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Psychopathy and Insight Within an Incarcerated Population

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PSYCHOPATHY AND INSIGHT WITHIN AN INCARCERATED POPULATION

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Psychology, Clinical

By

Courtney Steinorth

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ABSTRACT

The clinical construct of psychopathy has been researched extensively relative to incarceration. Cognitive insight has shown to be related to prognosis and treatment outcomes with severe psychopathologies. There has been, however, limited research on both psychopathy and cognitive insight in relation to incarceration. The purpose of the present study was to examine the moderation of cognitive insight levels on rates of incarceration (the number of times someone has been incarcerated in a government detention facility) based on their level of self-reported psychopathic traits. A brief demographic questionnaire, the Beck Cognitive Insight Scale, and the Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale were administered to and collected from 34 current inmates at a local county jail. The results were analyzed by conducting a multiple linear regression via JASP Statistical software. The results suggest that cognitive insight does not significantly moderate the relationship between psychopathy and rates of incarceration. With these findings, further research is recommended to garner a deeper understanding of which factors impact psychopathy and rates of incarceration.

KEYWORDS: psychopathy, incarceration, cognitive insight, adult, jail, psychopathic traits, detention

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INTRODUCTION

The link between psychopathy and incarceration is well established. Similarly, cognitive insight has been linked to more severe psychopathology and poorer prognoses. However, an area that has been researched considerably less is the relationship between psychopathy, cognitive insight, and incarceration. Psychopathic traits are characterized by a lack of emotions and impulse control. Cognitive insight is one's awareness of their psychopathology and the severity of it. This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the connections between a person's psychopathic traits, their level of cognitive insight into those behaviors and tendencies, and whether a person's cognitive insight is related to their frequency of being incarcerated. Incarceration–for the purpose of this study–denotes a legal detainment or arrest that lasted longer than 48 hours.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychopathy, Violence, and Offending

One widely researched characteristic of offenders is their traits of psychopathy. Psychopathy offers insight into which type of people offend, and how violence and impulsivity can be related to psychopathy (Heilbrun 1979). Hare (1998) elucidates that psychopathy may be the single most important clinical construct within the criminal justice system. Psychopathic tendencies and characteristics have been extensively researched among offender populations (Swogger et al. 2010; Walsh et al. 2004; Walsh et al. 2009). These studies presented results on how those who were offenders reported higher rates of psychopathic traits and were more likely to engage in violent behavior. The studies were conducted using incarcerated male and female, county jail inmates, over the age of 18, who were similar in composition to my proposed population. In addition, Brandt et al. (1997) found that among 130 male, adolescent offenders, the base rate of psychopathy may be as high as 37%. With rates potentially being this high in an adolescent population, the current study is expecting to see psychopathic traits exist at a similar or higher level in the adult incarcerated population.

Research has demonstrated that psychopathic individuals consistently exhibit traits that show a lack of emotional reactivity and inhibition control. Psychopathy is manifested behaviorally as being unable to resist or control impulses, along with being unable to have basic emotional reactions where they are socially warranted (Patrick et al. 2009). As one popular conceptualization by Patrick et al. (2009) suggests, psychopathy exists as a dimensional trait. Particularly, they propose a triarchic model that consists of three main factors: boldness, meanness, and disinhibition. Disinhibition regards lack of impulse control, boldness refers to

social dominance or manipulation and emotional resiliency, and meanness relates to aggression without regard to others' safety or wellbeing. This conceptualization encompasses the same underlying concepts and traits of Levenson et al.'s (1995a) self-report scale for psychopathy. Overall, psychopathy relates to behavioral disinhibition, lack of emotional reactivity, and lack of social regard to others' wellbeing.

It should be noted that Levenson et al. (1995a) distinguishes the difference between exhibiting antisocial personality traits and psychopathy. People can exhibit antisocial characteristics but not meet full criterion to be considered psychopathic. This is important to the research question because the current study is looking at rates of sub-threshold psychopathic traits among an incarcerated population, but not whether these participants meet criterion to be considered psychopathic or diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder (antisocial personality disorder is regarded as the closest clinical diagnosis to psychopathy in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5th Edition-Text Revision). Levenson et al. (1995b) assessed psychopathic attributes in a non-incarcerated population. Their results also support the idea of psychopathy being a continuous dimension. The scale they used for measuring psychopathy suggested that the strongest predictors of psychopathic action are primary and secondary psychopathy, social disinhibition, and sex. This scale was later recognized as the Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy scale (Levenson et al. 1995a).

Insight in Populations with Severe Mental Illness and Personality Disorders

Andrews et al. (2006) suggest that psychopathy was one of the top four psychological predictors of recidivism among offenders. However, Walters (2012) points out that many of these results have been achieved by using the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) and not

explored by using self-report psychopathy scales.. With many possible factors such as job attainment and relationship stability being possible indicators of incarceration, the current study wants to explore another internal facet that may be contributing to the incarceration of offenders: cognitive insight. There is substantial research studying cognitive insight in those who have severe psychopathology, such as psychosis, schizophrenia, and personality disorders (David 1990; Sleep et al. 2019); however, considerably less research has been conducted to examine levels of cognitive insight in person's who have sub-threshold levels of psychopathic traits and are incarcerated.

Cognitive insight, as defined in the context of psychiatry, is the ability of someone to recognize and understand that they are experiencing psychopathological symptoms or have a mental disorder (David 1990). Previous research by Williams and Collins (2002) suggests that poor cognitive insight is related to severe mental illness and psychopathology. Their research found that severity of symptoms and engulfment (the extent to which a person identifies with the patient role) were significantly negatively associated with cognitive insight. The current study questions lie with discovering whether those who are incarcerated tend to have lower levels of cognitive insight and higher levels of psychopathology when compared to the general population.

Goldberg et al. (2001) discussed how impairment in cognitive insight was related to lower medical compliance, increased rates of substance use, and decreased ratings of social skills overall. These correlates of poor cognitive insight led to the hypothesis that people, who exhibit more psychopathic traits and possess low levels of cognitive insight, are engaging in behaviors that will result in them being incarcerated more frequently. In patients with schizophrenia, Lincoln et al. (2007) found that as cognitive insight increased, symptoms of schizophrenia

decreased. In addition, lower cognitive insight is related to higher symptom levels during treatment. In a study conducted by Sleep et al. (2019), cognitive insight was present at a normative degree in participants who had personality disorders. Their results suggested that while these participants rated their pathological traits as more favorable, it was not in the sense that they viewed them as more positive or acceptable; rather, they seemed to be more neutral or "tolerable" to them than participants who did not have personality disorders. They merely rated them as less dislikable, not more likeable. This alludes that people with personality disorders have some degree of cognitive insight into the social constructs that these pathological traits are not desirable or likeable; however, more research is needed to examine whether this cognitive insight extends to themselves and their own exhibition of these pathological traits. In other words, is their cognitive insight internally focused or is it limited to outward, learned social norms of what traits are acceptable?

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the moderation of cognitive insight levels on psychopathic traits, and the rates of incarceration for male and female inmates at a county jail facility. More specifically, the current study was interested in the moderating effects of cognitive insight on someone who has higher levels of psychopathic traits, being incarcerated for their actions. The current study looked at this by measuring a person's self-reported level of insight, self-reported levels of psychopathic traits, and the frequency of being incarcerated. As previous studies have highlighted the importance of psychopathy and offending, and the impact cognitive insight has on psychopathology and prognoses, the importance of insight moderating

psychopathy was of particular importance to rates of incarceration. The specific hypotheses for this study are as follows:

- Psychopathy and insight interact to impact the rate of incarceration.
- Individuals with high levels of psychopathic traits and low levels of cognitive insight have higher rates of incarceration.
- Individuals with high levels of psychopathic traits and high levels of cognitive insight have lower rates of incarceration.

METHODS

Procedures

Site of Study. The present study took place at a large, midwestern county jail facility. The site of study has an average daily population of 980 inmates. Around one quarter of the population is female, and three quarters are male.

Participants. Participants of the incarcerated group consist of 34 inmates, who volunteered to complete the required study materials. One data set was discarded due to incompletion of the study materials. The sample was mainly representative of the overall inmate population in terms of sex, age, and race, but not in amount. There were 12 female and 22 male participants. Age of the participants ranged from 22 to 58. 22 participants were White, 4 were Black, 6 were Multiracial/Biracial, and 2 were Native American/Alaskan Native. Participation was voluntary and participants signed a consent form explaining the associated potential risks with the study.

Data Analysis. Table 1 lists descriptive statistics for variables examined in this study.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Psychopathy Score	Insight Score	Problem to Soc.	Times Incarcerated
Valid	34	34	34	34
Missing	2	2	2	2
Mean	49.500	7.824	4.147	9.529
Std. Deviation	11.250	7.461	2.595	10.872
Range	61.000	28.000	9.000	57.000
Minimum	29.000	-3.000	.000	1.000
Maximum	90.000	25.000	9.000	58.000

Hypotheses were investigated using correlations and a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted through JASP Statistics Software Version 0.17.1. Alpha was set as .05 for all inferential tests in this paper. Materials and data are available through email correspondance with the author.

Measures

Demographics: Brief demographics were collected by answering the following questions: “What is your identified race?”, “What is your biological sex?”, “What is your age?”, “How many times have you been incarcerated? Do not include arrests/detainments less than 48 hours (about 2 days).”, and “On a scale of 1-10 (1 being ‘no trouble’ and 10 being ‘a lot of trouble’) how much trouble would society think you are?” The term “Incarcerated” denotes a time spent in a detention facility or jail that lasted longer than 48 hours (about 2 days), as this is typically when most jail facilities will complete an official booking process. These demographics were gathered to identify key characteristics of the participants, including their rate of incarceration. This was necessary to be able to accurately compare participants along with seeing how insight may impact the frequency of incarceration.

Psychopathy. Psychopathy traits were measured by utilizing the Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy scale (LSRP) (Levenson et al. 1995a). This scale utilizes 26 items measuring two dimensions of psychopathy: primary and secondary. The first 16 items load onto the primary dimension and the last 10 items load onto the secondary dimension. The two dimensions and how the questions were constructed are detailed in the quote below:

> "The primary psychopathy items were created to assess a selfish, uncaring, and manipulative posture toward others, and the secondary psychopathy items were designed to assess impulsivity and a self-defeating lifestyle. The psychopathy items were constructed using an antisocial-desirability manipulation,which consisted of phrasing them in a way that does not signal disapproval of protrait endorsement" (Levenson et al. 1995a)

Each participant was asked to rate their agreement to each item, with some items reverse-scored to control for responses. Each item has 4 endorsement options: "disagree strongly," "disagree somewhat," "agree somewhat," and "agree strongly." With a minimum score of 26 and a maximum score 104, higher scores on both primary and secondary psychopathy scales indicate higher levels of psychopathic traits. Levenson et al. (1995b) found noninstitutionalized males had a mean, combined psychopathy score of 53.000.

Cognitive Insight. Cognitive insight levels were measured through the Beck Cognitive Insight Scale (BCIS; Beck et al. 2004). This scale consists of 15 items with 4 endorsement options: "disagree strongly," "disagree somewhat," "agree somewhat," and "agree strongly." Each participant was asked to rate their endorsement of each item. The BCIS consists of two subscales: 1) self-reflectiveness (nine items), which measures objectivity, self-reflection, and openness to feedback, and 2) self-certainty (six items), which measures over-confidence and mental flexibility. Cognitive insight is calculated using a composite index, with higher self-reflectiveness scores and lower self-certainty scores indicating greater cognitive insight. The proposed clinical cutoff scores for cognitive insight are as follows: Low: 3 or below, Moderate: 4 to 9, and High: 10 or above (Penney et al. 2019). The composite index score is computed by subtracting self-certainty scores from self-reflectiveness scores (Beck et al. 2004).

Data Collection. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board on April 10th, 2023 and received Approval #IRB-FY2023-351 (See Appendix). For the incarcerated

group, all instruments, including the consent form and demographic questionnaire, were distributed to the individual units, where inmates consented to participate by signing the consent form, filling out the scales, and submitting them back to the research team for scoring and analysis via the Health Service Request collection times (Health Service Request is the internal system for inmates to submit requests to the health department within the jail. The health department includes medical, dental, and mental health services.). The informed consent included information about the nature of the study (a study focusing on personality traits and being incarcerated), disclosed any benefits and risks, and provided contact information for the primary investigator if they were to have any questions or concerns regarding the study. Participants were deidentified using a numbering system and by not collecting names or classification information utilized by the jail. All information was uploaded and stored in a secure, encrypted folder within Microsoft OneDrive where access was restricted to the named researchers. The paper copies of the instruments were stored in a locked filing cabinet in a restricted access research lab. Scores for psychopathy traits and insight levels were calculated and compared with each participant's rate of incarceration (the number of times someone has been incarcerated in a government detention facility).

RESULTS

Since psychopathy is known to be higher in incarcerated populations (Brandt et al. 1997; Swogger et al. 2010), a multiple linear regression analysis and correlation were conducted to investigate whether cognitive insight could predict a person's rate of incarceration (the number of times someone has been incarcerated in a government detention facility) based on their reported level of psychopathic traits. The results of the regression indicated that the model accounted for 7 percent of the variance and that the model was not a significant predictor of a person's rate of incarceration, $F(3, 30) = .773$, $p = .519$. Upon further analysis, neither cognitive insight *(*$b = 1.733$*,* $p = .238$) psychopathic traits *(*$b = .264$, $p = .327$*),* nor the interaction between psychopathy and insight ($b = -.040$, $p = .187$) contributed significantly to the model. These results suggest that insight, psychopathy, and rates of incarceration are not significantly related, nor does insight moderate whether someone who has high levels of psychopathic traits will be incarcerated more frequently. Table 2 lists all correlations for the variables examined and Table 3 lists all coefficients for the variables examined.

Table 2. Correlations for variables examined

Variable		Psychopathy Score	Insight Score	Times Incarcerated
Psychopathy Score	Pearson's r	—		
	p-value	—		
Insight Score	Pearson's r	-.081	—	
	p-value	.649	—	
Times Incarcerated	Pearson's r	-4.955×10^{-4}	-.123	—
	p-value	.998	.489	—

Table 3. Coefficients for variables examined

Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p
H_0	(Intercept)	9.529	1.864		5.111	< .001
H_1	(Intercept)	-1.729	13.289		-.130	.897
	Psychopathy Score	.264	.265	.273	.996	.327
	Insight Score	1.733	1.439	1.190	1.204	.238
	Psychopathy Score ✻ Insight Score	-.040	.030	-1.342	-1.351	.187

Additionally, means for rate of psychopathy was found for both male and females. These means were comparable to the means that Levenson, et. al., (1995b) found in a noninstitutionalized population. For the incarcerated males, psychopathy levels (M = 50.909, SD = 11.174) were like the nonincarcerated males from Levenson, et. al.'s (1995b) study (M = 53.000, SD = 10.921). For incarcerated females, psychopathy levels (M = 46.917, SD = 11.405) were like nonincarcerated females from Levenson, et. al.'s (1995b) study (M = 46.704, SD = 10.243). Table 3 lists mean levels of psychopathic traits for both incarcerated males and females.

Table 4. Mean of psychopathic traits by sex

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Psychopathy Score	Male	22	50.909	11.174	2.382	.219
	Female	12	46.917	11.405	3.292	.243

DISCUSSION

Unlike previous literature (Brandt et al. 1997; Swogger et al. 2010; Walsh et al. 2004), psychopathy was not found to be significantly related to rate of incarceration.

It is important to note that psychopathy scores and insight together were negatively related to rate of incarceration, although not on a level that was statistically significant.

Insight on its own was not found to be significantly correlated to rate of incarceration either. One possibility for receiving these results could be due to the nature of the environment that the studied sample is in. As inmates are incarcerated for longer periods or over multiple times, cognitive insight may increase as a result of exposure to a culture which fosters taking responsibility for their actions and problems. As people become institutionalized, the subcultures that exist within the detention centers may emphasize insight and discourage psychopathic behaviors. Likewise, inmates may have experienced previous, negative consequences that are a result of them behaving psychopathically or expressing psychopathic thoughts or values. Conversely, inmates may be rewarded or praised by other inmates or authorities when they behave in ways that are socially acceptable or exhibiting positive change from their psychopathic behaviors. Both of these may have influenced a participant's responses on the LSRP and BCIS. This could have led to lower self-reported psychopathic traits and higher levels of cognitive insight. However, it may be that the LSRP scores were accurate, and rates of psychopathic traits were lower than previously predicted and comparative to a noninstitutionalized population. Also, since there were no direct benefits for completing the study, participants, who may have scored higher in primary psychopathy could have chosen not to participate in the study, thus creating an inaccurate reading of psychopathy among the sample population.

Data Limitations

While this study examined the connections between psychopathy, cognitive insight, and rates of incarceration, there were some limitations to the methodology and results produced in this study.

The sample size was small and may not be representative of the larger incarcerated population. The small sample size may contribute in part to the nonsignificant results that were found conducting this analysis. The final participation rate was a third of the total packets passed out and completed (33 out of 100). The environment and method for collecting the packets may have hindered some participants from returning their completed materials back to the investigators.

Desirable responding may have impacted the overall scores on psychopathic traits and cognitive insight. As the participants are actively in a detention facility and undergoing the legal process for receiving sentencing or plea bargains, they may not have wanted to respond in a way that would have them be negatively evaluated. This could have resulted in lower scores of psychopathic traits and higher scores of cognitive insight, whether it truly reflected how they felt about both constructs or not. Of course, if the respondents answered in a way that made them appear socially desirable versus how they honestly feel, the results would be impacted, and a true score would not be obtained. Despite being informed of how their participation would be completely anonymous, their results protected, and unable to be used against them in any legal proceedings, participants may still have felt a lack of trust or wariness towards responding in an honest and forthright manner in case it could be used against them or result in some negative consequence to them while they are undergoing a legal process.

Future Directions

For research in the future, it may be beneficial to expand upon the sample size and include a possible focus on the subconstruct of self-reflectiveness. Additionally, measures should be taken to ensure that the responding is done in a manner that best mitigates any risk or concern of responding in a way that the participants view as socially desirable.

If cognitive insight does not predict rates of incarceration in those with psychopathic traits, then other factors may warrant research. If a predictive factor for rate of incarceration in persons who have psychopathic characteristics is found, then there may be possible preventative measures that could be developed to help lower or reduce recidivism among the incarcerated population.

For the current study, since there were no significant results, reproducibility may be beneficial to give further credibility to the results found, especially with a study that resolves the presented limitations and methodology concerns.

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APPENDIX

Steinorth, Courtney A

From: do-not-reply@cayuse.com
Sent: Monday, April 10, 2023 6:19 PM
To: Steinorth, Courtney A; Deal, William P
Subject: IRB-FY2023-351 - Initial: Initial Approval

To:
William Deal
Psychology

RE: Notice of IRB Approval
Submission Type: Initial
Study #: IRB-FY2023-351
Study Title: Psychopathy and Insight Within an Incarcerated Population
Decision: Approved

Approval Date: April 9, 2023

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:
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Other Investigators: David Zimmerman, Amber Abernathy, Michael McGreevy

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