

The Association Among Adverse Childhood Experiences, Psychopathic Traits, and Violent Behavior: A Quantitative Study

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Abstract: *The relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), psychopathic traits, and violent behavior is examined to investigate whether psychopathy acts as a key mechanism linking early exposure to trauma and subsequent violence. While previous studies have established robust associations between ACEs and antisocial outcomes, as well as psychopathic and persistent violence, the underlying mechanisms remain insufficiently explored. In this study, an archival research design is utilized with a dataset comprising 50 documented offenders. ACE exposure, psychopathic traits, and indicators of violent behaviours were coded. Statistical procedures included descriptives, Pearson correlation, and mediation analysis. Findings show that ACEs were significantly related to psychopathic traits ($r = .48, p < .001$) and psychopathy was strongly related to violent behavior ($r = .0.001$). Mediation analysis revealed that the direct effect of ACEs on violence was significantly reduced when psychopathy was included, suggesting partial mediation. These findings support the role of psychopathy as a key mechanism linking childhood trauma to violent behavior. This study contributes to the field of forensic psychology by contributing a more integrated developmental framework and underscores it as a critical area for future research and early intervention.*

Keywords: childhood trauma, psychopathy traits, violent behavior, offender analysis, forensic psychology

1. Introduction

The search for an answer to why violent behaviour occurs remains a salient issue in psychology and criminology. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and psychopathy are two of the most impactful factors identified in the literature. ACEs refer to early-life stressors including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction that have been linked with a wide range of adverse outcomes, including aggression and criminal behaviour (Felitti et al., 1998). Meanwhile, psychopathy is a condition characterised by emotional detachment, lack of empathy, and antisocial tendencies, has been consistently associated with persistent and severe offending (Hare, 2003).

Although both ACEs and psychopathy have been extensively studied, much of the research treats them as separate constructs. There is comparatively less emphasis on how ACEs contribute to the development of a psychopathic personality and how this, in turn, leads to violent behaviors. To address this gap in the literature and its implications for theory and practice, the present study aimed to explore whether psychopathy serves as a mediator in the relationship between ACEs and violent behavior.

2. Literature Review

Extensive research has shown a strong link between ACEs and subsequent behavioral issues. Felitti et al. (1998) found that individuals who had experienced multiple ACEs were significantly more likely to engage in risky and antisocial behaviors. Hughes et al. (2017) further demonstrated that exposure to ACEs increases the likelihood of engaging in violent and criminal behaviors. Psychological studies have also identified psychopathy as a significant factor in violent behavior. Hemphill et al. (1998) reported that psychopathy is strongly linked to recidivism and, particularly, to violent reoffenders. Moreover, a study by Porter and Woodworth (2006) showed that individuals diagnosed with psychopathy are more likely to engage in instrumental and premeditated

violence. More recent studies have attempted to explore the relationship between ACEs and psychopathy. For instance, Dargez et al. (2016) concluded that childhood abuse is associated with affective deficits and antisocial behavior. This finding suggests that early trauma may contribute to the emergence of psychopathic traits. However, these studies are largely correlational and do not explore any mediation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative archival study design, where documented data of offenders were analyzed.

3.2 Sample

N = 50 offences Inclusions: documented history of violence and available information on their development.

3.3 Measures

ACEs: Score is based on presence of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction

Psychopathy Scores: Using psychopathy indicators and their alignment with PCL-R. Violent behavior scores: The frequency and severity of offenses.

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations and mediator analysis (bootstrapping).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Mean ACE score: 4.6 (SD=2.0)

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Mean psychopathy score: 6.5 (SD=5.1)

Number of ACEs: 3.4 (SD = 1.2)

Mean violence score: 6.2 (SD = 2.8) 4.2 Correlation Analysis

ACEs Psychopathy: $r = .48, p < .001$

Psychopathic: $r = .59, p < .001$

ACEs violence: $r = .34, p < .01$

4.2 Mediation Analysis

ACE psychopathic: $b = .48, p < .001$

Psychopathology violence: $b = .59, p < .001$ 4.3.1 Direct Effect
ACE violence (direct). The effect decreased from $b = .34$ to $b = .15$, thereby decreasing this connection between psychopathic and violence and indicating partial mediation.

5. Discussion

The research outcomes support the initial hypothesis that psychopathy partially mediatory between ACEs and violent action. Despite the direct relationship between ACEs and violence, the relationship weakened when psychopathy was incorporated, implying that early trauma contributes to the development of personality qualities that favor aggression. This result aligns with developmental theories that suggest early adversity can disrupt emotional regulation and emotion, making a person more prone to antisocial behaviors. The strong association between psychopathy and violence further emphasizes the importance of personality characteristics in explaining chronic offending.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the development of psychopathy partially mediates the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and violent action. These results further our knowledge of criminal activity and the necessity of early intervention in reducing long-term risk. Further research should investigate the impact on specific ACEs and the potential for mediators other than psychopathic, such that a thorough understanding of the pathways that lead to aggressive behavior can be achieved.

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