



Age of Onset of Psychopathic Traits in Adolescent Offenders

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Introduction

Psychopathy is an adult personality disorder characterized by a constellation of maladaptive interpersonal, affective, and behavioral traits (Cleckley, 1976; Hare, 2003). In youth, empirical evidence suggests that psychopathic traits are associated with a variety of negative outcomes, such as violence and criminal recidivism (Edens et al., 2001). However, there have been numerous concerns voiced regarding the application of psychopathy to younger samples (e.g., Seagrave & Grisso, 2002). These include the stability of psychopathic traits at young ages, the validity of extending adult conceptualizations of psychopathy to youth, and the ethical implications of labeling youth as psychopathic.

In recent years, researchers have called for a developmental approach to investigating psychopathy (Salekin & Frick, 2006). In this way, theories and methods from the developmental psychology literature can be used to elucidate the etiology, onset, and course of the disorder. One developmental concept of potential importance is age of onset, which has been useful in differentiating subgroups of conduct-disordered youth in terms of etiology, course, and outcome (Moffitt, 1993).

Theorists have long postulated that the roots of psychopathy lie in childhood (e.g., McCord & McCord, 1965). An early onset of behavioral problems is recognized in the assessment of psychopathy (Forth et al., 2003; Hare, 2003) and there is some evidence that psychopathic traits in youth are related to an early onset of dysfunction (e.g., Corrado et al., 2004). However, surprisingly little is known about the timing of onset of psychopathy, especially the core interpersonal and affective dimensions of the disorder.

The Current Study

The goal of the current study was to investigate the age of onset of the interpersonal, affective, and behavioral traits of psychopathy using a retrospective design in a sample of adolescent male offenders. The research questions were (1) can the age of onset of psychopathic traits be assessed reliably? (2) what are the median ages of onset of the various psychopathic traits? (3) what do the patterns of trait onset look like across development?

Method

Participants

Participants were 115 male adolescents incarcerated in western Canada. The ages of participants ranged from 13 to 20 ($M=16.3$, $SD=1.4$). The ethnic composition of the sample included 50% Caucasian, 41% Aboriginal, and 9% Other. Sixty-three percent of youth were incarcerated in maximum security custody and 37% were in a minimum security custody. Thirty-four percent of youth were on remand and 66% were sentenced. Forty-two percent were incarcerated for a violent offense. Mean sentence length was 173 days ($SD=197$).

Measures

Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL:YV; Forth et al., 2003)

	Mean (SD)	ICC
PCL:YV Total	26.8 (6.3)	.97
Factor 1 (Interpersonal)	4.3 (1.9)	.80
Factor 2 (Affective)	4.3 (1.6)	.70
Factor 3 (Behavioral)	7.6 (1.9)	.73

Collateral file information and PCL:YV interview data were used to rate the age of onset of psychopathic traits. The PCL:YV interview was augmented to include age onset queries for a variety of indicators of interpersonal, affective, and behavioral traits. The minimum age of onset was set at age 5. For each trait, if present, onset was coded as the age by which the youth reached a score of 1 (i.e., the age a trait was somewhat present, or first apparent).

Results

Interrater Reliability of Onset Ratings

Interrater reliabilities for age of onset judgments ranged from fair to good. On average, reliability was highest for affective traits ($M=.64$, $SD=.08$) and behavioral traits ($M=.64$, $SD=.09$), followed by interpersonal traits ($M=.47$, $SD=.05$).

Median Ages of Onset

Kaplan-Meier survival analysis was used to compute the median ages of onset of the first appearance (score of 1) of psychopathic traits. This method determines the average age by which half of the sample scores a 1 on the trait. On average, onset was earliest for Affective traits ($M=9.5$, $SD=1.7$), followed by Behavioral traits ($M=10.8$, $SD=1.6$), and latest for Interpersonal traits ($M=11.5$, $SD=2.1$). In terms of individual traits, the earliest onset was for the affective traits of Lacks Remorse and Callous/Lacks Empathy whereas the latest onsets were for Impression Management and Lacks Goals.

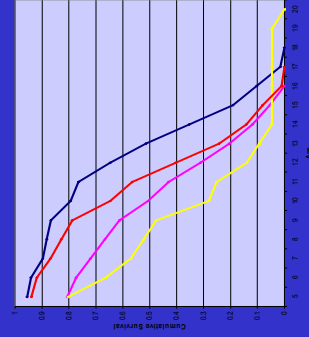
Developmental Patterns of Onset

Survival functions were used to depict the developmental patterns of onset of the first appearance of interpersonal, affective, and behavioral traits. Survival functions start at 1.0 when 100 percent of the sample has "survived", i.e., not yet shown the onset of a trait. Functions decrease toward 0 as new cases of trait onset occur at each age interval.

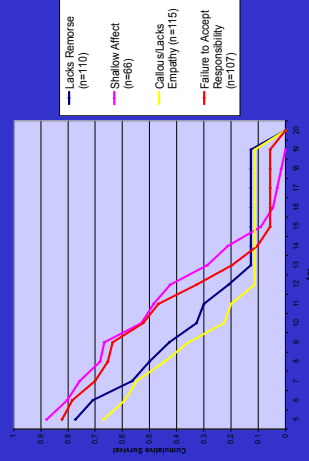
Interrater Reliability and Median Ages of Onset of Psychopathic Traits

Trait	ICC	Median Age Onset (score of 1)
Interpersonal		
Impression Management	.41	14
Grandiosity	.54	11
Pathological Lying	.45	9
Manipulation	.48	12
Affective		
Lacks Remorse	.66	8
Shallow Affect	.55	11
Callous/Lacks Empathy	.62	8
Failure to Accept Responsibility	.73	11
Behavioral		
Stimulation Seeking	.73	9
Prosocial Orientation	.64	12
Lacks Goals	.51	13
Impulsivity	.59	10
Irresponsibility	.72	10

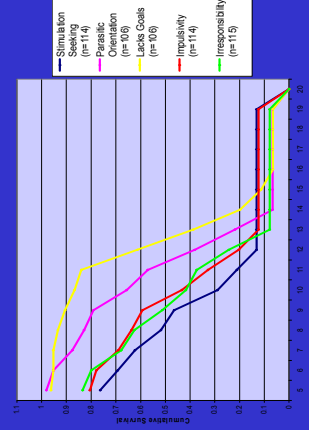
Factor 1 (Interpersonal) - Score of 1



Factor 2 (Affective) - Score of 1



Factor 3 (Behavioral) - Score of 1



Discussion

The results of the current study offer insight into the onset and development of psychopathic traits in a male juvenile offender sample. Interrater reliability findings suggest that the age of onset of psychopathic traits can be reliably assessed using the PCL:YV. Survival analyses indicate that, on average, affective deficits were the first psychopathic traits to appear developmentally and, within this dimension, the traits of Lacks Remorse and Callous/Lacks Empathy were the first to emerge. This is consistent with the theoretical view that affective deficits comprise the core features of psychopathy (Cleckley, 1976). Further, there is growing evidence that callous-unemotional traits are under strong genetic influence (Viding et al., 2005). Interpersonal traits emerged last developmentally and the traits of Impression Management and Lacks Goals were the latest of all traits to emerge. These traits may appear last because they do not crystallize until later ages and are thus inapplicable in younger samples (e.g., Hart et al., 2002). Alternatively, if these traits do exist at younger ages, their assessment may be limited by a developmentally uninformed measurement tool that precludes the identification of early manifestations of psychopathic traits (e.g., Johnstone & Cooke, 2004).

There are several limitations to the current study, including the retrospective study design and the restricted sample of serious male adolescent offenders. Future research should aim to use longitudinal, prospective designs with young children and multiple methods of assessing psychopathic traits across different samples. In addition, it will be important to examine the potential offset of psychopathic traits in youth and determine which bio-psycho-social factors may influence such transitions. The study of the onset and developmental course of psychopathy can be informed by the normative developmental literature. In this way, age-appropriate manifestations of psychopathic traits across development can be elucidated. The identification of high-risk developmental periods in which youth may begin to exhibit certain psychopathic traits will assist practitioners in designing timely and targeted treatment strategies.