Psychopathy

Phil408P
Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD)

- "A pattern of irresponsible and antisocial behaviour beginning in childhood or early adolescence and continuing into adulthood."
- Psychopathy is an extreme type of APD where "an early onset of extremely aggressive behavior that is not tempered by a sense of guilt or empathy with the victim" is present.
  - symptoms: aggressiveness, acts of violence, lack of empathy
Hare’s Psychopathy Checklist

- Hare built on Cluckley to create a Psychopathy checklist. The most used tool to assess psychopathy is currently Hare’s Psychopathy Checklist Revised which includes 20 traits which are then rated on a scale.

- The symptoms of psychopathy include: lack of a conscience or sense of guilt, lack of empathy, egocentricity, pathological lying, repeated violations of social norms, disregard for the law, shallow emotions, and a history of victimizing others.

- Why are there psychopaths?
Punishment Positions

- “A model of development of morality… [which] makes claims as to the impairment of psychopaths. These authors principally claim that socialization is achieved through punishment. Remorse for example, is viewed as a consequence of conditioning (through punishment)... psychopathy is a consequence of a deficiency in conditionability.”
  - So, we are conditioned through punishment to feel remorse and that conditioned remorse causes us to develop a moral outlook.
  - Psychopaths fail at being conditioned and since they are not conditioned to feel remorse they do not feel moral obligation.

- Such punishment positions are discredited: “Developmental studies have clearly demonstrated that punishment is not associated with a reduction in antisocial behavior; instead, the use of inductive techniques (e.g. asking how the child or victim of the act feels) is associated with a reduction in antisocial behavior”
  - Punishment positions fail to account for the total lack of empathy as well as the extreme aggressive behavior.
Blair’s Proposal

- Violence Inhibition Mechanism (VIM): “A cognitive mechanism which, when activated by non-verbal communications of distress, initiates a withdrawal response.”
  - present in some social animals species
    - VIM is believed to be present in animal species as a way to help maintain order.
    - Display of submissive cues can result in the termination of an aggressive attack (e.g. dogs baring their throat when facing a stronger opponent).
  - Not every observer’s response to the distress cue is the same.
- VIM is necessary for developing three aspects of morality
  - Moral Emotions
  - Inhibition of Violent Action
  - Moral/Conventional Distinction
Moral Emotions

- Mandler: “Emotions are a consequence of the interpretation of arousal through a process of ‘meaning analysis’.”
  - Blair: The arousal produced via VIM will be interpreted as one of the moral emotions (e.g. sympathy, guilt, remorse, empathy).

- Empathy: “An affective response more appropriate to someone else’s situation than to one’s own… an emotional response to another’s state.”
  - considered a product of role-taking: “the creation of a representation of another’s internal state—a calculation of what the other might be thinking/feeling given their situation.”
    - Role-taking is an account of emotional arousal at the thought of another’s distress. Not just experiencing the physical manifestation of their distress.

- Summary: In normal development distress cues are witnessed which activate VIM, many will role-take with the victim.
  - Conditioning of this process will cause role-taking alone to activate VIM so just the thought of someone’s distress will “generate empathetic arousal.”
The Inhibition of Violent Action

- “VIM initiates a withdrawal response resulting in the on-line interruption of violent action.”
- A normally developing child is negatively reinforced by distress cues every time he/she engages in aggressive activity.
- With conditioning, they stop engaging in such activity.
  - Every time a child engages in aggressive behavior they see the resulting distress cue in the victim of their behavior. This distress cue cues their VIM and they experience a withdrawal response. As this happens more and more, they are conditioned to have the withdrawal response happen automatically which halts them from acting violently.
  - They eventually develop a natural inhibition to violent action without needing to witness a distress cue to have withdrawal initiated.
The Moral/Conventional Distinction

- Moral Transgression: Such transgressions are “defined by their consequences for the rights and welfare of others.”
  - This does not always require a rule or person of authority.
  - Such a transgression is committed when it has negative consequences for another’s welfare or is in violation of another’s rights, regardless of rules.

- Conventional Transgression: Such transgressions are “defined as violations of the behavioral uniformities that structure social interactions within social systems.”
  - This generally involves authority figures and prohibiting rules.
  - Prohibiting rules are set by society and enforced by authority figures. When such rules are broken, a conventional transgression is committed.

- Moral transgressions are usually judged more seriously and to be less permissible than conventional ones.
  - Why is this?
Theories of moral/conventional distinction

- There is a “suggestion that the distinction is a result of the formation of two independent conceptual domains… the child constructs these domains from qualitatively different social interactional consequences of moral and conventional transgressions”

- Turiel: “The child’s constructed connection between his personal experience of pain and the observed experience of the victim” creates the distinction.
  - Conventional transgressions can be victimless and so there is no observation of pain for a child to connect to.
  - According to Turiel’s suggestion of how this distinction is formed, a person who has not experienced pain would not make this distinction.
    - This causes a problem when applied to psychopaths because they do experience pain so they should not fail to make this distinction.

- Blair: The distinction is because of VIM: recall, VIM is result of conditioning of pairing transgressions with distress cues→ there are no such cues for conventional transgressions because they are victimless.
  - VIM creates a sense of aversion to wrong-doing but that aversion is never activated with conventional transgressions because such transgressions are only bad in sense of breaking a rule.
Developmental Account of Morality

- "Developmental consequences of VIM are represented as a causal model."
  - "Causal models are divided into three levels: physiological, cognitive, and behavioral."
Developmental Account of Psychopathic Disorder

- “Absence of VIM is conceptualized as either a consequence of a physiological deficit or the absence of early socialization experiences... lack of VIM will result in absence of moral emotions” and such an absence is part of the clinical description of psychopathy.
  - With no VIM, a person has no conditioning or role-taking. This is compatible with psychopathy because “psychopathy is associated with the inability to feel empathy with the victim.”
    - Just like a child who has yet to learn to associate distress cues and has yet to be conditioned because they do not yet have strong presence of VIM, the psychopath does not. However; the child will eventually gain VIM and lose aggressive behavior where the Psychopath carries that aggressive behavior forever.
    - It is important to note that psychopathy is not just an issue of lacking VIM. “The development of the psychopath is represented as a consequence of the lack of VIM together with either unspecified cognitive or environmental factors.”

- “Individuals lacking VIM should fail the moral/conventional distinction and fail to internally generate moral justifications.”
  - Blair: When somebody is asked why a moral transgression is wrong they should give a causal analysis which determines that a distress cue activated the withdrawal response. Without VIM the individual can only judge an act as bad because they were told it is bad. They do not make victim-based judgements because they are lacking empathy and do not respond to distress cues.
Developmental Account of Psychopathic Disorder
Three Predictions

1. Psychopaths will not make a distinction between moral and conventional rules.
2. Psychopaths will treat moral rules as if they are conventional; that is, under permissible conditions, the psychopaths will say that moral as well as conventional transgressions are okay to do.
3. Psychopaths will be less likely to make references to the pain or discomfort of victims than the non-psychopath controls.

- What do you think of these predictions?
Psychopaths show “an early onset of extremely aggressive behavior that is not tempered by a sense of guilt or empathy with the victim.”

Blair proposes that this is because psychopaths lack a Violence Inhibition Mechanism (VIM) which is needed for developing moral emotions, an inhibition to violence and an understanding of the distinction between moral and conventional transgressions.
  - Without this mechanism, one does not learn to role-take because they do not feel empathy. Such a person will not have thoughts regarding the consequences of their actions for a victim and they will not respond to distress cues by withdrawing from aggressive behavior.

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The Predictions Again

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Basics of the Experiment

- Participants: 20 subjects from special hospitals who were admitted under the legal category of Psychopathic Disorder
  - Using Hare’s Psychopathy Checklist, the subjects were divided into two groups: Those with high scores (the psychopaths) and those with low scores (the non-psychopath controls).
  - All were white males.
  - All had committed violent crimes. Not only were their crimes violent, all but one of the participants in the high scoring PCL Psychopath group had killed.

- Materials: 8 stories to be judged
  - 4 moral stories: “a child hitting another child, a child pulling the hair of another child and the victim cries, a child smashing a piano and a child breaking the swing in the playground.”
  - 4 conventional stories: “a boy child wearing a skirt, two children talking in class, a child walking out of the classroom without permission and a child who stops paying attention to the lesson and turns his back to the teacher.”
    - What do you think about the chosen stories? Are they properly categorized as moral and conventional?
Procedure

- Each scenario was placed in a school setting “because piloting had shown that teachers were regarded by the subjects as legitimate authority figures for children.”
  - It is important that the subjects recognize a legitimate authority figure in the scenarios because authority figures are an important component of the moral/conventional distinction.

- The subject hears each scenario one at a time and is then asked three questions after each scenario.
  1. “Was it OK for X to do Y?” (Examines subject’s judgement of the permissibility of the act)
  2. “Was it bad for X to do Y?” and then “On a scale of 1-10, how bad was it for X to do Y?” (Examines the subject’s judgement of the seriousness of the act.)
  3. “Why was it bad for X to do Y” (Examines the subject’s justification categories for the act.)

- The participant was then told: “Now what if the teacher said before the lesson, before X did Y, that “At this school anybody can Y if they want to. Anybody can Y.”
  - They were then asked a final question: “Would it be OK for X to do Y if the teacher says X can?” (Examines the rule’s authority jurisdiction.)

- For each participant, the order in which the scenarios was presented was randomized.
  - Sound familiar? Order effects anyone?
Results

- “Moral transgressions were judged significantly less permissible, more serious and less authority dependent than conventional transgressions… Significant group differences were only shown in the results… of the authority jurisdiction criterion judgement.”

- Non-psychopaths made significant moral/conventional distinction on all three criterion judgements, psychopaths did not on any.
  - So “while the responding of the psychopaths and non-psychopaths was only significantly different for the authority jurisdiction criterion judgement, the two groups can be differentiated.”

- Prediction 1 (psychopaths will not make a distinction between moral and conventional rules) was born out by the experiment. They did not show a distinction on any of the criterion judgements.

- Prediction 2 (that psychopaths will treat moral rules as if they were conventional; that is, under permission conditions, the psychopaths will say that moral as well as conventional transgressions are OK to do) was not born out by the experiment.
  - Under the authority jurisdiction criterion judgement, psychopaths judged conventional transgressions as moral (not authority independent).
Results of Justification Categories

- “Regardless of group, victim’s welfare reasoning was more commonly used to justify moral items while disorder statements and rudeness were more commonly used to justify conventional items.”

- Prediction 3 (psychopaths will be less likely to make references to the pain or discomfort of victims than the non-psychopath controls) was born out by the experiment as psychopaths are significantly less likely to justify items by references to the victim's welfare.”

- However, “This difference between the groups was only present for the moral items; no conventional items were justified through references to victim’s welfare.”
Summary of Results

- Prediction 1 was born out by the experiment: “non-psychopaths made a moral/conventional distinction, the psychopaths did not.”

- Prediction 2 was not born out by the experiment: “psychopaths treated conventional transgressions like moral transgressions rather than treating moral transgressions like conventional transgressions.”

- Prediction 3 was born out by the experiment: “Psychopaths were much less likely to justify their items with reference to victim’s welfare.”
Moral/conventional distinctions are “found across ages and across cultures… [even] children with autism made the distinction.”

“These findings cannot be explained as a result of poor parenting strategies (this includes neglect or child abuse).”
  - abused children were able to make the moral/conventional distinction

Recall Turiel’s proposal that independent conceptual domains are constructed by a child as a consequence of “qualitatively different social interactional consequences for moral and conventional transgressions.”
  - “Such a framework would have to account for the present findings as indicating that the psychopath has not constructed the moral domain either because of a failure in the construction process or because of a lack of experience of the social interactional consequences of moral and conventional transgressions.”
A Problem with the Construction Process

- Turiel: “two forms of the manipulation of gathered data result in the construction of ‘judgements of moral necessity’: manipulations of past experience and counter-factual reasoning.”

- “Both of these manipulations result in judgements of moral necessity if the child has constructed a connection between his own personal experience of pain and the observed experience of the victim.”

- An individual who has never experienced pain would not make the moral/conventional distinction.
  - “However, there is no reason to believe the psychopaths do not experience pain. Nor is there any empirical reason to believe that psychopaths are any less likely to form connections between concepts than the normal population.”
A Problem with the Construction Process

- Alternative ways of generating ‘judgements of moral necessity’: role-taking or empathizing with the victim.

- To role-take an individual must be able to ‘mentalize’.
  - ‘Mentalizing’ involves the representation of mental states of others.
  - When the individual is role-taking he is forming a representation of the mental state of another. I.e. mentalizing.

- Children with autism have been shown incapable of mentalizing.
  - According to the aforementioned definition, these children should not be able to role-take or empathize.
  - However, children with autism do demonstrate the moral/conventional distinction.
  - Therefore, neither role taking nor empathy can be prerequisites for successful performance on the moral/conventional distinction task.

- Concerning children with autism, much like normally developing children, representations of moral transgression will activate VIM.
A Problem With the Construction Process

- “If psychopaths lack VIM they should fail to distinguish in their judgments between moral and conventional transgressions.”
  - “Most of the psychopaths in the present study did not distinguish between these two transgression situations in their judgements.”

- “If psychopaths lack VIM they should show impoverished victim-based moral meta-knowledge.”
  - “The psychopaths in the present study demonstrated significantly less reference to victim-based moral meta-knowledge than the non-psychopaths.”
Outside Effects on the Results

- “These subjects were all incarcerated and presumably motivated to be released. All wished to demonstrate that the treatment they were receiving were effective. They therefore would be motivated to show how they had learned the rules of society.”

- “The psychopaths manifest this desire on the authority jurisdiction criterion judgement, by suggesting that all transgressions are authority independent.”

- “Psychopaths lack VIM and thus are unable to identify the distinguishing features differentiating moral and conventional transgressions. This inability, coupled with a desire to demonstrate adherence to societal rules, results in their judgement of all the transgressions as authority independent.”

- “[Non-psychopaths] are incapable of ignoring the distinguishing features of moral and conventional transgressions because of the operation of VIM.”
Final Conclusions

- “If the transgression was moral, non-psychopaths used predominantly other’s welfare justification (“it hurts”) while psychopaths used predominantly normative justifications (i.e. “it is wrong” or “it is not socially acceptable”).”

- “Psychopaths are significantly more likely to fail to make a moral/conventional distinction and they are significantly less likely to make reference to the welfare of others. While this study is has not proven that psychopaths lack VIM, it has provided evidence that is in line with the position.”