Relationship between Psychopathy and Criminal Behaviours

Swetha Sadanandan

Abstract

Psychopathy and its connection with criminal behaviour are widely discussed and debated. In this review paper, an attempt is made to understand psychopathy and criminal behaviour with other research on aspects involving intelligence, impulsivity, recidivism and empathy. Intelligence and psychopathy play a role in the crime committed by the offender and also established the impulsivity in the crime committed. Further psychopathy as an indicator of recidivism in female and male offenders is explored. The gap in crime literature when female offenders are studied have become evident during this exploration. Male psychopaths who are offenders are more likely to show recidivism than female psychopaths who are offenders. An understanding of the Hare psychopathy checklist (PCL-R), the widely used test for assessing psychopathy has been established. The fMRI study on empathy in psychopaths has been implored. fMRI studies have shown a lack of empathy in psychopathic offenders. Overall, the relationship of criminal behaviour with psychopathy is explored through various research on various aspects like intelligence, recidivism and empathy. This article has compiled the different aspect of criminal behaviour to establish a scope for further research and intervention for psychopathic offenders.

Keywords: Affect, crime, offender, psychopathy, PCL-R, recidivism

Introduction

First and foremost, the essential factor is to understand what psychopathy is? Psychopathy could be referred to as a personality wherein an individual may seem charming, manipulative and ruthless to gain something even at the cost of exploiting others. They cease to have any feeling or sense of guilt or regret and are incredibly selfish. The term psychopathy was popularised by Hervey Cleckley in 1941, describing his patients who were sane but especially lacking the feeling of empathy and remorse marked by impulsive, deceptive and manipulative behaviour. Later on, Hare developed the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL). The revised version of Psychopathy checklist, i.e. PCL-R, is now widely used in diagnosing psychopathy in an individual and often used in numerous research involving offenders.

11 Institute of Behavioural Science, GFSU, Gandhinagar, Gujarat
According to PCL-R, psychopathy can be defined as a cluster of interpersonal, affective and antisocial traits. These individuals are deceptive, dominants, grandiose, and lack empathy and do not feel remorse or guilt.\(^4\) PCL- R has clusters of features or factor, i.e. Factor 1 are all the interpersonal and affective component of the disorder, and Factor 2 is the socially deviant lifestyle component. It is a 20 item on the checklist and marked on a 3-point scale. The scores range from 0-40, and the cut off score for psychopathy is 30. There are different tests and version of PCL developed over a period of time that cater to other population.\(^11\)

Psychopathy and its relation to crime have been explored through various research. In this article, some of the selected literature would be reviewed. Psychopathy, crime and intelligence are explored in this article. Psychopathy in male and female offenders with respect to recidivism will also be analysed. An attempt is made to understand the criminal’s mind by neuroimaging studies exploring the neurological changes in the brain. Whether there is a difference in the mindset of a psychopath and non- psychopath?

The article hence aims at exploring the overall behaviour of criminal and the aspects of crime and their relation to psychopathy.

**Intelligence and its relation to crime and psychopathy**

In research conducted by Alfred Heilbrun, the connection between psychopathy, violence and impulsiveness of criminal behaviour was examined. The participants were white prisoners. In this research, the violence of the offender was explored with the aspect of their intelligence. Violent crime was defined on the basis employed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, a crime that involved force, a threat to a person were violent crimes. Whereas crime against property represented non-violent crime. The impulsiveness of crime was rated by the undergraduate and graduate students who were informed about the commission of these crimes. They had to mark the crime based on their opinion of whether the crime was impulsive or premeditated. The offenders were divided on their score in intelligent quotient (IQ) test and on the tendency of psychopathy. Offenders with 106 IQ or above were divided into higher intelligence group. So, the four groups of offenders were High IQ psychopaths, High IQ non-psychopaths, Low IQ psychopaths and Low IQ non-psychopaths. From the results, it was observed that higher IQ psychopathic offenders committed were likely to commit non-violent crime than psychopathic offenders with lower IQ. Whereas, a non-psychopathic high intelligent individual committed a violent crime more than a non-psychopathic lower intelligent group. Impulsivity in less intelligent psychopaths more than the bright psychopaths. Intelligent psychopaths were inclined toward premeditation of crime and therefore were less impulsive. The data indicates that intelligent psychopaths have not inclined towards violence-prone and impulsive crime.\(^6\)
In this study, a different aspect of crime and violence was explored by adding the factor of intelligence. It appears from this research that intelligence may influence a psychopath’s crime that is the intelligent psychopath are less likely to commit or prone to violent crime, and they are not impulsive. However, in this research, the major setback was that the offenders were only white offenders. Impulsivity was reported by graduate and undergraduate students who could have affected the data. Instead of students, professionals in the field should have rated the impulsivity. There needs to be clarity in this research regarding the grouping of individuals based on the psychopathy and non-psychopathy offenders. However, the study highlighted the importance of the role of intelligence in its association with psychopathy and crime.

**Psychopathy and recidivism of male offenders**

Recidivism is the likelihood of repetition of an offence after the commission of a crime in the past. Research in the field of psychopathy has established that psychopathy can predict the recidivism of a crime. However, most data available are of male offenders. Therefore, in the other part, the research involving female offenders and their recidivism based on psychopathy will be explored later. In an attempt to understand psychopathy and recidivism in male offenders, there was a meta-analysis conducted. For the meta-analysis of 18 studies were compiled and examined. The studies were divided into three groups which were as follows: prediction of violent recidivism and institutional violence, prediction of general recidivism and prediction of sexual sadism and deviant arousal. The larger effect size was found in studies involving PCL predicting recidivism during their absence in custody and parole release. The smallest effect size was observed in the study examining recidivism in young offenders. It was also found that PCL-R scores could also predict sexual sadism. This research suggested that psychopathy can be associated with increased risk in criminal and violent behaviour in male offenders. There was future implication by authors suggesting an exploration of whether one PCL factors predict violent and criminal behaviour better than the other factor.³

In this meta-analysis, the researchers have observed and established that recidivism is associated with psychopathy along with the prediction of other behaviour like violence and sexual deviations. The future implication suggested by the researchers give direction in conducting and reducing the ambiguity in the scores of PCL, their median and mean score can provide information about the accuracy of the research.

**Psychopathy and recidivism of female offenders**

Psychopathy in female offenders’ prevalence is comparatively lower than men offenders.⁹ Gender
difference in psychopathy has been addressed even among the general population by using a self-reported psychopathy test; the PCL-R scores were also significantly low in females than male students. These researches were conducted among the male and female student population in universities. In a research conducted by Selkin, Rogers, Ustad and Sewell, as a first-ever attempt in understanding recidivism and psychopathy in the female offender, the sample included 78 female inmates of Tarrant County in Texas. They were of mixed ethnicity. PCL-R, along with personality assessment inventory, antisocial scale and Personality assessment inventory for aggression scales were administered. Personality disorder examination was also conducted in a semi-structured interview. The data for recidivism was collected from the computer system of Tarrant county, which has current records of the inmate’s performance. This was retrieved in between 12 to 16 months of the original time of the assessment. From this research, it could be understood that male psychopaths had higher recidivism than female psychopaths. In female offenders, psychopathy may slightly predict recidivism; however, it is not a strong predictor like in male psychopath offenders. Interestingly, only 11 per cent who of the population in female offenders who indicated recidivism show psychopathy, whereas 9 out of 10 recidivists’ female offenders were non-psychopathic.

This study reflects and highlights the gap in understanding a crime for female offenders. Psychopathy may not be a good indicator of recidivism in females even though it may apply to male psychopaths. This indicates the gap in the literature of crime where females are considered. This study paved the path for further research in understanding the relation of psychopathy for female offenders. The course has used various scales for the collection of comprehensive data which is useful in the prediction of the outcome; however, it has complicated the research element with terms of the results obtained. The statistical analysis in the study helped in understanding and predicting the outcome. More research on a female is required since the rate of female in the contribution of crime is increasing day by day.

**fMRI study on Psychopaths**

Several Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) studies have been conducted to understand the neurobiological correlates of psychopathy. For this article, the fMRI analysis of psychopaths for empathy is elaborated. Psychopaths deficit in affective arousal like the feeling of remorse or empathy in other individuals. In this study, empathy has been defined as a social-emotional response which is elicited through other person’s affective state. Empathy can include both cognitive and affective component. For this study, 125 incarcerated males between the age of 18-50 were the sample. They underwent PCL-R assessment, and they were assigned depending on their scores into high, medium and low psychopathy group. The participants were given visual stimuli depicting right hands and feet.
of the individual in pain and non-painful situation. It included an everyday scenario like finger trapped in the door; neutral pictures showed a similar situation without pain. Total of 120 stimuli of pain and non-pain situation was presented each trial of 1.4 seconds. The participants were asked to imagine themselves in some scenarios and imagine others in some. The results indicated an increase in network of the region involved in actual physical pain during imagine self-trials across all level of psychopathic condition. However, individuals failed in the activation of neural circuits of empathy while engaging in imagine another perspective. This indicates a general lack of empathy in psychopathic individuals.¹

This study has established the lack of empathy in psychopathic individuals. However, the major issue in the study is that only male offenders participated in this study. The empathy of women offenders is unknown and needs to be explored in terms of female psychopathic offenders. This research could add to the literature of psychopathy and crime if different elements are explored by having a group of non-psychopaths. A comparative study of psychopaths for non-psychopaths could help analyse and to determine the difference in the neural activation of the brain in both population

**Conclusion**

In this paper, different aspects relating to psychopathy in terms of psychopathy and crime with role of intelligence, psychopathy and recidivism in male and female offenders and lastly fMRI study of psychopathy and empathy has been reviewed. There seems to be a relation of intellect and psychopathy for the type of crime committed that is violent or non-violent and impulsivity of the crime. However, further exploration is required in terms of the understanding role of psychopathy in other cultures and how they affect the commission of a crime. Psychopathy and recidivism are well established through research in psychopathic male offenders; however, the gap is required to be bridged in the crime research in terms of crime committed by female offenders as well. Psychopathy in female decreases recidivism, the concept has to further understood as to why there is a difference in male and female recidivism in terms of psychopathy. fMRI studies have indicated that empathy in psychopathic offenders is lacking, and there needs to be a broader study which can elaborate on the differences in psychopathic and non-psychopathic individuals. Understanding a criminal and his mind is a difficult task; however, through such research and data compiling a general or common aspect can help in understanding the crime and in suggestions for rehabilitative measures.

**References**


