

How psychopaths identify victims: A proposed study of nonverbal cues
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Psychopathy is characterized by impulsive behavior, callousness, lack of remorse, manipulativeness (Book, Costello, & Camilleri, 2013), empathy deficits (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010), and interpersonal coldness (Gullhaugen & Nottestad, 2012). Their emotional disconnect and interpersonal coldness is supported by the way psychopaths seem to ignore the emotional significance of words. For example, they respond to neutral words like “table” the same as they would respond to emotionally charged words such as “cancer” (Louth, Williamson, Alpert, Pouget, & Hare, 1998).

Psychopathy and Nonverbal Decoding

Nonverbal decoding is the ability to judge another person’s emotional state, personality, or thoughts from nonverbal cues such as a facial affect, tone of voice, gestures, and body language (Hall, Andrzejewski, & Yopchick, 2009). Some studies have found that overall, psychopaths are worse at nonverbal decoding of facial affect when compared to nonpsychopaths (Dawel, O’Kearney, McKone, & Palermo, 2012). When examining the ability to decode specific commonly studied affects (such as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust; Ekman, 1980; Kosson, Suchy, Mayer, & Libby, 2002; Leathers & Emigh, 1980) researchers found that psychopaths, as identified by the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), are worse than the average person at decoding disgust expressions (Kosson, et al., 2002).

Other research suggests that psychopaths may be better at some elements of nonverbal decoding than nonpsychopaths. When comparing how accurately psychopaths and nonpsychopaths decoded individual emotions, Kosson and colleagues (2002) found that the entire sample recognized happiness, sadness, and surprise, but the psychopaths were superior at recognizing anger. Another study found that participants scoring high on Factor 1 psychopathic traits on the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI) were better at reading fear expressions, and were no worse than nonpsychopaths at decoding emotion in tone of voice (Del Gaizo & Falkenbach, 2008). Also, psychopaths are better at judging emotional intensity (Book, Quinsey, & Langford, 2007). Furthermore, incarcerated psychopaths are better overall decoders of

emotion than incarcerated nonpsychopaths (Pham & Philippot, 2010). Though psychopaths have empathy deficits, they do not lack nonverbal decoding skill.

Victim Identification and Psychopathy

Researchers have investigated how psychopaths relate to and perceive victims. Psychopathic criminals tend to victimize strangers and are rarely motivated to commit crimes for emotional reasons (Williamson, Hare, & Wong, 1987). These findings suggest that psychopaths have a cool, calm, and “rational” approach to committing crimes. Psychopaths have no deficits assessing nonverbal cues of vulnerability (Book, Quinsey, & Langford, 2007) and may pay greater attention to victims or people they believe are easily victimized (Levenston, Patrick, Bradley, & Lang, 2000). Psychopaths evince an inhibited startle reflex when viewing pictures of mutilation and victims under attack (Levenston et al, 2000). Levenston, et al (2000) theorized that inhibited startle reflex reflects psychopaths’ empathy deficits and the special attention that they pay to victims. In another study, psychopaths had better memory for helpers viewed in an animated clip than nonhelpers. Psychopaths may remember these helper animations better because of an assumption that altruistic actors are easier to victimize (Camilleri, Kuhlmeier, & Chu, 2010).

Several studies have examined whether victims can be identified by nonverbal cues. Gunns, Johnston, and Hudson (2002) found that participants from a community sample could identify men and women that they believed would be vulnerable to attack based solely on how the men and women moved their entire bodies as they walked. Nonverbal cues such as a short stride for a potential victim’s height, lateral or forward-back weight shift, or gestural walking style indicated that an individual was easy to victimize. Participants from a community sample are able to select individuals with short strides and personality traits that indicate vulnerability as targets for inappropriate sexual touching (Sakaguchi & Hasegawa, 2006). Furthermore, when shown clips of people walking from behind, psychopaths high in Factor 1 traits were better at

identifying victims than nonpsychopaths, and would justify their assessments by referring to the victim's gait (Book, et al., 2013).

The Proposed Study

The proposed study will examine the relationship between psychopathy scores and performance on nonverbal decoding and empathy tasks. Specifically, a community sample will view video clips of subjects walking and answer questions about the subjects as in Book et al. (2013). The video clips will be of nonvictims, victims, and individuals previously victimized who had completed a self-defense class. All video subjects will wear a skin-tight spandex suit (body morphsuit) and shot against a white background to control for individual differences in appearance. Participants will also complete the Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy (DANVA; Nowicki & Duke, 2001) and a battery of self-report personality measures, including the PPI-R (Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996) and Triarchic Psychopathy Measure (TriPM) (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009) to assess psychopathy, and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) to assess empathy (Davis, 1980).

I hypothesize that participants high in psychopathy will be superior to participants low in psychopathy at identifying victims from video clips using the victim's gait, and that this relationship will be moderated by DANVA scores. Evidence suggests that identifying oneself as a victim leads others to perceive oneself as a victim. Therefore, I hypothesize that psychopaths and nonpsychopaths alike will have difficulty identifying victims who have taken self-defense classes, as these classes may reduce self-perception of victim identity.

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