



Childhood Traumatic Experience, Attachment Quality, and Parenting Style as Predicting Factors of Psychopathic Behaviour

Opeyemi Olubusuyi Fasanu

Department of Psychology, University of Ibadan,
Ibadan, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate how childhood traumatic experiences, attachment qualities with parents and peers and perceived parenting style contribute to psychopathic behaviours among inmates. A size of 270 institutionalised participants responded to a questionnaire comprising items from the Levenson's Self Report Psychopathy (LSRP, $\alpha = .83$), Early Trauma Inventory Self-Report Short Form (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$), Parenting Style Inventory-II (Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$), and Inventory of Parent and Peers Attachments (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). The results showed that early childhood experiences of sexual abuse showed significant prediction of psychopathy [$\beta = .24$, $t = 2.63$, $p < .05$]. Alienation in attachment quality significantly predicted psychopathy [$\beta = -.19$, $t = 3.01$, $p < .01$]. Similarly, parenting style autonomy-granting significantly predicted psychopathy [$\beta = .25$, $t = 3.64$, $p < .01$]. The study concludes that the experience of childhood trauma, the quality of attachment and parenting style could have implication for psychopathic behaviour pattern.

Keywords: Attachment quality, Childhood trauma, Parenting style, Psychopathy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychopathic behaviours are behavioural patterns characterised by a firm opposition of social rules and norms, irrationality, irritability, irresponsibility, and lack of remorse for one's own wrong doings (Englebert, 2019). Individuals living with psychopathy often come into conflict with the law. The emotional, social, psychological, and financial implications of psychopathic behaviours are a burden for families and governments around the world (Okpuvwie, Akinyede, Tohozin and Toko, 2021). The cost of rehabilitating offenders, maintaining societal peace, enforcement of compliance with the law, and building and maintaining correctional facilities for offender are evidences to this fact.

In previous studies, some researchers pointed to socio-economic factors, such as poverty, lack of jobs, social injustice, oppression and marginalisation, use of illicit substances of abuse, as predictors of psychopathic behaviours (Okpuvwie, Akinyede, Tohozin and Toko, 2021). Some other researcher reported that people with psychopathic behaviours may be genetically predisposed or some neurobiological factors are implicated (Frazier, Ferreira, & Gonzeles, 2019; Evertsson & Meehan, 2013). Another research report stated that people with psychopathic personality are structurally and functionally different from other people without it in their volume or reactivity in brain regions like amygdala, hippocampus, other limbic systems and frontal and temporal cortices (Skeem, Polaschek, Patrick, and Lilienfeld, 2011). However, the present study aims at investigating the contributions of fundamental factors in the developmental process of people such as the experience of traumatic childhood, quality of attachment and parenting styles experienced while growing up. Based on the objectives of the present study, the following hypotheses were set for testing:

- i. Childhood traumas (general trauma, physical punishment, emotional abuse, sexual traumatic events) will significantly predict psychopathic behaviours.
- ii. Attachment qualities (trust, communication, alienation) will significantly predict psychopathic behaviours.
- iii. Parenting styles (responsiveness, autonomy-granting, demandingness) will significantly predict psychopathic behaviour.

2.METHODOLOGY

A total of 270 institutionalised participants in the Nigeria Prisons Service correctional facility in Agodi, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, participated in this study. They responded to a questionnaire comprising the following self-report instruments:

3.LEVENSON SELF-REPORT PSYCHOPATHY (LSRP)

The researcher used the 26-item Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy (LSRP) scale to measure the degree of primary psychopathy (psychopathic emotional affect) and secondary psychopathy (psychopathic lifestyle) (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Responses were rated on a 4-point scale coded from 0 = Strongly disagree to 3 = Strongly agree and internal consistency of .82 was found. Meanwhile, in this present study, the overall internal consistency without items 10 and 15 yielded ($r = .838$). The Cronbach's alpha for psychopathic emotional affect subscale yielded $\alpha = .714$ and psychopathic lifestyle yielded Cronbach's $\alpha = .788$. Sample items include *"Looking out for myself is my top priority"*, and *"For me, what's right is whatever I can get away with"*

4. INVENTORY OF PARENT AND PEER ATTACHMENT REVISED (IPPA)

The questionnaire also comprised Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment Revised (IPPA) developed by Armsden and Greenberg (2009) but revised by Gullone and Robinson (2005). There were two components of attachment: parent and peers. The parent attachment comprised 28 items and the peer scale comprised 25 items. Items 3, 5, 7, 10 and 15 on the parent scale and item 5 on the peer scales were scored in reverse. The rest were scored directly. The scale uses a 5-point likert coded from 1 = Almost never or Never true to 5 = Almost always or Always true. It has been found to have a test-retest reliability ($\alpha = .93$) for the parent attachment and ($\alpha = .86$) for peer attachment reported by the authors. The present study found Cronbach's alpha = .674 for parent attachment and ($\alpha = .836$) for peer attachment. Sample items include *"My parents listen to my opinions"* and *"My friends are fairly easy to talk to"* for parents and peers respectively.

5. EARLY TRAUMA INVENTORY SELF-REPORT SHORT FORM (ETISR-SF)

The 29-item Early Trauma Inventory Self-report Short Form (ETISR-SF) developed by Bremner (2004) was used to measure the traumatic experience in earlier developmental life such as general trauma, physical punishment, emotional abuse, sexual traumatic events, and other traumas such as horror, helplessness, and fear, and out-of-the-body feeling. The scale is rated on "Yes" or "No" response format with a Cronbach's alpha .869. The present study has reported Cronbach's $\alpha = .767$ for general trauma, $\alpha = .664$ for physical abuse, $\alpha = .552$ for emotional abuse, and $\alpha = .673$ for sexual abuse, and $\alpha = .896$ for the overall scale. Sample items include *"Did you ever see someone murdered"*, and *"Were you involved in a serious accident?"*

6. PARENTING STYLE INVENTORY - II (PSI-II)

The 15-item Parenting Style Inventory - II (PSI-II) developed by Darling and Toyokawa (1997) was used to measure parenting style as perceived by the respondent. PSI-II has three subscales: demandingness, responsiveness, and psychological autonomy-granting, rated on a 5-point scale coded from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Psychometric analyses of PSI-II reveal adequate internal consistency of .72, .74, .75 for the three subscales respectively as mentioned earlier, as well as adequate variability, and predictive validity (Darling and Toyokawa, 1997). The present study has found Cronbach's alpha of .691, .689, and .517 for responsiveness, autonomy-granting, and demandingness subscales respectively. Overall internal consistency yielded .750 Cronbach's alpha. Sample items include *"My Parents don't really like me to tell her my troubles."* and *"My parents hardly ever praise me for doing well."*

The questionnaires were administered to the inmates in the correctional facility in Agodi, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Only the male inmates could participate, as access to the female section of the facility was unsuccessful due to security reasons given by the prison authorities. All questionnaires were completed anonymously and returned to the researcher within the prison facility. All data collected were coded into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.

7. RESULTS

In this study, the author used descriptive analysis for the demographic distributions and inferential statistics to test the hypotheses. The results are presented as follows:

Table 1: Showing Descriptive Analysis of Socio-demographic of the Participants

Demographics	Groups	Frequency	Percent
Marital Status	Single	145	53.7
	Married	121	44.8
	Not indicated	4	1.5
	Total	270	100.0
Education	Primary	54	20.0
	Secondary/*NCE	153	56.7
	University/Polytechnic	60	22.2
	Not indicated	3	1.1
	Total	270	100.0
Parental Substance Use	Mother only	8	3.0
	Father only	88	32.6
	Both parents	47	17.4
	None	126	46.7
	Total	270	100.0
Parent's Family size	1-5 members	136	50.4
	6-10 members	117	43.3
	11 members and Above	15	5.6
	Not indicated	2	.7
	Total	270	100.0
Parents Divorced or Separated	Yes	153	56.7
	No	116	43.0
	Not indicated	1	.4
	Total	270	100.0
Demise of parent(s)	Mother only	88	32.6
	Father only	60	22.2
	Both parents	56	20.7
	None	66	24.4
	Total	270	100.0
Age at Parent's Demise	Infancy (Birth - 1 year)	17	6.3
	Childhood (2 - 11 years)	25	9.3
	Adolescents (12 - 19)	66	24.4
	Early Adulthood (20 - 39 years)	75	27.8
	Not Applicable (living parents)	64	23.7
	Don't know my age	23	8.5
	Total	270	100.0
Prison Status	Awaiting Trial	227	84.1
	Convicted	42	15.6
	Not indicated	1	.4
	Total	270	100.0

*NCE means National Certificate Examination

The data collected showed average age was 31.02±8.74 years and 145 (53.7%) of them were singles while 121 (44.8%) were married with four (1.5%) who did not indicate their marital status. More than half, that is 153 (56.7%), have had secondary education with a few others having either tertiary education in addition, or only primary school education.

Additionally, taking a cumulative of those whose parents used substances, the data show 143 (53%) of them had one of their parents using psychoactive substances. This could negatively influence parental training. In addition, more than half of them reported their parents had separated from or divorced each other. Cumulatively, 204 (79.2%) have lost one or both parents whether before or after separation/divorce. This also could have negative parenting impact. Moreover, about 107 (40.0%) of them have lost one or both parents before age 19 years and 23 (8.5%) reported they did not know their age when they lost one or both parents.

The results of inferential tests of the hypotheses stated are presented in the following section:

Table 2: Showing Childhood Traumas as Predictors of Psychopathic Behaviour using Linear Regression

Childhood Traumas	β	t	Sig.	R	R ² (%)	F	Sig.
General traumas	-.036	-.32	.748				
Physical abuse	-.047	-.49	.621	.180	0.032 (3.2)	2.18	.072
Emotional abuse	-.117	-1.34	.180				
Sexual abuse	.240	2.63	.009				

First, the combined relationship of general traumas, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse accounted for 3.2% of the total variance of psychopathy and did not show statistical significance [$R^2 = 0.032$, $F = 2.18$, $p > .05$]. In terms of independent contributions, only sexual abuse as a component of childhood traumas showed significant prediction of psychopathic behaviour [$t = 2.64$, $p < .01$, $\beta = .24$]. It shows that higher scores on childhood sexual abuse predicted higher tendency of psychopathic behaviours among the inmates. Table 3 shows results for the second hypothesis testing.

Table 3: Showing Parental Attachment Qualities of Trust, Communication, and Alienation on Psychopathy using Linear Regression

Parental Attachment Quality	β	t	Sig.	R	R ² (%)	F	Sig.
Trust	-.028	.335	.738				
Communication	-.040	.481	.631	.184	0.034 (3.4)	3.08	.028
Alienation	-.192	3.013	.003				

Table 3 shows that parental attachment of trust, communication, and alienation jointly accounted for 3.4% proportion of psychopathic behaviour and is statistically significant [$R^2 = .034$, $F = 3.08$, $p < .05$]. However, in terms of individual contributions, only parental alienation significantly predicted psychopathic behaviours [$\beta = -.192$, $t = 3.013$, $p < .005$]. Table 4 shows result for the third hypothesis.

Table 4: Showing Perceived Parenting Styles as Predictors of Psychopathic Behaviour using Linear Regression

Parenting Styles	β	t	Sig.	R	R ² (%)	F	Sig.
Responsiveness	.030	.47	.635				
Autonomy-granting	.259	3.64	.000	.308	0.095 (9.5)	8.91	.001
Demandingness	.064	.90	.367				

Table 4 shows the combined relationship of responsiveness, autonomy-granting, and demandingness accounted for 9.5% of the total variance of psychopathic behaviour among the inmates and is statistically significant [$R^2 = .308$, $F = 8.91$, $p < .001$]. Among the parenting styles, autonomy-granting is the significant predictor of psychopathic behaviour [$\beta = .26$, $t = 3.64$, $p < .001$]. The implication of this is that more of parental granting of autonomy predicts more tendency of psychopathic behaviours.

7.1 DISCUSSION

Data from the present study showed that childhood experience of sexual abuse could increase the tendency of psychopathic behaviour in adult life. Previous research reports have also stated that childhood traumatic experiences could have significant impacts on psychopathology including those of externalising behaviours in adulthood life (McLaughlin, DeCross, Jovanovic, & Tottenham, 2019; Heirigs, 2020).

The findings of the present study showed that parental alienation could lead to more tendency of psychopathic behaviour. Attachment in early life fosters good nurturing, but when it fractures, it could have negative implications for moral, emotional, and behavioural development. Gauthier (2014) reported that maternal warmth/neglect moderate the main effects of childhood abuse on antisocial behaviour, implying that the tendency for psychopathy is narrowed or widened the more, depending on whether the mother is warm in her relationship or neglectful. Further studies stated that offenders' parent-child attachment relationships were often dominated by affectionless control, reflecting low parental care (McKillop, Smallbone, Wortley, and Andjic, 2012; Frodi, Dernevik, Sepa, Philipson, & Bragesjo, 2010).

One more fundamental factor is how children perceive the parenting styles of their parents. Autonomy-granting parenting style has been shown as a significant predictor of psychopathic behaviour in this study. Whether the parents are perceived to be autonomous-granting, emotionally responsive, or demanding, the kind of person the child becomes later hinges to a good extent on the parenting qualities they experience. Previous literature findings have shown parenting practices have impact on general criminogenic thinking as well as specific types of criminogenic styles (Gonzalez, Mandrachchia, Nicholson, and Dahlen, 2013). Mensah & Kuranchie (2013) reported that authoritative parenting based on reasoning, understanding, consensus and trust resulted in pro-social behaviour while authoritarian parenting based on strict rules, force, threat, verbal and physical punishments resulted in anti-social behaviour.

8. RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

Based on study, it is recommended that education about fundamental factors such as parenting styles, attachment quality and possible childhood abuses should be an integral part of various wide sensitization and awareness campaigns by governments and non-governmental organisations, in their efforts to tackle antisocial behaviours and crimes in the society.

In conclusion, psychopathic behaviours develop gradually and an individual may become prone to exhibit them when there is exposure to autonomy-granting parenting, parental alienation and possible childhood abusive experiences. .

REFERENCES

- Armsden, G., and Greenberg, M.T. (2009). Inventory of parent and peer attachment (IPPA). Department of psychology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-1252. Retrieved from <http://prevention.psu.edu/pubs/documents/IPPAmanual0809.pdf>
- Bermes, M.S. (2013). Childhood predictors in the severity of combat related posttraumatic stress disorder among veterans with combat related exposure. PhD Dissertation, College of Health and Public Affairs, University of Central Florida. Retrieved from: http://etd.fcla.edu/CF/CFE0004815/Final_copy_6_w_minor_edits.pdf on 18 August, 2014.
- Bremner, (2004). Early trauma inventory self-report short form (ETISR-SF). Retrieved from: <http://www.psychiatry.emory.edu/documents/research/ETISR-SF%20Adult%20traumas.pdf>
- Darling, N., and Toyokawa, T. (1997). Construction and validation of the parenting style style inventory. USA: Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Pennsylvania State University. Retrieved from <http://www.oberlin.edu/faculty/ndarling/lab/psiii.pdf>
- Evertsson, H., Meehan, A., (2012). Genetics and environmental influences on psychopathic personality traits: A meta-analytic review. <https://diva-portal.org>
- Frazier, A., Ferreira, P.A., & Gonzeles, J.E. (2019). Born this way? A review of neurobiological and environmental evidence for the etiology of psychopathy. *Personality Neuroscience*, 2(e8): 1 – 16. DOI: 10.1017/pen.2019.7
- Frodi, A., Dernevik, M. Sepa, A., Philipson, J., Bragesjo, M. (2001). Current attachment representations of incarcerated offenders varying in degree of psychopathy. *Attachment and Human Development*, 3(3): 269 – 283.

- Gauthier, N. (2014). Psychopathy and antisocial behaviour: the moderating effects of maternal neglect and warmth. MSc Thesis submitted to the Department of Psychology, Brock University, Ontario.
- Gonzalez, R., Mandracchia, J.T., Dahlen, E. (2014). Exploring parenting as a predictor of criminogenic thinking in college students. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 58(9): 1081 – 1100.
- Gullone, E. and Robinson, K (2005). The inventory of parent and peer attachment – revised (IPPA-R) for children: A psychometric investigation. *Clin. Psychol. Psychother.*, 12, 67–79 (2005)
- Heirigs, M.H. (2020). Psychopathy, adverse childhood experiences, and antisocial behaviour. Graduate Theses and Dissertations: 17932. Retrieved at <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/117932>
- Ikpuvwie, E.J., Akinyede, J.O., Tohozin, C.A.B., & Toko, M.I. (2021). Impacts of crime on socio-economic development. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 12(5): 71 – 81.
- Levenson, M. R., Kiehl, K. A., & Fitzpatrick, C. M. (1995). Assessing psychopathic attributes in a noninstitutionalized population. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68 (1), 151-158.
- McLaughlin, K.A., DeCross, S.N., Jovnovic, J., & Tottenham, N. (2019). Mechanisms linking childhood adversity with psychopathology: Learning as an intervention target. *Behav Res Ther.* 118: 101 – 109. DOI: 10.1016/j.brat.2019.04.008
- Mensah, M.K., and Kuranchie, A. (2013). Influence of parenting styles on the social development of children. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2(3): 123 – 130.
- Skeem, J.L., Polaschek, D.L.L, Patrick, C.J., and Lilienfeld, S.O. (2011). Psychopathic personality: Bridging the gap between scientific evidence and public policy. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 12(3): 95 – 162. DOI: 10.1177/1529100611426706 <https://pspi.sagepub.com>

Correspondence: Email: fasanuopeyemi@gmail.com