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

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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.

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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...

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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').

¹ In a challenge to the legitimacy of the construct, Cavadino (1998) suggested substituting the term 'psychopath' with 'bastard' as a more accurate (if not more frank) descriptor: "*For 'predominantly aggressive psychopath', read: 'stroppy bastard'. For 'predominantly inadequate psychopath', read: 'useless bastard'.*" (p. 6).

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'² on the block. I offered to take him out³. I had a reputation for viciousness and doing what I said I would do...I made a shank⁴ 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

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.