When Psychopaths go to College: Psychopathic Traits and College Adjustment

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Abstract
Estimated as less than 1% of the general population, psychopaths are responsible for significant amounts of violence. However, few studies have explored psychopathic personality characteristics in non-incarcerated populations, or “hidden” psychopaths. Using the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI), this study evaluated correlations between psychopathic traits and indicators of college maladjustment. We hypothesize that “hidden” college psychopaths are more interpersonally maladjusted than peers, equally successful intellectually, and less impulsive than their incarcerated counterparts. Understanding the differences and similarities between incarcerated and hidden psychopaths may lead to improved recognition and possibly early intervention with these social predators.

A significant body of literature exists regarding the antisocial behavior of criminal offenders. This research has clearly demonstrated a connection between the personality construct of psychopathy and antisocial behavior and aggression (e.g. Hare, 2003). However, relatively little research has explored the interperson and affective characteristics of psychopathic personality in non-incarcerated populations. Hare notes that psychopathy is not synonymous with criminality and that many psychopaths may avoid detection by the criminal justice system, becoming unethical professionals, corrupt public officials, and persons engaging in “shady” business dealings. Hare also notes that systematic research on non-criminal psychopathic populations is needed. Likewise, Babiak (1995) believes that the tendency toward unethical behavior is not very different between criminal psychopaths and “sub-criminal” or non-adjudicated psychopaths. In his case study, it was noted that a “hidden” psychopath expresses more of the inherent personality characteristics associated with psychopathy and expresses less of the antisocial behavior and deviant lifestyle characteristics. Cleckley (1976) referred to these individuals as “white collar” psychopaths and stated that he believed these individuals were able to better maintain an outward appearance of normality than their criminal counterparts.

Thus, it is not unreasonable to postulate the existence of “hidden” psychopaths at college; in fact, the college environment is also known to harbor some individuals who commit crimes, including sexual assault (Abbey & McAuslan, 2004). We prefer the term “hidden” psychopaths because of its broader applicability to the earlier term “white collar” psychopath, which refers primarily to work settings. Preliminary research has suggested that some...
subtypes of psychopaths may actually appear to be successful in some settings and contexts (e.g. Babiak, 1995; Hare, 1993). Unfortunately, identifying such “hidden” psychopaths may be difficult to do.

The most widely used, scientifically validated measure of psychopathy has been the Hare Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (IPCL-R; Hare, 2003). Hare contends that factor analyses of this scale suggest that the construct is “underpinned” by two correlated factors: Factor 1 measuring Interpersonal/Affective characteristics (e.g. glibness, pathological lying, lack of remorse, lack of empathy) and Factor 2 measuring Social Deviance (e.g. need for stimulation, irresponsibility, poor behavioral controls, juvenile delinquency). The drawbacks of using this measure in studies with a college population include the high degree of professional training required to use the instrument, its use of multiple items related to an explicit criminal/legal history, its validation primarily with incarcerated samples, and its requirements for an extensive interview and a review of institutional files. A screening version was developed for use outside of forensic settings ([PCL-SV]; Hart, Cox, & Hare, 1995), but it was found that the behavioral traits had to be strong before the interpersonal and affective traits become evident (Cooke, Michie, Hart, & Hare, 1999), and it likewise requires a significant investment in time for an interview and review of records. Because of these difficulties, several attempts have been made to develop self-report instruments to assess psychopathy.

One such instrument that was recently tested using college undergraduate students is the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). This personality styles inventory has been shown to correlate moderately with the Factor 1 Interpersonal/Affective characteristics of psychopathy and less strongly to Factor 2 Social Deviance, making it more useful with non-correctional participants (Edens, Poythress, & Watkins, 2001; Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003). With further validation, this scale might improve our ability to understand the similarities and differences between the personalities of “hidden” psychopaths and their more overt cousins, improve our ability to assess characteristics of psychopathy in non-criminal populations, and possibly provide targets for intervention that help some of these “hidden” psychopaths to live lives that are less harmful to society and more productive.

This study will examine whether psychopathic personality elements (as measured by the PPI) are related to adjustment to college. Hare (1993) has proposed that one major difference between “white collar” or “hidden” psychopaths and those who become embroiled in the justice system relates to the types of social norms these offenders violate: the difference between ethical standards and laws. It seems reasonable to assume that if “hidden” psychopaths, in fact, represent a proportion of college undergraduates, they may be involved in ethical violations and negative interpersonal behaviors that may not rise to the level of violence or aggression represented by breaking the law, but may be measurable as “college maladjustment.”

In order to test this hypothesis, college undergraduates were asked to complete both the PPI and the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Baker & Siryk, 1984). Because the PPI is a relatively new instrument, this study aims to accomplish several objectives: estimate the percentage of our sample who may represent “hidden” psychopaths, describe the types and nature of maladjustment admitted to by these persons, and evaluate the factor structure of the PPI as a validation attempt for this instrument. In so doing, we hope to advance the state of knowledge of these “hidden” psychopaths and their impact on society.

Method
Participants
Participants were 136 females and 131 males recruited from the Department of Psychology Human Subjects Pool at Grand Valley State University. Participants voluntarily earned enrichment credits that were considered part of their Introductory Psychology courses. Students were free to choose an alternative activity and were not required to participate to earn the enrichment credits. There was no significant difference in mean age between males and females, with the mean age of the participants being 19 years old. There were two participants who deviated considerably from this sample norm (ages 32 and 47), but their data did not significantly differ from that of the other participants. The class construction of the sample included 69.9% second semester freshman, 17.9% sophomores, 9% juniors, and 3.2% seniors.

Instruments
The Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996) is a 187-item instrument labeled “A Personality Styles Inventory.” Participants respond to Likert-scale descriptive items in accordance with how much the statement applies to them. A score of 1 indicates the statement is false and a score of 4 indicates the statement is true. Approximately half of the items are reverse scored. Higher total and subscale scores represent a higher tendency to manifest overall psychopathy or that particular psychopathic trait. The PPI contains
eight subscales that measure different facets of the psychopathic personality: Machiavellian Egocentricity, Social Potency, Fearlessness, Coldheartedness, Impulsive Nonconformity, Carefree Nonplanfulness, Alienation (also known as Blame Externalization), and Stress Immunity. In a study by Poythress, Edens, and Lilienfeld (1998), using a prison inmate population, the PPI was found to correlate moderately high with the PCL-R total score ($r = .62$). They also found the PPI to correlate significantly with scores on both factor 1 ($r = .61$) and factor 2 ($r = .48$). In another study conducted by Benning et al. (2003) using a non-incarcerated population, factor analysis revealed a central two-factor structure of the PPI similar to that of the PCL-R. When using an oblique rotation, the researchers found the two factors to be independent of one another, signifying that they each measure a unique aspect of psychopathy.

The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ; Baker and Siryk, 1999) is a 67-item college adjustment scale, in which respondents evaluate statements on a 9-point rating scale indicating how well he or she is dealing with the aspect in question. A rating of 1 indicates the statement applies very closely to the subject, and a rating of 9 indicates the statement does not apply at all. The higher the subscale and total score the better the student’s adjustment to college. The SACQ contains four subscales: Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Personal-Emotional Adjustment, and Attachment. Reliability studies of the SACQ were carried out by the Baker and Siryk over several years, with coefficient alphas consistently ranging from .81 to .95. Initial validation studies were conducted at 21 different colleges demonstrating high intercorrelation data for all four subscales, with internal consistency coefficients ranging from .64 to .91.

**Procedure**

Students completed an Informed Consent Form prior to participation in the study. The form described the study as seeking to understand the relationship between aspects of personality and adjustment in college. The confidential nature of the study was emphasized.

To ensure anonymity, participants constructed their own unique research identification numbers using an algorithm devised by the researchers. The purpose of the algorithm was to ensure the ability to link the participant’s PPI scores with his or her SACQ scores. This algorithm was sufficiently complex that upon review, no two subjects produced identical numbers.

Once the informed consent and research identification number forms were complete, students were given the SACQ, immediately followed by the “personality styles inventory,” or the PPI. Students responded directly on the SACQ form and utilized a Scantron sheet for the PPI. Upon completion of the surveys, students were provided with a Debriefing Form that explained the purpose of the study in more detail. After reading the Debriefing Form, students were informed that if they were concerned or wished to know their score on either scale, they would be able to contact the researchers for their specific information and for assistance.

**Results**

**Gender Differences**

Because the PPI is a relatively new instrument, an exploratory approach was taken to data analysis. A possible gender difference was found in overall PPI scores with males scoring higher overall in self-reported psychopathic traits ($M=364$) than females ($M=356$; $t=1.541$, $p<.08$). In order to explore possible gender-based differences in phenotypic expression of these traits, the sample was split by gender. There were no significant differences between the genders with regard to year in school or age.

Independent T-Tests evaluated gender differences on PPI subscales. The primary difference concerned fearlessness, with male fearlessness scores ($M=49$) being significantly higher than females ($M=45$; $t=2.536$, $p<.05$). Also found was a trend involving impulsive nonconformity ($t=1.458$, $p<.08$) with male scores slightly higher ($M=36$) than females ($M=34$). There were no further significant differences with any of the other six subscales.

An independent T-Test demonstrated no significant differences between males and females concerning overall SACQ scores. However, significant gender differences were found on several subscales. First, males ($M=135$) reported being less adjusted than females ($M=141$) with regard to academic adjustment ($t=-2.138$, $p<.05$). Second, significant differences between the genders were also found concerning attachment to the institution ($t=-2.122$, $p<.05$), with males being less attached ($M=109$) than females ($M=115$). Finally, there were significant differences between the genders in relation to emotional adjustment ($t=2.301$, $p<.05$) where it was found that males in this sample were better emotionally adjusted to college life ($M=87$) than females ($M=81$). There were no significant differences detected between the genders on social adjustment to college.

**Intensity of Psychopathic Traits**

A two-step cluster analysis was used to determine if the sample fell into natural groupings according to PPI total scores. The cluster analysis confirmed that both males and females naturally fell into groups of high, medium, and low levels of psychopathy, with approximately 68% of the sample falling into the high group, 16% in the medium group, and 16% in the low group.
This cluster analysis was consistent with the normal distribution patterns of both male and female samples, with high and low groups falling approximately one standard deviation from the mean PPI total score. There were no significant differences between male and female distributions on the PPI total score.

Hypothesizing that notable differences in college adjustment would be most visible at the extremes of reported psychopathic traits, gender segregated t-tests were used to compare groups based on high (Males>406, Females>396) and low (Males<240, Females<249) scores on the PPI. The only trend noted was found within the males’ emotional adjustment, with males scoring in the low range on the PPI being significantly better adjusted emotionally according to the SACQ \( (M=93.85) \) than males scoring in the high range \( (M=81.71; t=1.749, p=.088 \) (2-tailed))

Correlational Analyses
Finally, correlations were run between the overall and subscale scores of both surveys to explore bivariate relationships between psychopathic personality traits and college adjustment. Tables 1 and 2 present these results. It should be noted that these correlations are consistently low to moderate in strength.

Females. There were relatively few significant relationships between female PPI scores and college adjustment. The only exceptions were Machiavellian egocentricity and impulsive nonconformity. Machiavellian egocentricity was negatively correlated with academic adjustment in females, while impulsive nonconformity was correlated negatively with emotional adjustment.

Males. The correlations between the measures found among the male participants demonstrated multiple relationships between college adjustment and psychopathy. Overall college adjustment was negatively correlated with impulsive nonconformity and was positively correlated with fearlessness and coldheartedness. Academic adjustment was positively correlated with coldheartedness, stress immunity, and fearlessness. Social adjustment was only found to correlate with fearlessness. Emotional adjustment was negatively correlated with Machiavellian egocentricity, alienation, impulsive nonconformity, and carefree nonplanfulness, and was positively correlated with fearlessness and coldheartedness. Finally, attachment to the institution was only found to negatively correlate with impulsive nonconformity.

Table 1. Female Correlates of Psychopathy and College Maladjustment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PPI Scales</th>
<th>SACQ Total</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Attachment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machiavellian</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.12†</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Potency</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearlessness</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coldheartedness</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulsivity</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carefree</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress Immunity</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* \( p<.05 \)
† \( p<.10 \) (trend)
Discussion

In this exploratory study, we hypothesized that “hidden psychopaths” might be attending college and that they would most likely be less impulsive than their criminal counterparts (although more impulsive than nonpsychopaths) and less socially adaptable than their non-psychopathic college peers. Without a criminal population to make a direct comparison to, it is difficult to state whether or not this particular sample is necessarily less impulsive than an incarcerated sample.

Using the PPI as an exploratory measure of self-reported psychopathic traits, we found that approximately 16% of both male and female students reported psychopathic traits to an extent greater than 84% of the college population. Although we did not evaluate to what degree the students in this study might have engaged in “psychopathic-like” behaviors, this finding is not surprising because it seems to fit with reported rates of incarceration of male versus female criminal psychopaths. Other gender differences suggest that primarily males report higher degrees of fearlessness and slightly higher degrees of impulsive behaviors. However, since the PPI is a self-report instrument some caution is warranted in interpreting these results too strongly. It is unclear whether these noted gender differences reflect actual gender differences in the expression of subclinical psychopathic traits or if they reflect, for example, social stereotypes about young males and their expected behavior at college. In addition, these results suggest that males are less well adjusted than females overall to college, and in particular, have less affiliation with their institution. However, males reported being better emotionally adjusted to college, a finding that may be related to a sense of increased fearlessness. The negative correlations between self-reported impulsive behavior for both males and females suggest that the ability to restrain oneself is an important part of adapting to college life.

For females, there were relatively few linkages between reported psychopathic traits and aspects of college adjustment. In particular, it is intriguing that in female college students, Machiavellian egocentricity and impulsive nonconformity were the only variables negatively related to aspects of college adjustment. These findings support a growing body of research (Grann, 2000; Vitale & Newman, 2001) that suggests that females high in psychopathy may express those traits in a manner that is distinct in many ways from males, although available data is again based primarily on incarcerated populations.

Another important implication found within this research is the consistent correlation of fearlessness and coldheartedness in males with overall college adjustment, academic adjustment, and emotional adjustment. Besides the relationship between stress immunity and academic adjustment, no other measures of psychopathy positively relate to the adjustment to college life. These results in males suggest that a

Table 2. Male Correlates of Psychopathy and College Maladjustment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PPI Scales</th>
<th>SACQ Total</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Attachment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machiavellian</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Potency</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearlessness</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coldheartedness</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulsivity</td>
<td>-.13†</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carefree</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.12†</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress Immunity</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.12†</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.05, **p<.01
† p<.10 (trend)
possible combination of high levels of fearlessness and coldheartedness with low levels of impulsive behavior may be the necessary cocktail to a psychopath’s success in college. The low impulsivity enables them to delay gratification, an attribute not commonly associated with psychopaths, long enough to obtain a degree. Their fearlessness may provide a motivating factor by encouraging risk-taking behavior as a means of obtaining goals and desensitizing the student psychopath to the discouragement voiced by others. The coldheartedness provides the lack of concern for fellow students and possibly faculty, which is necessary for viewing them as mere stepping-stones to be manipulated on the way to success.

Also important are the psychopathic traits that were found to be inversely related to successful adjustment in college. Traits such as impulsive nonconformity, alienation, and Machiavellian egocentricty, which were found to negatively correlate with variables associated with successful adjustment to college, are measures commonly associated with the deviant behavioral manifestations of psychopathy. These traits are most often found within those psychopaths who have already encountered the criminal justice system and are possibly less successful at obtaining a higher education. The psychopathic traits that are associated with proper adjustment to college, such as fearlessness and stress immunity, are those that relate to the interpersonal and affective characteristics of psychopathy. These characteristics are easier to pass off as personality characteristics and are less likely to be seen as criminally deviant or antisocial. These results suggest that “hidden” college psychopaths who are higher in the Factor 2 type of antisocial traits may struggle more in college, possibly leading them to drop out or ultimately to seek other, perhaps more criminal, avenues to express their personality traits. Of course, this hypothesis is speculative, but it suggests that future studies of college populations might do well to track the trajectories of persons scoring at different levels on the PPI; by evaluating such outcome measures as criminal arrests, behavioral disruptions or infractions on campus, and drop-out rates, we may gain a more significant understanding of the interaction of Factor 1 and Factor 2 traits in noncriminal populations and how they affect behavior.

The future direction of this study seeks to find stronger relationships between these interpersonal and affective characteristics of college students with psychopathic tendencies. By looking at the traditional two-factor model of psychopathy and running an array of more complex statistical analyses in more applied settings, we hope to establish a more solid pattern of behavior consistent with these “hidden” psychopaths. Other samples of the population also need to be taken into consideration as a solution to the restriction of range, which is apparent in studying a single university’s population. In a phase two study, measures of grade point average and responses to ethical scenarios will be incorporated as more solid behavioral measures. More consideration will also be taken with gender differences, especially within the two-factor model of psychopathy, to determine the possible pattern differences found between male and female psychopathy.

It is important to understand that by identifying these “hidden” psychopaths we may be able to conceive of a subtype of psychopathic behavior that explains how these individuals are slipping through the collegiate environment and into the work world. Through continued research, we can improve upon assessment and diagnosis of psychopathic behavior and in the future increase our risk management technologies. Only through a better understanding of the spectrum of psychopathy can we possibly grasp how it manifests in different environments and how we can better preemptively prepare for the destructive predispositions of the psychopathic personality.
References


