

The Mindful Psychopath: How Mindfulness Plays a Role in Psychopathy and Aggression

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Introduction:

The relationship between aggression and psychopathy has been extensively studied but other traits likely impact this relationship. The role of mindfulness in the relationship between psychopathy and aggression has not been thoroughly explored (Hyatt, Zeichner & Miller, 2019).

Mindfulness, the non-judgmental focus on present moment awareness, is associated with many positive changes in cognitive state. There is little research on mindfulness and psychopathy with some studies suggesting that while they are uncorrelated (Scavone, 2017), mindfulness may impact the relationship between psychopathy and aggression (Velotti, Garofalo, Aguanmo et al., 2016).

Aggression has been operationalized in research a number of ways. The Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire, a widely used instrument, divides aggression into four subconstructs: physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility (Buss & Perry, 1992). Physical aggression is defined by the urge to perform acts of violence. Verbal aggression is the tendency of an individual to express their resentment with others. Anger refers to irritating or frustrating thought patterns, and hostility reflects paranoia, jealousy, and a lack of trust. Psychopathy is often operationalized as facets of primary and secondary psychopathy.

The current study sought to test the impact of mindfulness on the relationship between psychopathy and aggression by exploring the relationship at different levels of trait mindfulness in a nonclinical sample.

Hypotheses:

- There will be a positive relationship between psychopathy and aggression
- Psychopathy will be less predictive of total aggression at higher levels of mindfulness
- The effect predicted in hypothesis two will be strongest for verbal and physical aggression

Methods:

- A sample of 350 students enrolled at a liberal arts college in upstate New York completed this anonymous survey using Qualtrics in a supervised lab setting.
- Participants completed the Levenson Psychopathy scale, the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness-Revised (CAMS-R) scale, and the Buss Perry Aggression scale
- The correlation between aggression and psychopathy was calculated for participants in the highest and lowest quartiles of mindfulness
- The Fisher's r to Z transformation was used to assess the significance of difference between correlations

Results:

Relationship between Psychopathy and Aggression for High and Low Mindful Participants

	High Mindfulness	Low Mindfulness	Significantly Different
Aggression Total	0.39 **	0.51 **	
Verbal Aggression	0.24	0.43 **	✓
Physical Aggression	0.46 **	0.48 **	
Hostility	0.07	0.33 **	✓
Anger	0.36**	0.39**	

**Correlation is significant at the 0.006 level (2-tailed) Bonferroni Correction

- Total Psychopathy and total Aggression scores were positively correlated, $r(330) = 0.52, p < 0.01$.
- Psychopathy was significantly more related to verbal aggression for low mindful participants than for high mindful participants, ($Z = 1.38, p < 0.05$.)
- Psychopathy was significantly more related to hostility for low mindful participants than for high mindful participants, ($Z = 1.75, p < 0.05$.)
- Levels of mindfulness did not impact the strength of the relationship between psychopathy and physical aggression or between psychopathy and hostility

Discussion:

- Our first hypothesis was supported as total aggression and psychopathy were significantly positively correlated, replicating prior findings.
- Hypothesis two was not supported as the relationships between total aggression and psychopathy at differing levels of mindfulness were not significantly different.
- Higher mindfulness depressed the relationship between verbal aggression and psychopathy but also between hostility and psychopathy, partially supporting hypothesis three.
- Apparently those high in both psychopathy and mindfulness may be able to regulate their verbal aggression better than those with high psychopathy and low mindfulness.
- Also mindfulness allows those who have psychopathic hostility to let go from maladaptive internal ruminations that include negative comparisons with others, paranoia, and jealousy.
- Levels of mindfulness did not impact the relationship between psychopathy and physical aggression or between psychopathy and anger.
- This may be because of the low variability of physical aggression reported in this sample.
- Facets of psychopathy are expressed differently depending on the individual differences in mindfulness.
- Results suggest that practices which enhance mindfulness skills may be beneficial those high in trait psychopathy.

References:

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