An Introduction to the Special Issues on Juvenile Psychopathy and Some Reflections on the Current Debate

Juvenile Psychopathy: The Debate

The topic of “juvenile psychopathy” has exploded as a matter of interest in recent years, driven by overlapping theoretical and practical concerns. A growing body of literature reveals limitations in the current diagnostic system’s chief reliance on the single diagnosis of conduct disorder to identify youth with socially deviant behavior. Available evidence suggests that conduct disorder is a heterogeneous category, both phenotypically and etiologically (see, e.g., Frick, 1998). Moreover, conduct disorder as a diagnostic classification has little utility for identifying the small group of youth involved in a grossly disproportionate amount of crime during adolescence and adulthood (Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Moffit & Caspi, 2001). These theoretical developments have been accompanied by growing practical demand for tools that will identify this group of persistently violent youthful offenders. These are precisely the youth for whom increasingly punitive sanctions, ranging from transfer to the adult system to the death penalty, have been legislated (see Edens, Skeem, Cruise, & Cauffman, 2001; Seagrave & Grisso, 2002).

Several scholars have argued that a select group of youth with serious conduct problems will mature into adults with psychopathic personality disorder (Frick, 1998; Lynam, 1996; Skilling, Harris, Rice, & Quinsey, 2002). As is the case with adults (Skeem, Poythress, Edens, Lilienfeld, & Cale, 2003), traits of emotional detachment may disaggregate the behavior-based category of conduct disorder into more useful variants (Frick & Ellis, 1999). To investigate such hypotheses, the “gold standard” measure of adult psychopathy (Hare, 2003) has been extended downward to youth in an effort to assess the same malignant constellation of interpersonal, affective, and lifestyle traits.

This downward extension makes intuitive sense, given behavioral similarities between chronically violent youth and psychopathic adults. However, whether the construct of psychopathy can validly and should be applied to youth is a matter of considerable debate. Underlying this threshold question are empirical, policy, and ethical issues that have only been joined in the last few years. Contextually, three issues seem paramount: (i) the validity of applying psychopathy to youth, (ii) the meaning and malleability of psychopathy in youth, and (iii) the ethical and moral appropriateness of assessing psychopathy in youth.
Validity and Developmental Appropriateness

First and most fundamentally, there is disagreement about whether the construct of psychopathy is valid for youth, given patterns of personality development. To validly use psychopathic traits to disaggregate conduct disorder, we must understand the developmental stage(s) at which such features appear and begin to remain stable. This issue is crucial, given that some psychopathic traits (e.g., impulsivity; irresponsibility) may be viewed as normative and temporary features of adolescence (Edens et al., 2001a). A recent exchange illustrates this debate. Hart and his colleagues argue “…there is no consensus among developmental psychopathologists that personality disorder as a general class of psychopathology even exists in childhood or adolescence... If stable personality does not exist in childhood or adolescence, then surely personality disorder cannot” (Hart, Watt, & Vincent, 2002, p. 242). In contrast, Frick (2002) asserts “…basic assumptions in developmental psychopathology… recognize that indicators of abnormal developmental outcomes can be similar to those found in normal development because they often involve similar processes… The key is to determine what can lead those processes to go awry… in the case of psychopathology” (Frick, 2002, pp. 248–249). To resolve these issues, longitudinal studies that track the stability and course of apparent traits of psychopathy from adolescence through adulthood are needed, as are investigations of whether the manifestations of psychopathy may vary across development.

Meaning and Malleability

Second, assuming that the construct of psychopathy can validly be applied to youth, the malleability of the disorder is unknown. Several scholars study psychopathy in youth with the goal of intervening early to divert youth to more prosocial “pathways” while their traits are relatively malleable (e.g. Andershed, Kerr, Stattin, & Levander, 2002; Frick, 2002). When juxtaposed with the widespread and prevailing assumption that psychopaths are “untreatable,” this goal is laudable. However, there is a risk that an assumption of untreatability will be extended downward to youth along with the construct of psychopathy. Commenting on the hypothetical case of a 15 year old in juvenile court, Seagrave and Grisso (2002) note that limits on juvenile jurisdiction typically would permit treatment of the juvenile for only one or two years before release: “Few clinicians who work with serious juvenile offenders or psychopathic adults would offer much optimism for rehabilitating a truly psychopathic youth in that period of time” (p. 221).

Dangerously few data are available to inform this debate. This mirrors the broader state of the field of psychopathy and risk, where advances in assessment have far outpaced advances in treatment. Nevertheless, some evidence suggests that assumptions of untreatability are just that. Recent evidence suggests that psychopathic youth could develop into nonpsychopathic adults, given simple exposure to protective factors (Vitacco, Neumann, Robertson, & Durrant, 2002), or treatment in non-traditional psychosocial programs (Caldwell, Skeem, Salekin, & Van Ryoebbeck, manuscript under review). This evidence is consistent with a recent study of adults, which indicates that treatment involvement is associated with reductions in violence for people with psychopathic traits (Skeem, Monahan, &
Mulvey, 2002). In a broader context, important strides have been made in the treatment and management of the behavior of individuals with borderline personality disorders (Linehan, 1993), a group of individuals previously thought of as virtually impossible to treat. More important, diseases such as schizophrenia were considered untreatable 40 years ago (Bloom, 2003), yet vast strides have been made because of advances in treatment in the control of symptoms and in enabling individuals with schizophrenia to adopt recovery as a legitimate treatment goal.

This is not to suggest that the development of management and treatment strategies for psychopathic individuals will be an easy task. However, to make policy and clinical decisions based on the assumption that treatment simply will not work, particularly for youth, may have the practical effect of creating a caste of “untreatables” whose lifelong dangerousness is taken for granted.

**Ethical and Moral Appropriateness**

Third, the effect of labeling is a critically important issue. The label “psychopath” appears to carry enormous weight in legal proceedings, threatening to overwhelm the impact of other factors to the trier of fact (Edens, Petrila, & Buffington, 2001; Edens, Guy, & Hernandez, this issue). Within the general population, mental illness continues to be viewed with ambivalence, in large measure because of continuing assumptions about a link between mental illness and dangerousness (Link, Phelan, Bresnahan, Stueve, & Pescosolido, 1999). Application of the label “psychopath” to youth could do significant harm, particularly given that many of the adolescents to whom the label might be applied are already involved in juvenile proceedings. The label may drive decision making in the legal setting in a punitive direction. Moreover, its presence in legal and medical records that will follow the adolescent may have collateral impact throughout his or her life.

**RECOMMENDATION FOR CAUTION AND BETTER UNDERSTANDING**

Given such concerns about validity, implications, and appropriateness, commentators have strongly advised caution in the use of instruments for assessing psychopathy in forensic clinical practice. Seagrave and Grisso (2002) predict that in the near future “juvenile psychopathy measures will become one of the most frequently used instruments in forensic assessments of delinquency cases of any kind” (p. 220). However, they argue that “psychopathy assessment of youths must achieve a high level of confidence before it is employed in the juvenile justice system” (pp. 219–239) and observe that this level of confidence has not yet been achieved. In contrast, Frick (2002) argues that psychopathy is not uniquely problematic and should not be held to a higher standard than other constructs. Nevertheless, he advises a cautious approach at this time to clinical use in general and forensic use in particular.

Despite such calls for caution, juvenile psychopathy measures have been published for use in clinical and forensic contexts (Forth, Kosson & Hare, 2003; Frick &
Hare, 2001). Although psychopathy measures were developed to facilitate early intervention, the current sociopolitical climate may demand that they be used to inform legal decisions that youth (i) are and will remain “dangerous,” and (ii) cannot be rehabilitated. Thus, research on the validity of psychopathy in youth, particularly on its manifestations and stability across time (both with and without intervention) is greatly needed, as is research into treatment interventions designed to ameliorate anticipated risk.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE CURRENT ISSUES

The debate about juvenile psychopathy, with particular focus on important theoretical issues, has been presented in other contexts, most notably in a recent issue of *Law and Human Behavior* (Volume 26(2), April 2002). This is the first of two consecutive volumes in *Behavioral Sciences and the Law (BSL)* on this topic. These volumes together present more than one dozen research based articles that begin to advance our understanding of “juvenile psychopathy.” These articles contribute to our understanding of a number of points in this debate, ranging from the validity and stability of psychopathic traits, as currently assessed, to the impact of psychopathy on decision makers.

In the first paper of this volume, Vincent and her colleagues use a theory-based approach to assess whether traits of psychopathy can identify a subgroup of persistent and serious youthful offenders. They do so by cluster analyzing interpersonal, affective, and behavioral features of psychopathy assessed by the Youth Version of the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL: YV; Forth et al., 2003), and then comparing the resulting subtypes on their patterns of antisocial behavior. These authors find subtypes of incarcerated youth with different patterns of psychopathic features. Although behavioral features (impulsivity, antisocial behavior) are non-discriminating, interpersonal and affective features appear to hold some promise for identifying youth who persist in offending past adolescence.

In the second paper, Frick and his colleagues report the results of a cross-sequential study of the stability of psychopathic traits, as assessed by the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD, Frick & Hare, 2001), across a four-year period. Their results suggest that these traits are moderately stable during the transition from childhood to adolescence. These results contribute to the debate about the stability of purported traits of psychopathy during and across particular developmental stages.

In the third paper, Skeem and Cauffman report on a study that examines the validity of the “downward extension” of adult psychopathy to youth. To do so, they compare the PCL: YV (Forth et al., 2003) and the self-report Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (Andershed et al., 2002). Their results suggest that, although these conceptualizations of juvenile psychopathy hold promise, both are associated with psychosocial maturity. This raises questions about their ability to identify a disorder that will remain stable from adolescence to adulthood.

The fourth and fifth papers also examine the reliability and predictive validity of self-report measures of psychopathic traits. Lee and her colleagues conclude that the APSD possesses limited concurrent validity with the PCL: YV, indicating that these
instruments do not measure the same construct. Falkenbach and her colleagues also utilize the APSD, comparing it with a modified version of the Child Psychopathy Scale (CPS; Lynam, 1997); they conclude that further research is necessary before the instruments are ready for clinical use, but suggest that each has the potential to inform clinical judgment.

The last two papers examine public and professional attitudes regarding psychopathy. In the first, Edens and his colleagues explore the impact of psychopathic traits on sentencing decisions by providing participants with capital offense scenarios in which juveniles’ psychopathic traits were manipulated. They find that psychopathic traits predicted participants’ endorsement of a death sentence for the juvenile.

Finally, Cruise and his colleagues apply a “bottom-up” approach to identify the core characteristics of psychopathy for both male and female adolescents. Specifically, they use prototypical analysis to query juvenile detention workers and probation officers about features of psychopathy. They find that juvenile justice personnel view a wide range of behavioral and lifestyle indicators as indicative of juvenile psychopathy in addition to the affective and interpersonal characteristics that clinicians typically view as crucial to the construct.

These studies and those to appear in the next BSL volume certainly do not address every issue in the debate about applying psychopathy to youth. However, they provide a snapshot of the state of the field during this stage of the construct’s development and point the way for advancing understanding in future research. As the research agenda on this critical topic becomes more complete, it should provide a basis to begin to answer the broader social, ethical, and clinical questions being argued.

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REFERENCES


