

Psychopathy in Criminal Justice

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Introduction

Psychopathy is a spectrum disorder that is categorized by personality traits, emotional characteristics, and behavioral patterns (Beaver, K., Boutwell, B., Barnes, J., Vaughn, M., and DeLisi M., 2017). Those characterized as psychopaths are identified as not being able to feel remorse nor guilt, egocentric and irresponsible, superficial charm and do not follow social norms regularly. It also includes personality traits such as insensitivity, being short tempered, apathetic, guiltlessness, and non-sympathetic. The social and emotional aspects of the disorder are bound to a socially deviant, but not necessarily a criminal lifestyle that includes impulsive and irresponsible behavior and a tendency to ignore or violate social norms (Hare & Neumann, 2009). In American culture and the media, it is often used to describe someone who is “insane” or “crazy”. Even the way the police have used the term psychopath is questionable. They have used it in derogatory terms to describe someone wild on the loose. Society may use “psycho” to describe an individual who has committed a criminal act that is unspeakable, horrific, or too difficult for others to understand. Most psychopaths are also categorized with antisocial personality disorder, however, not most individuals who have an antisocial personality disorder do not all have from psychopathy. There is roughly 1.3 million people in the United States with severe psychopathy (Leedom, 2017). Psychopathy is an extremely complicated, difficult disorder that effects the way they live their life and causes them to have arduous relationships and the increased possibility of interacting with the criminal justice department.

Psychopathy in Criminal Justice

In the past decade there has been a shift on how psychopathy is seen in the criminal justice system. Before, clinical diagnosis like psychopathy were not valued in understanding and predicting criminal behaviors. Now, the psychopathy defined by the PCL-R is almost universally

recognized by forensic psychologists and the courts (Hare & Neumann, 2009). Individuals with psychopathy may be described as having a “prescription” for doing antisocial or criminal acts because of their sense of entitlement, impulsivity, need for power, and general lack of behavioral control (Andrews & Bonta, 2003). Their traits and behaviors would be why psychopathic individuals are overly represented in the criminal justice system. “Their impulsivity and poor behavioral controls may result in reactive forms of aggression or violence, but other features (for example, lack of empathy and shallow emotions) also make it relatively easy for them to engage in aggression and violence that is more predatory, premeditated, instrumental, or cold-blooded in nature,” (Hare & Neumann, 2009, p. 796).

Treatment in Criminal Justice System

Psychopaths are a difficult group to deal with within the justice system. They are not only unresponsive to most treatments, but are even seen as “untreatable” (Vien & Beech, 2006). Treating them may be difficult because of their ability to manipulate, so they seek treatment when it serves their interests (for example, needing it for probation or parole). Individuals with psychopathy seem to hardly gain from prison treatment programs that are “emotion-based, involve talk therapy, are psychodynamic or insight-oriented, or are aimed at the development of empathy, conscience, and interpersonal skills,” (Hare & Neumann, 2009, p. 798). These findings are supported by research done in behavioral genetics, neurobiology and developmental psychopathology, stating that psychopathy is defined by behavioral and personality predispositions that are rooted deep and arduous to break (Harris, Skilling, & Rice, 2001). There has been a push for programs generally meant to reduce risk for recidivism and violence (Wong & Hare, 2007). It has been suggested that programs targeted for psychopaths should focus less on attempting to change their personality and make them feel empathy and more on ways of

using their strengths and capability to appease their wants and needs in a way that is acceptable in society (Hare & Neumann, 2009).

Impact of Family

Psychopathy and family have a very complex relationship. There is a risk for family and friend victimization with the symptoms of the disorder. L. Leedom wrote a chapter on the impacts of psychopathy on the family (2017). Families experience “coercive family interactions” from the children and teens that exhibit tendencies and traits found in adult psychopathy. Bad parenting is the result from the child expressing traits of psychopathy onto the parent. Sibling may also become victims of the child that exhibits psychopathy traits. Children that externalize psychopathic traits condition their siblings in coercion, then both begin to display coercion with parents. There is also a possibility of externalizing siblings train their younger siblings into doing antisocial activities. The chapter identifies a study that found specific interactions between externalizing children and their siblings. The externalizing children displayed disapproval, negative facial expressions, name calling, threatening to get what they want, and physical aggression. These antisocial behaviors have a negative effect on the younger siblings.

Friendship and socialization is also researched in Leedom’s chapter on psychopathy and family. Even though psychopathy may cause complicated friendships, they still want companionship and do activities they like with others. These types of relationships would be considered to have lack in depth because psychopathy is correlated with lack of closeness and less helping of others. Psychopaths keep friends to get what they want which is attention, to be admired, and to dominate others.

Psychopathy and substance Abuse

There has been evidence of substance abuse and disorders such as psychopathy and antisocial personality disorders. Alcohol is like a stimulant that promotes the expression of antisocial behavior, it is not likely that alcohol brings on behavior or thoughts that were not already there (Smith & Newman, 1990). There is a significantly higher rate of alcoholism and drug abuse in offenders with antisocial personality disorders (Smith & Newman, 1990). It was found that 71.3% of incarcerated offenders with an antisocial personality disorder had a lifelong diagnosis of alcohol abuse-dependence. Non-antisocial personality disorder offenders had a dependency rate of 40.2% (Collins, Schlenger, & Jordan, 1998). When it came to drug abuse antisocial personality offenders also had a higher rate of dependency at 28.3% than offenders that did not have an antisocial personality disorder that were at 10.4% (Collins et al. 1998). It was also found that individuals with psychopathy are at an increased risk for lifetime alcohol and drug disorders when incarcerated (Smith & Newman, 1990).

Conclusion

Psychopathy Disorder still raises many questions and concerns. It is seen as unethical and inappropriate to label a child as a psychopath, even though they have psychopathic tendencies. If more people were aware of how psychopathy develops there may be a slight opportunity to prevent that from developing further. Culturally the term “psycho” is used for anything out of the ordinary, and therefore prevents society from truly understanding what the disorder really is. When it comes to treatment, the main objective of psychopathy treatment is focused on increasing or creating empathy within these individuals. However, it seems as if it does little benefit. The focus should be more on helping these individuals in focusing their strengths on aspects that are more socially acceptable and legal. Substance abuse has shown that it is more prevalent in those who have psychopathy than those who do not. There is a need to research

more on individuals with psychopathy in a more longitudinal manner begging from childhood to adulthood understand the triggers of what exactly pushes them to crime.

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