Introduction to the Special Issue on Juvenile Psychopathy, Volume 2

Juvenile Psychopathy: Informing the Debate

A recent explosion of interest in the topic of “juvenile psychopathy” has been accompanied by sharp debate about whether the construct of psychopathy can validly and should be applied to youth. In the second consecutive special issue of *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* devoted to the topic of juvenile psychopathy, we present additional empirical articles to inform this debate. As noted in the first issue (Petrila & Skeem, 2003), three underlying controversies seem paramount: (i) the validity of extending adult models of psychopathy downward to youth, given patterns of personality development; (ii) the malleability or treatability of psychopathy-like features during youth; and (iii) the ethical and moral appropriateness of assessing psychopathy during youth.

This volume contains six articles on juvenile psychopathy focused on three general topics, including the psychometrics of juvenile psychopathy measures; the relationship between psychopathy-like features and treatment progress; and a “road-map” for assessing the validity of psychopathy in youth.

**Psychometrics of Juvenile Psychopathy Measures**

Several articles in this special issue assess the psychometric properties of measures of juvenile psychopathy. These articles emphasize the utility of these measures in assessing risk for violence, expressing the measures’ chief practical appeal. By identifying useful, youth-focused measures that appear to reliably assess something that “looks like” psychopathy (Hart, Watt, & Vincent, 2002), these articles provide a foundation for determining whether psychopathy is a valid and developmentally appropriate construct for youth.

In the first paper of this volume, Corrodo and his colleagues prospectively examine the utility of the Youth Version of the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL:YV; Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003) in predicting violent recidivism for 197 male adolescent offenders. These authors used PCL:YV clusters of psychopathy-like features, as organized by traditional two-factor (Hare, 1991) and revised three factor (Cooke & Michie, 2001) psychopathy models, to predict recidivism. The authors found that the PCL:YV’s utility in predicting violent recidivism chiefly was attributable to its summary of nonspecific antisocial features (i.e. traditional...
Factor 2; revised “Impulsive and Irresponsible Lifestyle”), rather than the emotional detachment of psychopathy per se, in keeping with prior research (Skeem & Mulvey, 2001). The authors conclude that the personality features of psychopathy are not necessary for risk assessment. Given the stigma of psychopathy, and risk assessment as a primary “driver” for interest, their results are intriguing.

In the second paper, Campbell and her colleagues further assess the PCL:YV, using a sample of 228 adolescent offenders. In contrast to the first paper, these authors approached the PCL:YV as a unidimensional scale, given factor analytic results. They found that file-based PCL:YV ratings identified relatively few offenders (9%) as psychopathic. More importantly, the PCL:YV and was positively associated with measures of violence and social deviance and unassociated with psychological distress. Despite this support for the measure’s construct validity, the PCL:YV was positively associated with parental maltreatment and physical abuse, in contrast with seminal theories of primary psychopathy (see Skeem, Poythress, Edens, Lilienfeld, & Cale, 2003).

The third and fourth papers present the utility of the self-report Psychopathy Content Scale (PCS; Murrie & Cornell, 2000), which often is presented as a screening tool for psychopathy. In the third paper, Murrie and his colleagues found, based on a sample of 113 adolescent offenders, that the PCS and Antisocial Process Screening Device (Frick & Hare, 2001) were somewhat less robustly correlated with various measures of violence than the PCL:YV. Notably, in contrast with adult research (e.g. Hart & Dempster, 1997), the instrumentality or goal-directedness of youths’ past violence was not uniquely related to core interpersonal and affective features of psychopathy assessed by the PCL:YV (Factor 1). In the fourth paper, based on 481 offenders who completed various self-report measures, Lexcen and her colleagues found that the PCS assessed a unidimensional construct that was correlated with socially deviant behavior. However, the authors found little support for the measure’s divergent validity, given that many psychopathy-like adolescents with high PCS scores manifested significant psychological distress.

These first four papers, which focus on the measurement of psychopathy, provide relatively clear support for the utility of these measures (or sub-components thereof) in identifying youth who engage in socially deviant, often violent behavior. However, the papers provide only mixed support for the construct validity of psychopathy in youth. Although there clearly is evidence that we have relatively useful short-term violence risk assessment tools, the “jury is still out” on whether they validly assess psychopathic personality disorder.

**JUVENILE PSYCHOPATHY MEASURES AND TREATMENT PROGRESS**

The fifth paper has a similar focus to the first group of papers, but also explores the relation between measures of psychopathy and treatment progress. Based on a sample of 85 adolescent offenders (half of whom had sex offenses), Spain and her colleagues found that the self-report measures (Child Psychopathy Scale, Lynam, 1997; and APSD) possessed somewhat greater utility in predicting institutional violence than the PCL:YV. Notably, the behaviorally focused subscales of the CPS
and PCL:YV (rather than interpersonal or affective scales) tended to be most strongly associated with physical violence.

These authors also found moderate relationships between the time that staff took to promote adolescents to higher treatment levels and the APSD (interpersonal and impulsive subscales) and CPS (behavioral and affective subscales). The PCL:YV was essentially unrelated to this index of treatment progress. Although these findings do not indicate whether psychopathy-like adolescents can benefit from sufficient doses of appropriate treatment, they provide important information on an under-researched topic. As the authors note, the relationship between treatment progress and psychopathy-like features may be measure dependent for adolescents. This suggests that caution is warranted when using these measures to make inferences about whether these offenders can be rehabilitated. Moreover, it suggests that issues of construct validity continue to be paramount. In addition, the article begins to address the current void of data on the malleability of psychopathy-like features.

**SETTING GOALS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In the final article, Johnstone and Cooke offer a roadmap for future research on the validity of the construct of psychopathy for juveniles. These authors propose three requirements for demonstrating that downward extensions of psychopathy to juveniles are valid: configural invariance of symptoms across key ages, similar performance of age cognate symptoms across the key ages, and relative stability of relative standing on the latent trait across age. They present modern analytic techniques (e.g., item response theory) as tools for advancing the field in this important domain. In doing so, they provide the field with direction for addressing one of the most crucial unresolved issues in the field: whether the nature and manifestations of psychopathy are essentially the same, whether one is 14 or 44 years old.

These studies and those that appeared in the last *BSL* issue devoted to this topic (volume 21(6)) do not definitively resolve core questions of whether psychopathy is a valid construct for juveniles, whether psychopathy-like features in juveniles are malleable or treatable, or whether we *should* apply the construct to youth. In fact, many of the studies reflect a continued focus on how well measures of juvenile psychopathy perform as violence risk assessment tools. Nevertheless, among these studies, there is growing attention toward identifying the most developmentally valid clusters of psychopathy-like features, assessing the stability of psychopathy-like features over time, and testing the impact of the psychopathy label on legal decision-makers.

Future research focused on three core issues will greatly benefit the field. First, as suggested in these two volumes of *BSL*, determining whether psychopathy is a valid construct applicable to juveniles requires additional inquiry; until then, caution in its application is of obvious importance. Second, further investigation is needed into whether shorter forms of these measures, or self-report measures, can be developed with adequate reliability and validity to use in community settings. Performing a full psychopathy assessment is time consuming; in community care settings where financial pressures push clinicians toward assessments that require comparatively little time, measures that can be administered more quickly will have more appeal.
Finally, as we suggested in the last issue (Petrila and Skeem, 2003), there is a pressing need for the development and assessment of treatment interventions designed to manage and ultimately treat individuals most prone to violence.

We believe that the field’s attention is shifting “back to the basics” that need to be defined before the construct of juvenile psychopathy is applied in psycholegal settings. We greet this shift with enthusiasm, given its potential for informing debate about the broader social, ethical, and clinical questions involved.

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REFERENCES


