

Can Psychopathic Violence Be Explained by Attachment?

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Although individuals with psychopathic personality traits often lead deviant, albeit not criminal, lives, this type of personality disorder is more common among imprisoned offenders. In particular, psychopathic traits are present in offenders who committed more serious and violent crimes. This article focuses on one of the aspects of understanding the evolution of a psychopathic personality and violence, namely attachment. Empirical studies conducted to date confirm that psychopathy is associated with anxious forms of attachment, mostly avoidant/dismissive. In the early relationship with the object of attachment, the psychopathic person probably did not have a sufficiently consistent, attuned, loving, and encouraging experience. Moreover, abuse and neglect are common. In such circumstances, children protect themselves by adopting mechanisms, which are (inadequately) prolonged into adulthood, and their inner world is inhabited mainly by aggressive objects. As adults, psychopaths lack the capability for attachment. Additionally, they perceive people as unreliable and aggressive. Their intense envy arouses the desire to possess or destroy "the other", while power is also used to heal the wounds of grandiosity, which is occasionally shattered by situations or people. An additional factor enabling psychopaths to be harmful and violent to others without feeling guilt, stems from their impaired or even inexistent ability to mentalize. Mentalization develops from a secure attachment, within which individuals learn during their childhood to reflect on their own and others mental states and behaviour. The ability to mentalize is weaker in prisoners than in control groups and is even more impaired in offenders with antisocial traits. This paper offers an insight into the most intimate psychological functioning of psychopaths and thus provides opportunities for possible interventions that might also enable the prevention of violent behaviour as a long-term investment.

Keywords: psychopathy, antisocial personality disorder, attachment, mentalization, violence, imprisoned offenders

UDC: 159.97