

# Impact of Parental Abuse during Childhood on the Formation of Primary and Secondary Psychopathy

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between psychopathy and parental abuse during early childhood. A total of 339 college students were evaluated to examine their psychopathic tendencies and were asked to report their childhood parental abuse experience. Partial correlation analyses showed a significant positive correlation between secondary psychopathy and physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. However, there was a lack of significant correlation between childhood parental abuse and primary psychopathy. Regression analysis demonstrated that factors such as emotional abuse and neglect were strong predictors of secondary psychopathy. This study suggests that childhood parental abuse is associated with secondary psychopathy, whereas such association is not observed with primary psychopathy.

**Keywords:** primary psychopathy, secondary psychopathy, childhood parental abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect

Psychopathy is regarded as a distinctive personality trait which is believed to be strongly related to criminal behavior. Psychopathic individuals show deficits in interpersonal relationships and seem to have unique affective processes. According to Poythress, Lilienfeld, and Skeem (2006), "Psychopathic individuals... have difficulty developing or sustaining meaningful attachments to others. They lack a normal range and depth of emotions and tend to be narcissistic and manipulative, at times even predatory." Due to psychopathic individuals' limited emotional range, they do not feel guilt or remorse for their wrongdoing. In other words, they *cannot* as opposed to *do not* empathize with others' pain. Therefore, researchers have been paying respectable attention to the characteristics and processes of crime, and neurological aspects and behaviors (e.g., antisociality and violence) of psychopathic

perpetrators in trying to address a set of questions: why do psychopathic individuals commit crimes, how are they different, and how do they become psychopathic? In order to develop an effective intervention program, it is important to understand the reasons why they become psychopathic.

Recent studies suggest psychopathy does in fact have two distinctive factors as opposed to traditional monistic perspective. They are distinguished as Primary and Secondary psychopathy due to their difference in affective traits, behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and characteristic developmental processes (e.g., Brinkely, Newman, Widiger & Lynam, 2004; Mokros et al., 2015; Skeem, Poythress, Edens, Lilienfeld, & Cale, 2003). However, this view on psychopathy is not a new phenomenon. It has already been suggested in Karpman's (1941, 1948) studies that both subgroups of psychopaths are characterized by irresponsible, antisocial, and hostile behaviors, but the motivations for their behaviors are different. He suggested that the primary psychopathy reflects problems of instinctive emotional organization, and the secondary psychopathy is a result from a neurosis caused by environmental influences that ultimately results in hostility and antisocial be-

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havior. Thus, he suggested that researchers have to consider parental rejection and harsh punishment within the individual's environment to evaluate secondary psychopathy. Similar research was conducted by Porter (1996) following Karpman's argument on heterogeneity of psychopathy. He accommodated Karpman's context to study psychopathy formation processes and suggested that characteristic problem of primary psychopathy is innate and congenital, whereas secondary psychopathy results from emotional disturbance after experiencing physical or sexual abuse. Many researchers have hypothesized that abuse contributes to decreased capacity to empathetically respond to negative events. Especially, childhood parental abuse may result in desensitization to painful experiences, which makes a child to be callous and disinterested in others' need for empathy (e.g., Weiler & Widom, 1996). In other words, a capacity to respond with empathy is turned off by desensitization coming from repeated childhood parental abuse (e.g., Porter, 1996).

In Korea, there are very limited studies regarding primary and secondary psychopathy and its differences. Kim and Park (2005) supported Karpman's argument saying that primary psychopathy and secondary psychopathy have different etiologies from studying adolescents with high psychopathy traits. They reported that primary psychopathy seems more related to external narcissism, low trait anxiety whereas secondary psychopathy appears to be more relevant to borderline personality traits, internal narcissism, and high trait anxiety, which can be triggered by dysfunctional environment. Hong et al. (2008) also reported similar results from a study of Korean college students; secondary psychopathy is more related to parental rejection, neglect and abuse.

Based on the studies above, we can assume that primary and secondary psychopathies have different formation processes. Assuming the secondary psychopathy was acquired and determined by early experiences with caregivers (e.g., parental rejection, neglect, and physical or sexual abuse), it is important to study the correlation between secondary psychopathy and putative environmental factors. However, follow up studies of Karpman (1941, 1948) and Porter (1996) are insufficient. There have only been a few studies focusing on the relationship between these environmental factors and antisocial personality, the meta construct of psychopathy. Studies suggested that parental rejection, neglect and

abuse are correlated with late-onset of antisocial behavior (e.g., Arduino, 2011, 2012; Craparo, Schimmenti, Caretti, 2013; Forth & Burke, 1998; Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Marshal & Cooke, 1995). In applying such results to psychopathy, it can be inferred that secondary psychopathy is related to the environmental problems, in particular, maladjusted parents' deviant care giving patterns.

Additionally, there is a study addressing the relationship between psychopathy and environmental factors using the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R). Weiler and Widom (1996) studied the relationship between psychopathy and childhood parental abuse or neglect experiences from a community sample. Participants with abuse or neglect experiences in their early childhood had significantly higher PCL-R score than those with less or none. This study suggests there is a correlation between psychopathy and early experience of abuse or neglect. However, the study did not make a distinction between primary and secondary psychopathy and each factors' relationship with early experiences of abuse.

In summary, psychopathy has long been considered untreatable and dangerous due to its association with high rates of violence. Considering the fact that primary and secondary psychopathy have different formation processes, it is important to separate the two factors of psychopathy to examine how individuals are influenced by abusive childhood experiences and identify variables responsible for secondary psychopathy development.

This study aims at understanding the formation process of psychopathic characteristics and is expected to help to develop prevention and intervention strategies for the psychopathic individuals. Therefore, it is expected that this finding will reveal the formation of psychopathic characteristics and will improve our ability to understand and develop implications for future prevention and treatment.

## Method

### Participants

Three hundred and fifty four undergraduate students in Korea volunteered to participate in our study. Students were asked to fill out self-report questionnaires. Among the 354, fifteen of the reports were inadequate; therefore the remaining 339 were used for

the analysis (56.3% female). The participants age ranged from 18 to 40 ( $M = 21.9, SD = 2.70$ ) and compensation was not given.

### Measure

The Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRPS; Levenson et al., 1995) consists of 26 items which was developed to measure interpersonal skills, affective traits and antisocial behaviors among community population from PCL-R (Psychology Checklist-Revised; Hare, 1991). The SRPS consists of two distinct domains; primary and secondary psychopathy. The primary psychopathy portion of the SRPS measures callous-unemotional traits and tendency to manipulate others. The secondary psychopathy portion measures impulsivity and antisocial behavior. These measures are proven to have high internal reliability and validity (Ross et al., 2007). The internal consistency ( $\alpha$ ) of this measure on this study was .78.

The Childhood Parental Abuse Scale (Kim, 2003) consists of 19 items to measure physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect in childhood. The internal consistency ( $\alpha$ ) of this measure on this study was .76.

## Results

Table 1 shows the relationship among physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, total abuse score, primary psychopathy and secondary psychopathy following the Bivariate Correlation analysis.

Psychopathy had a significant positive correlation in the level of .13 to .20 with childhood parental abuse. However, subordinate features of psychopathy showed different aspects. The primary psychopathy showed significant positive correlation with physical

abuse ( $r = .11, p < .05$ ), but it did not have significant correlation with parental abuse ( $.06 < r < .08$ ). However, parental abuse showed a significant positive correlation of  $.16 < r < .27$  with secondary psychopathy. Moreover, there was a higher correlation between secondary psychopathy and emotional abuse,  $r = .25, p < .001$ .

Partial correlation was conducted to find how primary psychopathy and parental abuse in childhood is related. After controlling the secondary psychopathy, the result showed that the value of the partial correlation is insignificant for physical and emotional abuse, neglect and total abuse score. Thus, primary psychopathy does not have a significant relation with the parental abuse during childhood ( $r = .06, ns$  with physical abuse;  $r = -.01, ns$  with emotional abuse;  $r = -.00, ns$  with neglect; and  $r = .01, ns$  with abuse in total). Physical abuse showed significant positive correlation with primary psychopathy, but partial correlation analysis did not produce any significant results. Primary psychopathy is assumed to be controlled on partial correlation.

The results of a partial correlation analysis between the secondary psychopathy and parental abuse during childhood after controlling the primary psychopathy showed a significant positive correlation,  $r = .13, p < .01$  with physical abuse;  $r = .24, p < .001$  with emotional abuse;  $r = .17, p < .01$  with neglect; and  $r = .25, p < .05$  with abuse in total. Thus, it is shown that parental abuse during childhood has a significant relation with the secondary psychopathy.

In order to explore how parental abuse during childhood has an impact on the formation of psychopathy, and if so, what factor creates a stronger influence. A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. We entered primary psychopathy into step 1 to con-

**Table 1.** Means (SD) and Correlations among Primary, Secondary Psychopathy, and Childhood Parental Abuse

	Physical abuse	Emotional abuse	Neglect	Abuse total	Primary psychopathy	Secondary psychopathy	Psychopathy total
Emotional abuse	.54***						
Neglect	.22***	.31***					
Abuse total	.68***	.85***	.72***				
Primary psychopathy	.11*	.08	.06	.10*			
Secondary psychopathy	.16**	.25***	.18***	.27***	.34***		
Psychopathy total	.16**	.18***	.13*	.20***	.89***	.73***	
Mean	7.66	8.47	7.58	23.71	34.34	21.54	55.88
S.D.	1.30	2.66	2.36	4.83	5.35	3.56	7.36

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 2.** Hierarchical Regression Results for the Prediction of Secondary Psychopathy

		B	B SE	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	F
Model1	Primary psychopathy	.223	.031	.335***	.112	51.216***
Model2	Primary psychopathy	.210	.030	.315***	.171	20.719***
	Physical abuse	.000	.149	.000		
	Emotional abuse	.260	.074	.194**		
	Neglect	.148	.072	.098*		

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

trol. In step 2, the subordinate factors of parental abuse during childhood such as physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect were set as an independent variable and secondary psychopathy was entered as a dependent variable.

The result of this analysis shows that in step 1, primary psychopathy predicted secondary psychopathy significantly ( $F(1,405) = 51.216$ ,  $\beta = .355$ ,  $t = 7.157$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In step 2, parental emotional abuse and neglect significantly predicted secondary psychopathy, except for childhood physical abuse, as shown in Table 2.

## Discussion

This study examined the formation processes of psychopathy which is known to be closely related to criminal behavior, especially the relationship between subordinate constructs of psychopathy and parental abuse in early childhood. Subordinate factors of parental abuse in early childhood including physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect were used to search for the strongest predictors of psychopathic personality. To figure out the relations between the psychopathy and childhood parental abuse, a partial correlation between the secondary psychopathy and physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and total abuse score was analyzed after controlling the primary psychopathy. The result showed that the emotional abuse, neglect and the secondary psychopathy have significant positive correlations. This finding is consistent with the previous research which argued parental abuse in early childhood has a close relationship with the formation of the secondary psychopathy, while it does not have significant relationship with the primary psychopathy (Forth & Burke, 1998; Karpman 1941, 1948; Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Marshall & Cooke, 1995; Porter, 1996).

According to Hong and Hyun (2008), a primary psychopathic

individual tends to be exploitative, dominant in interpersonal relationships, rarely feels fear, uses instrumental aggressive behavior, is goal-oriented, and is strategic to when achieving one's goal. On the contrary, the secondary psychopathic individual has high comorbidity with impulsivity, and substance abuse. Additionally, they use reactive aggression, are not strategic, and show high hostility with low socialization. In summary, the reasons for these problematic behaviors shown in primary and secondary psychopaths could be due to emotional and neurological deficits.

While the primary psychopathic individual was born with affective deficits, the secondary psychopathic individual shows posterior affective disturbances. This means that the primary psychopathy has innate neurological problem, and it seems that posterior environmental factors such as parental abuse during childhood do not affect the formation of psychopathic characteristics. However, it is assumed that the secondary psychopath experiences emotional disturbances, not from innate reasons, but from environmental reasons such as parental abuse in early childhood.

Thus, we examined what subordinate factors of parental abuse during childhood including physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect predict secondary psychopathy. After controlling primary psychopathy, hierarchical regression analysis was done with parental abuse during childhood including physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect as independent variables and secondary psychopathy as a dependent variable. The result showed that the emotional abuse and neglect from parental abuse during childhood significantly predicted secondary psychopathy. Among the factors above, the strongest predictor of secondary psychopathy was emotional abuse factor.

These results are consistent with the previous studies reporting the relationship between late-onset of antisocial behavior (e.g., meta construct of psychopathy) and parental abuse during child-

hood (Craparo et al., 2013; Forth & Burke, 1998; Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Marshall & Cooke, 1995; Mokros et al., 2015), but not consistent with Porter's (1996) argument that emotional problems of psychopathy results from physical or sexual abuse.

According to Spertus et al. (2003), the emotional abuse or neglect in childhood predicts unstable affections including depression in adults better than the physical abuse. Considering that the secondary psychopath experiences high level of emotional disturbances, it appears that the emotional abuse or neglect predicts secondary psychopathy better than physical or sexual abuse.

Whether psychopathy is a homogeneous construct or a heterogeneous construct has been a controversial issue in this field. This study supports that psychopathy is a heterogeneous construct, which is consistent with Brinkley et al. (2004) and Skeem et al. (2003), suggesting environment and parental abuse during childhood, has a different influence on the constructs of primary and secondary characteristics characters.

Implications from those results suggest some ways for prevention for psychopathy. Since the primary psychopathy comes from innate reasoning, such as neurological problem (Hong & Hyun, 2008), it seems hard to prevent it from occurring in advance. However, for those who experienced severe emotional abuse or neglect, the abused population can be prevented from developing secondary psychopathic characteristics.

One way to intervene for psychopathic characteristics based on this study is through psychotherapy. There are a few studies suggesting emotional abuse and neglect are closely related to emotional problems (Spertus et al., 2003). Karpman (1948) argued that the secondary psychopathy, stemming from emotional problems, can respond to psychological treatment. Therefore, developing psychotherapy for the secondary psychopathy is necessary for effective intervention.

Limitations of this study should be noted. Since participants were college students who function relatively well, we are not sure those results would be applied in the same manner to people with psychopathy. Thus, those results should be interpreted carefully and future research is needed to test validity of this study. Nevertheless, we considered college students appropriate as study participants since they are less likely to be influenced by other external factors (e.g., history of crime, diverse socioeconomic status)

compared to inmates.

In addition, childhood parental abuse appeared to predict secondary psychopathy significantly, but it was only less than 20%. Other than childhood parental abuse, variables related to secondary psychopathy need to be examined. According to Skeem et al. (2007), mental health related problems including anxiety are bigger for secondary psychopathy compared to primary psychopath and normal population. Therefore, further research should look for the relations between secondary psychopathy and emotional problems such as anxiety.

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