farrington et al., 1986) and that this group is overrepresented by psychopathic individuals (Lynam, 1996, 1998). Violence and general antisocial behavior are likely related to individuals who lack important human characteristics, such as remorse and empathy (Salekin, in press b). Hare and Hart (1993) highlighted this important point by stating that “given the characteristics of psychopathy . . . it comes as no surprise that the disorder is implicated in a disproportionate amount of serious repetitive crime and violence” (p. 106).

Indirect evidence for the psychopathy-recidivism relation among youth can be found in the adult literature, which indicates that psychopathic offenders commit more crimes and a wider range of crimes than do other offenders (Hare et al., 1988). In addition, psychopaths have a high recidivism rate once released from