Psychopathy and Personality Characteristics for Adolescent Offenders

Patrick K. Cook, Chrystal G. Boyles, Barry R. Burkhart, and Kelly Cromer
Auburn University, Auburn University Montgomery, Department of Psychology
State of Alabama, Department of Youth Services

Introduction

Previous Research

• Psychopathy is the earliest personality disorder recognized by psychiatrists (Millon, 1998) and it remains a construct of great interest and debate among modern-day researchers.

• Data indicate that psychopaths comprise less than 1% of the general population while they are estimated to make-up approximately 25% of the prison population (Hare, 1996).

• Recent psychopathy research with juvenile offenders has documented its predictive ability in relation to recidivism (e.g., Brandt, Kennedy, Patrick, & Curtin, 1997), institutional violence (e.g., Murrie, Cornell, Kaplan, McConville, & Levy, 2004), and self-reported aggression (e.g., Frick, Cornell, Barry, Bodin, & Dane, 2003).

• Furthermore, it has been suggested that empirically grounded classification systems aimed at identifying homogenous groups may be beneficial for juvenile offender treatment planning and programs (Benda, Corwyn, & Toombs, 2001).
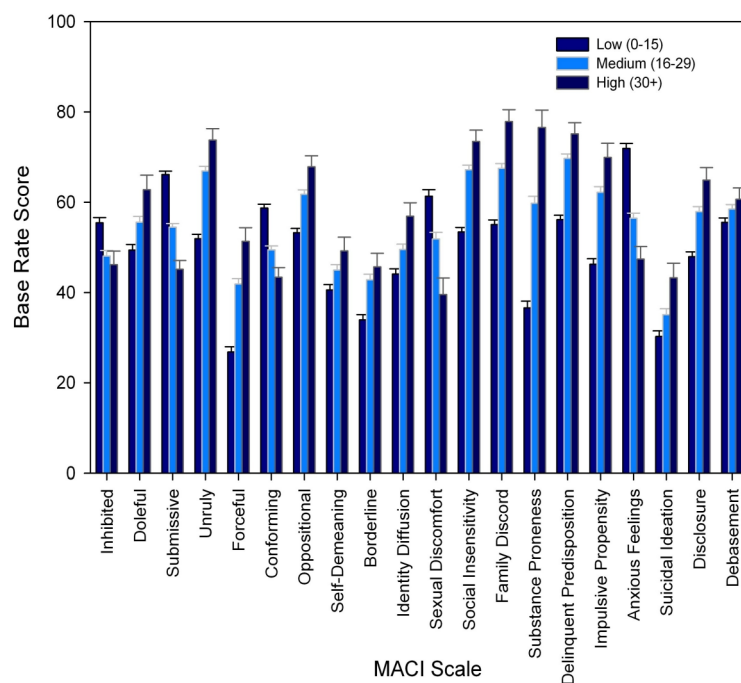
Goals

• Traditionally, classification systems have relied upon using the adjudicating offense when forming groups and this system may fail to address underlying mental health problems and personality characteristics. This investigation aimed to classify offenders by level of psychopathy and determine if personality characteristics were unique to each group.

• If group differences are found, to determine if treatment needs for juvenile offenders differ significantly based on measured level of psychopathy.

Methods

Participants

• Male, juvenile youth-offenders incarcerated at Mt. Meigs Correctional Facility, an Alabama Department of Youth Services facility consented to serve as participants.

• Youth from throughout the state of Alabama were housed within this correctional facility as this facility received individuals from all counties of the state.

• Average age at the time of incarceration was 15.97 years old (range = 12.1 to 18.67 ; SD = 1.53 years). Mean grade level at incarceration was 8.66 (SD=1.99 grades).

• N=706

• Inmates incarcerated for a variety of offenses including rape (attempted), sodomy (attempted), sexual abuse (attempted), assault, drug offenses, property offenses and violation of parole.

• Demographic Breakdown: Caucasian (51.8%), and African-American(48.2%).

Figure 1. MACI Scales in Which Significant Psychopathty Group Differences Were Measured.

Instruments

• **Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory** (MACI; Millon 1993).

• The MACI is a 160-item, self-report inventory specifically targeted to assess troubled adolescents as its normative sample is derived from adolescents in clinical, residential, and correctional settings.

• The MACI was designed to measure a range of personality styles, psychosocial concerns, and clinical symptoms via a true/false question format.

• **The Hare Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version** (PCL:YV; Hare) is a 20-item rating scale for the assessment of psychopathic traits in male and female offenders between the ages of 12-18 years old.

• Expert raters complete a semi-structured interview and review collateral information from multiple sources in order to yield dimensional scores or for the purpose of classifying individuals into groups.

• The PCL:YV is a downward extension of the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised which is the most widely used measure of psychopathy.

Procedures

• The MACI was orally administered as a component of a standard intake assessment battery for newly incarcerated offenders.

• Second-year graduate student clinicians completed the PCL:YV interview and reviewed all available collateral information in order to determine final psychopathy scores for each inmate.

• Those offenders with psychopathy scores greater than or equal to 30 were classified as "High Psychopathy" (n=51) while those between PCL:YV values of 16 – 29 were classified as "Medium Psychopathy" (n=316) followed by those below PCL:YV scores of 15 being classified as "Low Psychopathy" (n=339).

Results

• Significant differences across psychopathy groups were measured by a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA); Wilks' Lambda = 0.682, $F(30, 674)$ = 4.74, p < .001.

• Subsequent univariate analyses indicated significant mean scale score differences between psychopathy groups based on the following scales: Inhibited, Doleful, Submissive, Unruly, Forceful, Oppositional, Self-Demeaning, Borderline Tendency, Identity Diffusion, Social Insensitivity, Family Discord, Substance Abuse Proneness, Delinquent Predisposition, Impulsivity, Anxious Feelings, Suicidal Ideation, Disclosure, and Debasement (see Figure 1).

Discussion

• Initial psychopathy scores, as measured by the PCL:YV, suggest group specific considerations given these measured differences on personality functioning.

• Adolescents with psychopathy scores of 30 or greater reported more frequent previous contact with the legal system, more frequent difficulties stemming from alcohol or drugs, greater problems with family members, and a less emotionally expressive presentation based on their MACI profiles. These results are consistent with the construct criteria

• These measured personality distinctions, according to level of psychopathy, suggest the MACI may be a sensitive measure for measuring aspects of psychopathy via a self-report format.

Future Directions:

• Determine the ability of the MACI to serve as a self-report measure of psychopathy given the face valid items that clearly map onto psychopathy dimensions.

Contact Patrick Cook with any questions at cookpat@auburn.edu or visit the Burkhart laboratory webpage to view additional projects at www.auburn.edu/~burkhbr