Relation of Parental Attachment to Psychopathic Traits Among College Students

Background:

A major contribution to the contemporary understanding of antisocial behavior and aggression has been the recognition that among those whose conduct problems are the most severe and intractable are individuals characterized by psychopathic traits (Hare, 2003; Raine et al., 2005). To date, the study of psychopathy has been the primary province of neuropsychologists (e.g., Blair, 1999) and psychophysiologists (Lykken, 1995; Patrick & Zempolich, 1998) and psychopathic traits have been largely conceptualized as biogenetically determined (Hare, 1998; Hare, 1999; Hare & Neumann, 2008). However, emerging evidence also indicates that parental dysfunction plays a stronger role in the development (Loney, Hutenberg, Counts-Allan, & Schmeelk, 2007) and temporal stability (Frick, Kimonis, Dandreaux, & Farell, 2003) of psychopathic personality traits than has been previously appreciated. A vital area for future longitudinal and behavioral-genetic research will be to more clearly determine the nature of the intertwining relationship between parenting dysfunction and the development and maintenance of C/U personality traits (Stellwagen, 2010). For example, are parenting dysfunction (e.g., the use of harsh physical discipline) and psychopathic traits in children best conceptualized as bidirectional influences? Or can evidence be marshaled establishing a directional path of causality? Such data would help illuminate the relative contributions of genetic and environmental influences in the intergeneration transmission of psychopathic traits. For example, stronger evidence linking exposure to dysfunctional parenting in early childhood with the subsequent development of psychopathic personality traits could lead theorists “back to the future” to reconsider the value of earlier formulations of psychopathy that stressed disrupted
parent/child attachment as the principle etiological factor in the development of a “guiltless” personality orientation (e.g., Bowlby, 1946; McCord & McCord, 1956).

**Hypotheses:**

The primary goal of the study was to examine the relationship between psychopathic personality traits (e.g., deficient interpersonal empathy, shallow emotions, a lack of remorse for misdeeds) and parent/child attachment history among college students. More specifically, the following hypotheses were proposed: (1) high levels of psychopathy would be associated with low levels of perceived parental warmth; (2) high levels psychopathy would be associated with controlling parenting; and (3) Gender differences were examined in an exploratory manner.

**Participants:**

The participants in the present study consisted of 238 introductory psychology students (144 females; 94 males) recruited from a public university in the Pacific Northwest. Participants were offered course extra-credit in exchange for their participation.

**Results:**

- “Cold” parenting was found to be significantly and positively associated with psychopathic traits
- Controlling parents was not found to be associated with psychopathic traits
- No gender differences were found for these results

**Discussion:**

- Cold parenting corresponds with parents who exhibit little, if any, affection for their children. The “coldness” of cold parenting also refers to the parent’s “responsiveness” within the parent-child interaction, and whether the parent is rejecting of the child. Recently, parental “coldness”, which corresponds to the low care dimension, has been
studied a primary cause of psychiatric distress in children. The results of this study buttress and extend these findings.

- The finding that controlling parenting was not associated with psychopathic traits suggests that children may be apt to accept stringent parenting if they sense that their parents are well-meaning rather than rejecting. Moreover, while controlling parenting is typically discussed in the childhood literature as a purely dysfunctional style of childrearing, there may be positive effects associated with controlling parenting in terms of protecting children from negative peer influences. Additional research regarding the various positive and negative correlates of controlling parenting would be of value.

**Current Status of Project:**

- A manuscript has been generated based on the results of this study; this manuscript is currently in the revise and resubmit stage of development.