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Courtney Beussink
Georgia Southern University, cb09943@georgiasouthern.edu

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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, manipulativeness, 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 (Morgan, Laurent, & Hodges, 2018).

• 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

Participants: 296 college students (63.5% women; M age = 19.49, 51.8% Caucasian)

Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP-III)

- Paulhus, Normand, & Hare (2003)
- Total score and 7 facet scores
  1. IPM – manipulativeness, superficial charm, grandiosity, pathological lying
  2. CA – lack of empathy and remorse, shallow affect, failure to accept responsibility

Instructions to Feel with the Target

Instructions to Imagine-Self as Target

No Specific Instructions

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

H1: Partially supported

• ANCOVA examining interaction between condition (IV) and psychopathy (covariate) on ratings of sadness (DV)
  - F(1, 290) = 3.30, p = .04, η² = .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, η² = .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

CONCLUSION

Results support past research showing that psychopathy scores are negatively associated with feelings of sadness and empathic concern (Lisheer 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

CONTACT: Courtney Beussink (cb099943@georgiasouthern.edu)