

Psychopathic Personality in Early Childhood:

A Critical Comment

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Abstract

A recent article published in the *Journal of Personality Disorders* (López-Romero et al., 2021) described the identification of "putative psychopathic personality" in a school cohort of 3-6 year old children from Spain. This comment offers cautionary considerations of the original article on scientific grounds and critical comments on policy grounds. We caution researchers, policy-makers, attorneys, judges, and the general public about the dangers of using this label given present knowledge about the antecedents, early indicators, and stability of the adult disorder of psychopathic personality when assessed in childhood.

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The search for the causes and antecedents of psychopathic personality disorder is longstanding in behavioral and medical science. In addition to creating significant distress within family and social domains, this disorder has been associated with aggression, criminal offending, and a broader threat to public safety and societal well-being. The early identification of those at risk of developing psychopathy, and effective interventions to reduce the severity of this disorder and its broader impact, would surely be welcomed as important clinical contributions and advances in scientific knowledge.

At the same time, there are few scientific questions in psychology more fraught with the risk of harm to innocent people than those embedded in research on psychopathic personality. The label “psychopathic personality,” whether accurately applied or not, evokes perceptions of violence risk, immutability, and a range of pejorative impressions that may exceed what is justified for a child who may have such traits at an early age—and can seriously damage their future.

The increasing use of a developmental psychopathology lens through which to investigate personality characteristics in adolescents and children (see Frick et al., 2014) is one hallmark of contemporary research on psychopathic personality. The value of such work for designing sound and developmentally sensitive prevention approaches is self-evident. However, this work also highlights a certain tension between the perspectives of two camps: personality

researchers and forensic/law-psychology researchers.¹ One noteworthy distinction between these groups may involve the greater focus on the inherent value of basic science in the former, as contrasted with the latter group's greater contextual attention to implementation of research findings as they apply to policy and practice. We are aware of the attention to developmental aspects of psychopathic personality, particularly since the proposal of the triarchic model (Patrick et al., 2009), while we also note the careful attention to language employed by developmental personality researchers in their descriptions of traits (e.g., callous-unemotional, psychopathic), correlates of traits, and related phenomena (see, e.g., Dotterer et al., 2017; Kyranides et al., 2017). Such conservative use of language is broadly consistent with scientific principles. However, it is particularly salient in research on the developmental aspects of psychopathic personality, given the potential for abuse of such research findings when applied to policy and practice.

This brings us to a study recently published in the *Journal of Personality Disorders*. In “Studying configurations of psychopathic traits: Exploring the viability of psychopathic personality in early childhood,” the investigators (López-Romero et al., 2021) sought to identify a group of young children (ages 3-6) drawn from a Spanish school cohort who are at risk for developing psychopathic personality disorder as adults. Using parent ratings for these children,

¹It would be more precise to refer to a sub-group of “forensic/law-psychology researchers” as “clinical forensic researchers.” Doing so could highlight their focus on how psychopathy is abnormal (unusual, extreme, or rigid), maladaptive (impairing capacity to fulfill social roles and obligations), and susceptible to fluctuation over time in nature, severity, or consequences. Viewed through this lens, psychopathic personality disorder has potential relevance to a number of legal decisions made about people with psychopathy, including some decisions that are highly consequential. This may incline clinical-forensic researchers toward a particular awareness of the policy and practice implications of research on psychopathy.

the investigators identified five groups: (1) those high on *grandiose-deceitful*; (2) those high on *callous-unemotional*; (3) those high on *impulsive-need for stimulation*; (4) those high on all three factors; and (5) those low on all these factors. The first three dimensions were selected to represent three factors associated with psychopathic personality. The fourth of these five groups was termed “putative psychopathic personality” by the investigators.

We have two responses, falling in the broad areas of research method and public policy implications, respectively. We offer cautions in the former area, while acknowledging the potential value of a developmental psychopathology framework. We prioritize our critical comments concerning this study in the area of implementation of research findings—their application to policy and practice. We observe that the article provided cautions, warnings and statements of limitations about making inferences of psychopathic personality, based on both developmental theory and on methodological limitations of the study. But these cautions were mostly provided near the end of the paper, and the investigators do not seem to have heeded their own warnings in certain important respects.

The Study’s Scientific Claim

Despite the article’s careful caveats, the authors repeatedly assert that “putative psychopathic personality” had been identified. This is unusual language, particularly when applied to children between the ages of 3 and 6. We caution that such a claim should be considered in light of these caveats, and certain aspects of the study’s design. To cite one example, the findings were summarized as follows: “Taken together, current results provide the first evidence that data-driven statistical strategies can identify a small group of young children who exhibited a putative psychopathic personality...” (López-Romero et al., 2021, p. 18). Yet, if

one heeds the cautions offered elsewhere in the article, the article's conclusion that the study identified youths who "exhibit" psychopathic personality, "putative" or not, is not well supported. What the study found, at most, was a small group of children among whom, given further longitudinal study, it might be possible to identify a minority who later in life develop stable psychopathic traits. We say "a minority," because even in early adolescence, studies identifying potential future individuals with psychopathic personality disorder and moderate stability from early adolescence into adulthood on this construct also find that a majority are false-positives when followed longitudinally into adulthood (Lynam et al., 2007).

The authors' warnings clearly acknowledged the inappropriateness of labeling 3-6 year old children as having "putative psychopathic personality." Yet they carve out an exception for researchers. Why? Surely researchers—personality, developmental, educational, clinical—are among the *best* able to appreciate both the implications and the limitations of empirical findings without using a label that can potentially distort the meaning of those findings. Moreover, the communication of scientific findings and their use in legal contexts are too often influenced by searches that use only titles, abstracts, or quotations of 1-2 lines from a study. Given this, it is quite conceivable that it is the identification of "putative psychopathic personality" in young children that will be widely drawn from this article, not the appropriate cautions that appear throughout and are only discernible from a careful reading of the entire article.

The article identifies limitations in the study's "data-driven statistical strategies," but some of them are so limiting they seriously weaken the interpretation of the findings. First, a one-year follow-up is not a meaningful measure of stability of children's traits. Instead, it is a single period of relatively short duration. Second, parent ratings of their children's motives and

intentions are potentially confounded by parents' characteristics, such as their own motives, perceptions, parenting styles, and emotional reactions to their children. Third, teacher ratings on the critical traits were not reported in the article, so cross-informant convergence of either ratings or empirical clusters were also not addressed. Finally, the measures in the study (at both data collection points and regarding both predictors and outcomes) consist entirely of parent and teacher ratings, several of which imply inference about causal thinking in these young children (e.g., "never seems to have a bad conscience for things that he or she has done", p. 5). The authors acknowledge this limitation, indicating that "...it is possible that shared method variance to some extent inflated the support for the hypotheses." (p. 18) We agree, and consider this more than "possible." One might instead reasonably consider this an illustration of the stability of parents' (mis)perceptions and attributions about young children, not a predictive study of personality traits.

The Paper's Policy Implications

There are particularly important concerns about how these results could be applied. In their Implications section, the authors appropriately caution that the term "putative psychopathic personality" should not be used in contexts other than research. Yet the use of that label in a scientific research article might inadvertently promote use of findings in different contexts despite the authors' caution that "one should not use the label *psychopathic personality* for applied purposes when dealing with very young children." (p. 17) Given how measures of psychopathy have been used in the past, we can imagine that the findings of the present study might be misapplied in (a) *educational contexts* (classroom and program placement, IEP planning), (b) *juvenile justice settings* (e.g., transfer and reverse transfer decisions, placement

decisions, or even adjudication decisions if it were implicitly used as character evidence relevant to culpability), or (c) *health-related contexts* (e.g., investigation of reports of child abuse, professional treatment of disruptive behavior, or family responses to being informed a child resembles those with “putative psychopathic personality”—particularly in cases in which the child’s behavior is related to preexisting trauma from parental abuse). In addition, the media coverage of research using this label is likely to be overly simplistic at best, and erroneous and inflammatory at worst.

Our comments pertain to this particular study. But they are also relevant for *any* research attempts to identify early signs of psychopathic personality. We have suggested that substantial harm can result from labeling young children as having some version of psychopathic personality—particularly when their “personality” is a developmental work in progress. This applies to children who are inaccurately categorized, certainly. It may also apply to children who are accurately appraised, as this could discourage the development of effective interventions by assuming comparable stability between “putative psychopathic personality” in young children and psychopathic personality in adults. We strongly suggest that future researchers employ extreme care to avoid linking their findings regarding young children to adult psychopathic personality until we know more about the accurate identification, longitudinal stability, and effective rehabilitation of the early signs of psychopathic personality.

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