

Apr 16th, 2:45 PM - 4:00 PM

Psychopathy, Empathy, and Prosocial Helping: Can You Increase Altruistic Helping For Individuals High In Psychopathy?

Courtney Beussink

Georgia Southern University, cb09943@georgiasouthern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/research_symposium

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Beussink, Courtney, "Psychopathy, Empathy, and Prosocial Helping: Can You Increase Altruistic Helping For Individuals High In Psychopathy?" (2016). *Georgia Southern University Research Symposium*. 41.
https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/research_symposium/2016/2016/41

This presentation (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences & Events at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Southern University Research Symposium by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Psychopathy, Empathy, and Prosocial Helping: Can You Increase Empathy-Related Attitudes For College Students High In Psychopathy?

Courtney N. Beussink, Jessica Davis, Kylan Jackson, & Amy A. Hackney, Ph.D.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Psychopathy exists at elevated levels within forensic & community populations and is associated with negative traits, such as deficits in affective empathy, manipulateness, and criminal behavior (Hare, 2003).

- Inducing empathy through perspective-taking may be one way to reduce these negative implications.

Those high in psychopathy (especially CA traits) are less likely to participate in altruistic helping and empathy mediates this relationship (White, 2013).

Empathy also mediates the relationship between perspective-taking and prosocial helping.

- Imagining oneself as the target increases prosocial helping through empathic concern and self-other overlap (Myers, Laurent, & Hodges, 2014).
- RESEARCH QUESTION: Would asking individuals high in psychopathy to imagine themselves in the target's position increase empathic concern and self-other overlap and thereby increase their altruistic helping?**

Recent research has shown that asking individuals high in psychopathy to feel with the target activates "empathic" regions in the brain, suggesting they may have the capacity to experience affective empathy with conscious effort (e.g., Meffert et al., 2013).

- RESEARCH QUESTION: Would asking individuals high in psychopathy to feel with the target increase their sadness and empathic concern for the target and thereby increase their altruistic helping?**

CURRENT STUDY

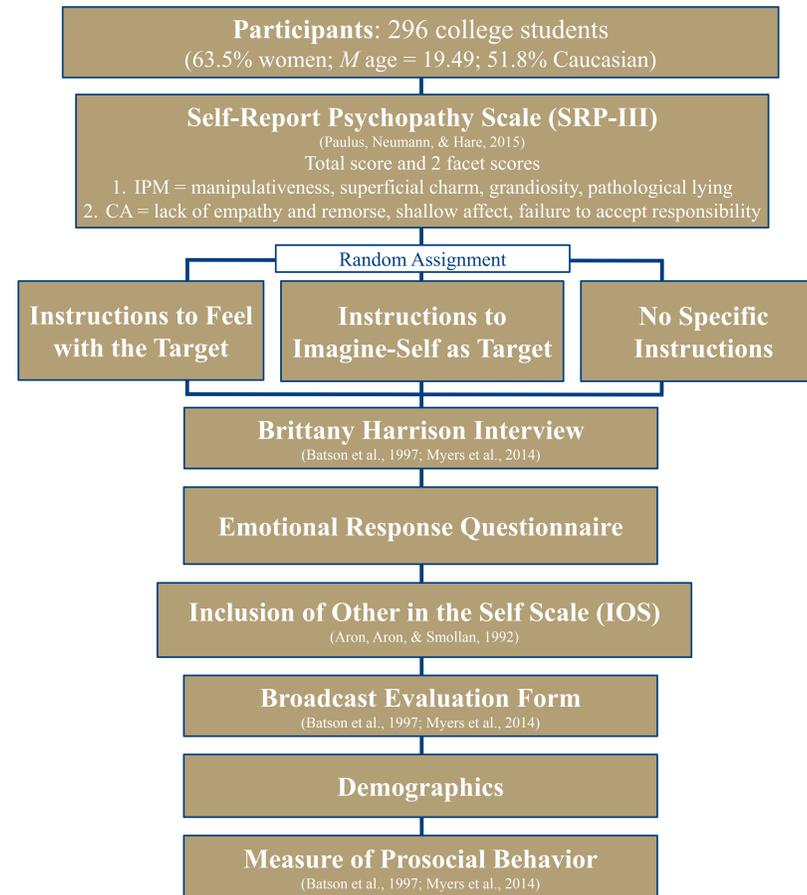
The primary purpose of this research was to investigate the effects of perspective-taking on the empathy-related attitudes of college students high in psychopathy.

- Empathy-related attitudes included sadness, empathic concern, self-other overlap, and prosocial helping

HYPOTHESES

It was hypothesized that individuals high in psychopathy who received perspective-taking instructions would report more sadness (H1), more empathic concern (H2), more self-other overlap (H3), and more prosocial helping (H4) than individuals high in psychopathy who did not receive specific instructions.

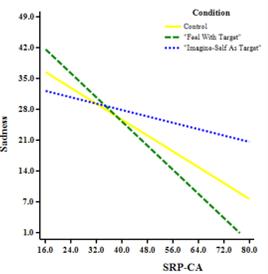
METHODOLOGY



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

H1: Partially supported

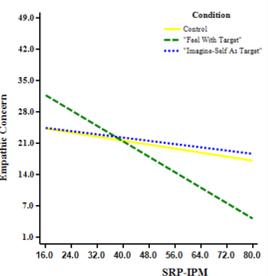
- ANCOVA examining interaction between condition (IV) and CA psychopathy (covariate) on ratings of sadness (DV)
 - $F(1, 290) = 3.46, p = .03, \eta^2 = .02$
- CA traits negatively related to sadness for those in the control and "feel with target" conditions, but not for those in the "imagine-self as target" condition



* No significant interactions for total psychopathy or IPM traits

H2: Not supported; Results contrary to hypothesis

- ANCOVA examining interaction between condition (IV) and IPM psychopathy (covariate) on ratings of empathic concern (DV)
 - $F(1, 290) = 3.30, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$
- IPM traits negatively related to empathic concern for those in the "feel with target" condition, but not for those in the control or "imagine-self as target" conditions



* No significant interactions for total psychopathy or CA traits

H3 & H4: Not supported

* No significant interactions for total psychopathy, CA traits, or IPM traits

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Significant Gender Differences for:

- Psychopathy** (total, IPM, & CA psychopathy)
 - Men reported more psychopathic tendencies than women
 - In line with past research (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002)
- Empathy** (sadness and empathic concern)
 - Women reported more sadness and empathic concern than men
 - In line with past research (Eisenberg, 2003)
- Prosocial helping**
 - Women offered more help to the target than men
 - In line with past research (Eisenberg, 2003)

Significant Psychopathy Main Effects on:

- Empathy** (total, IPM, & CA psychopathy)
 - As psychopathy increased, sadness and empathic concern decreased
 - In line with past research (Lishner et al., 2015)
- Prosocial helping** (CA psychopathy)
 - As CA psychopathy increased, prosocial helping decreased
 - In line with past research (White, 2013)

CONCLUSION

Results support past research showing that psychopathy scores are negatively associated with feelings of sadness and empathic concern (Lishner et al., 2015) and participation in altruistic helping (White, 2013).

This research was the first to examine the effects of perspective-taking instructions on empathy-related attitudes for individuals high in psychopathy.

- Asking individuals high in CA traits of psychopathy to imagine themselves as the target led to increased sadness**
 - Future research should investigate this interaction further as a possible avenue for developing interventions and treatment
- Asking individuals high in IPM traits of psychopathy to feel with the target led to decreased empathic concern**
 - Alarming, since these perspective-taking instructions seemed to have a contrasting effect
 - Future research should also investigate this interaction further