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FACE VALIDITY: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FACIAL AFFECT RECOGNITION AND PSYCHOPATHIC TRAITS WITH HIGH-RISK PRISONERS IN NEW ZEALAND

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

Psychopathy, as a psychiatric entity, psychological construct, and social idea has suffered from conceptual vagueness and misuse for over two centuries. Currently, psychopathic individuals are considered to present as having a constellation of affective, interpersonal, and behavioural characteristics that typically incurs great social, economic, and human costs by virtue of repeated displays of extreme antisocial behaviour. As such, individuals who are considered ‘psychopathic’ tend to be over-represented in judicial and correctional settings, tend to re-offend faster and more often than non-psychopathic offenders, and are also resistant to conventional treatment efforts – so much so, in fact, as to have the reputation of being ‘untreatable’. Historical and current conceptualisations of psychopathy have emphasised moral, behavioural, cognitive, neurocognitive, and even physiological differences. However, the various social and interpersonal contexts in which these individuals interact and indeed offend do not appear to have been fully explored in the literature. This study explored social cognitive aspects of violent offenders with psychopathic traits with a view towards informing intervention approaches with this high-risk and potentially dangerous group. Furthermore, the impact of psychopathy is largely evident in the social realm and suggests differences in social information-processing. The role of emotions, especially those of others, is an important construct across theories of social interactions and impairments in affective processing, such as low empathy, guilt, and fear that are common features of psychopathy. Given that recognising emotions from facial cues is an early developmental marker of
emotional and social development, it presents as an interface between
behaviour and social cognitive processes. This study sought to investigate the
basic relationships between psychopathy and social cognitive phenomena.

Male prisoners ($N = 68$) from New Zealand prisons were invited to (1) identify
facial expressions from Ekman and Friesen’s (1976) Pictures Of Facial Affect
stimuli set; (2) discriminate emotions from displayed pairs of faces; and (3)
repeat the tasks after being administered a frustrating task. It was
hypothesised that men who presented with psychopathic traits (as measured
on the *Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised; PPI-R*; Lilienfeld &
Widows, 2005) would reveal biased responding before and after the stress
intervention. Contrary to expectations, the findings from this study did not – on
the whole – support the hypothesis. However, the outcomes called into
question the supposedly pervasive and apparently cognitively-impaired nature
of psychopathic social information-processing.
Acknowledgements

When I was four, my dad told me that when I grow up he wanted me to be a doctor...I'm not sure if this is what he meant...

First and foremost, I thank my wife Nicky who has stood by me throughout this entire process and, on occasions, had to tolerate my sketchy ideas of 'lifestyle balance' as a result. Boy, is she glad this is over! In addition, I thank my family (both sides) for their unwavering support and understanding (and their occasional curiosity was also appreciated).

Secondly, I thank my supervision team, a triumvirate that consisted of:
Ian Evans – Mentor, benefactor and spellbinding teller of tales...Since the early 2000s, Ian has supported my unorthodox (so some have told me) research interests ranging from listening to Neil Armstrong’s moon landing speech *in reverse*, to exploring magical ideation and spiritual phenomena with Māori psychiatric populations. So, when contemplating the idea of stressing-out violent prisoners with marked psychopathic traits, telling them that they have 'failed', and offering little in return bar the opportunity to press lots of buttons – guess who was my first choice of supervisor!

John Podd – Secondary supervisor, neurocognitive wizard and teacher. What began as a casual conversation over beer and chips grew into a mutual interest in psychopathy and social cognition, as well as a constructive learning
experience for me. For his sins, John assumed the arduous task of having to reacquaint me with basic statistical procedures.

Nick Wilson – Since the very beginning, Nick encouraged me to take this journey. Forever the slave-driver, his pragmatic and strategic outlook – as well as his own forays into psychopathy research – assisted me to think my way through a good deal of the logistics for this work.

Thirdly, I acknowledge my early supporters, particularly Marion Dixon, Pieter van Rensburg, and Glen Kilgour, who were all pivotal in my decision to take this challenge on. I also include here many friends who, in part, accompanied me on this journey – a number of whom embarked on their own (sometimes ill-fated) doctoral voyages – and served as both inspirations and warnings.

Fourthly, I would also like to voice my appreciation for staff from Prison Services and Psychological Services (especially at the Special Treatment Units, where much of the data were gathered) who allowed the smoothest possible access for me to work with the participants and went to great lengths to promote the study and help recruit the participants. Psychological Service – My professional ‘family’ since 2003 – has provided consistent and unwavering support for me to undertake and complete this project, and were generous enough to leave me alone to do what needed to be done. I am also grateful to Mate Webb (Cultural Advisor, Psychological Services, Department of Corrections) for his advice and guidance from the earliest stages of experimental design.
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A Note on Terminology

It is acknowledged that categorisation serves the purposes of reducing complexity, exemplifying patterns of a phenomenon, and enabling one to order and relate classes of objects and events (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956). However, because of the universally pejorative nature of the term ‘psychopath’ in clinical, forensic, research, and everyday contexts – a peculiar xenophobia reflected in much of this literature¹ – I will refer to individuals who meet the clinical criteria (under whatever scheme) adjectively (i.e., ‘John is psychopathic’ or ‘a psychopathic individual’) or in a possessive sense (i.e., ‘John exhibits psychopathic traits’), rather than as a noun (i.e., ‘the psychopath’, ‘psychopaths’ or ‘John is a psychopath’).

Preface

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

1 Corinthians 13:12 (King James Version).

When I was at ***** prison, we had a ‘kiddy-fucker’ on the block. I offered to take him out. I had a reputation for viciousness and doing what I said I would do...I made a shank with barbed wire around it – designed in such a way that it would go in easily, but make a real mess coming out – I've always had a love of fishing – when the time came, we were watching a movie on one of those old projectors...he was in the row behind me. When I spotted him, I stabbed him – so much so that I took out a lung. He was put on life support after that, and to my knowledge – unless he's dead – still is. I got another three years for that – on top of my five, but had won a lot of respect and loyalty from others as a result (Retired New Zealand gang member, personal communication, 2010).

Since becoming a psychologist for the Department of Corrections in early 2003, I became intrigued by this notion of ‘psychopaths’, and over the years had my fair share of experiences with offenders who were described accordingly. Most memorable were my experiences as a therapist with the experimental High-Risk Personality Programme, a pilot group-therapy

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2 New Zealand prison slang: an identified (or assumed) child sexual offender.
3 Slang: to intentionally kill or severely harm another individual, often in retribution.
4 Slang: improvised stabbing implement, usually fashioned from makeshift materials.
violence prevention programme based at West North Block at Waikeria Prison. The 12 men who participated in the 10-month intensive therapy hailed from the four corners of Aotearoa and were screened for psychopathy with the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) – the first time psychopathy had ever been formally diagnosed for this purpose in the history of the Department.

Over the year, as my team and I became acquainted with many of the most notorious prisoners in the system at that time, it became apparent that no two ‘looked alike’ – despite similar scores on the PCL-R. Furthermore, many other things were being observed that appeared contrary to the impression imparted by the experimental literature, such as the strong sense of attachment to us as therapists and an even stronger sense of affiliation – even amongst traditional rivals – that permeated this group, even years after the programme concluded.

In light of this, a number of questions presented themselves: are so-called ‘psychopaths’ really a ‘case apart’ as the literature would have me believe, or are these kinds of contraindicative traits as described reflective of emergent properties that require time, energy, patience, and curiosity on the part of others to discover? Are the more dramatic behaviours a consequence of impairments, or differences?

In any case, individuals around the globe who have met the criteria for psychopathy have been subject to some of the harshest measures that Western societies can offer – and perhaps rightly so. Whilst I do not claim to be ‘romantic’ about psychopathic offenders, the paradox that these (invariably) men form a vulnerable group that make others vulnerable cannot be ignored if safe and just societies are to be strived towards.