Experiential Perturbations of Psychopathy and Sexual Sadism

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Childhood experiences, juvenile behaviors, adolescent personality characteristics, and excessive and compulsive sexual behavior are critical to the early identification of individuals high on psychopathy and those high on sexual sadism, and contribute to assessment (risk and clinical), management, and treatment planning of these individuals. Comprehensive, empirically validated etiological models of psychopathy and sadism have, however, remained elusive. Both constructs independently and jointly have been linked to increased encounters with law enforcement, egregious violence during the commission of crimes, elevated levels of recidivism, and sexual violence (Brown & Forth, 1997; Hare & McPherson, 1984; Hill, Habermann, Berner, & Briken, 2006; Knoll & Hazelwood, 2009; Myers, Chan, Vo, & Lazarou, 2010; Robertson & Knight, 2014; Serin & Amos, 1995; Williamson, Hare, & Wong, 1987).

Despite their importance in both clinical and forensic domains, relatively few studies have investigated the social-developmental histories of psychopathy and sexual sadism, and little consistency has emerged in what research has transpired. Understanding social-developmental histories is essential for early identification and for the potential to fashion interventions that might circumvent the progression to more serious manifestations of these constructs. To understand the social-developmental pathways of psychopathy and sadism and to explore the similarities and differences between these pathways, we examined the role of adverse childhood experiences (psychological, physical, and sexual abuse) in the development of juvenile externalizing behavior (e.g., oppositional behavior, assault, and delinquency), hypersexuality (e.g., sexual drive, sexual compulsivity, and sexual preoccupation), and adult adaptation.

Despite research on psychopathy’s genetic correlates (e.g., Viding, Hanscombe, Curtis, Davis, Meaburn, & Plomin, 2010) and social-developmental foundations (e.g., Christian, Frick, Hill, Tyler, & Frazer, 1997), much less is known about its early course than about its adult manifestation (Gretton, Hare, & Catchpole, 2004; Lynam & Gudonis, 2005). Psychopathic personality characteristics (i.e., callous-unemotionality) present at a relatively early age and continue throughout the lifespan (Hare & Neumann, 2009; Myers et al., 2010). Overall, these psychopathic features are associated with high levels of aggression, hypersexuality, and antisocial/criminal activities in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Brown & Forth, 1997; Hare, Cooke, & Hart, 1999; Harris, Rice, Milton, Lalumiére, & Quinsey, 2007; Kastner & Sellbom, 2012; Porter & Woodworth, 2006; Visser, Pozzebon, Bogaert, & Ashton, 2010).

Similar to psychopathy, sexual sadism is associated with conduct problems, predatory violence, and hypersexual traits with an onset in adolescence or early adulthood (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Hare et al., 1999; Knight & Cerce, 1999; Knight &
Sims-Knight, 2003, 2004; Langström & Hanson, 2006). Much less is known about sadism’s early course as compared to its adult manifestation despite research on the physiological (Bradford, 2006; Briken, Habermann, Berner, & Hill, 2006; Gray, Watt, Hassan, & MacCulloch, 2003) and social-developmental (Chan & Heide, 2009; MacCulloch, Gray, & Watt, 2000; O’Meara, Davies, & Hammond, 2011) antecedents. Overall, sexual sadists display myriad conduct problems, hypersexual traits, antisocial behaviors, and assaultive incidents in adolescence, as well as adulthood (Gray et al., 2003; Hill et al., 2006; Langström & Hanson, 2006).

The current study evaluated the pathways from abusive childhood experiences to juvenile externalizing, hypersexuality, and adult psychopathology in a sample of 397 adult, male sex offenders. Childhood abuse, juvenile externalizing, and hypersexual measures showed differentiation in predicting psychopathy and sadism. Comparison of structural equation models suggested that the two constructs share similar developmental pathways. A key difference was the role of hypersexuality, which was only significant in the development of sexual sadism.

Goals of the Poster Presentation:
1. To examine the role of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse in the development of juvenile externalizing behaviors, hypersexual traits, psychopathy, and sadism.
2. To discover similarities and differences in the roles that childhood abuse, juvenile externalizing behaviors, and hypersexual traits play in the prediction of psychopathy and sadism.
3. To understand the practical implications of the findings and their relevance for treatment of victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse.