



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science – 2018

I16 Phenotypic Characteristics in Different Groups of Psychopathic Individuals

Donatella La Tegola, PhD, University of Bari, P.zza Giulio Cesare, 11, Bari 70124, ITALY; Alan R. Felthous, MD, Saint Louis University School of Medicine, Forensic Psychiatry Division, 1438 S Grand, St. Louis, MO 63104-1027; Roberto Catanesi, MD, P.zza Giulio Cesare, Bari 70124, ITALY; Domenico Montalbò, MD*, p.zza G. Cesare, 11, Bari 70124, ITALY; and Felice F. Carabello, MD, University of Bari, Section of Forensic Psychiatry, p.zza G. Cesare, 11, Bari 70124, ITALY*

After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to recognize phenotypic characteristics in different groups of psychopathic individuals.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by helping identify any phenotypic gender-specific factors related to psychopathy.

Psychopathy in a personality disorder entailing traits and behaviors that have a negative impact on individuals and society. The diagnostic criteria for psychopathy has a long history in psychiatry and overlaps with criteria of other personality disorders, especially antisocial personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder. These include egocentricity, superficial charm, a grandiose sense of self-worth, the need for stimulation, pathological lying, a manipulative approach to relationships, a lack of remorse and guilt, callousness, a lack of empathy, impulsivity, irresponsibility, and an inclination toward criminal behaviors. The confusion in the use of the term “psychopathic” could be explained by different phenotypic characteristics in different groups of psychopathic individuals and by gender differences.

The Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) is one of the most commonly used measures of psychopathy.¹ The total score of PCL-R is composed by interpersonal and affective (factor 1) scores and lifestyle scores (factor 2). The current study investigated discrepancies in scoring of PCL-R between a male psychiatric forensic sample, a female psychiatric forensic sample, a female prisoner sample, and female prisoners who had been convicted for Mafia-related crimes. Prior research on psychopathy has primarily focused on the problem in men. Only a few studies have examined whether psychopathy even exists in women, and, if so, how the disorder manifests itself within them. Research on differences between the sexes has suggested that psychopathy is less frequent in women than in men; however, it is debated whether the observed differences in the occurrence of male and female psychopaths reflect actual physical differences in the frequency of psychopathy, or whether those differences reflect factors related to aspects of the diagnostic tools and the terminology used, which surface when these criteria for evaluating psychopathy are applied to women. This study has shown how the psychopathic individuals in the different female samples demonstrated similar phenotypic characteristics. On the contrary, differences between the sample of women and that of men were observed: female sufferers more often seem to demonstrate emotional instability, verbal violence, manipulation of social networks, and, to a lesser degree than male psychopaths, criminal behavior and instrumental violence.

The importance of a correct diagnosis of “psychopathy” relates to its potential usefulness with regard to issues such as the choice of treatment strategies, treatment evaluation, risk assessment, and the prediction of future violence. If one assumes that the same research results achieved in studying men are automatically transferable to women, one does risk misjudgments of enormous consequence. For instance, within the field of forensic psychiatry, the diagnosis of psychopathy is often used to justify the length of prison terms. In some countries, indefinite prison terms can be given to criminals with this diagnosis. The diagnosis of psychopathy may also be used to justify patients’ exclusion from treatment programs as well as other punitive measures.

Reference(s):

1. Hare, R. D. (2003). *Manual for the Revised Psychopathy Checklist*. (2nd ed.). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Multi-Health Systems.

Psychopathy, Gender-Specific Factors, Phenotypic Characteristics