

Early Trauma and its Influence in Adult Male Psychopathy

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Review

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The factors that interact to drive the development of psychopathy are diverse. A genetic predisposition has been observed that, when coupled with the experience of traumatic events at a young age, potentiates the development of this behavioral and affective disorder that leads to aggressive and violent acts against society.

OBJECTIVES: To understand the incidence of traumatic events (e.g., stressful events, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse) and their influence in the psychopathy of adult male convicts.

PARTICIPANTS AND MATERIALS: Background criminal career reviews and semi-structured clinical interviews were conducted to classify the inmates according to their psychopathy level utilizing the Revised Hare Psychopathic Scale. In addition, the Early Trauma Inventory was applied to assess the frequency and diversity of events experienced before the participants were 18 years of age.

RESULTS: Inmates with high psychopathy also presented with a high incidence of traumatic events, as well as stressful events, emotional and sexual abuse in a higher frequency than the group with low psychopathy. The incidence of traumatic events and emotional abuse were found to predict the degree of psychopathy among the inmates.

CONCLUSIONS: Traumatic events experienced during infancy and adolescence seem to favor the manifestation of violent conduct by interacting with neurobiological factors that underlie psychopathy, such that an association may be observed between the frequency of childhood traumatic events and the level of psychopathy present in adult life.

Key words: adults, convicts, psychopathy, early trauma, violence

Heading words: criminal psychology, forensic psychology.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the origins of aggression and violent behavior in individuals who contemplate killing and torturing others have been a subject of study for neuroscientists. A complex interaction of genetic, neurobiological, sociocultural, and learning factors has been described in the development of conduct disorders, such as antisocial personality disorder and psychopathy.

Psychopathy is a personality disorder that exists in 1-3% of the general population and in 15-25% of the inmate population. It can involve violent reactive behavior conduct and/or premeditated acts, or acts of manipulation and superficial charm that may appear normal to achieve personal goals (Hare, 1991; Ostrosky-Solís, Ruíz, Arias & Vásquez, 2008). Emotionally, psychopaths are characterized by an inability to develop affective bonds or to experience normal feelings, especially those of empathy and guilt.

Different theories underscore the importance of psychosocial factors (e.g., living in a hostile environment, abuse and neglect as an infant) in the development of psychopathic personalities. In these theories, a genetic predisposition is potentiated by the environment, learning, and structural changes in cerebral areas during critical stages of cognitive and emotional development, leading to this conduct disorder.

Bandura (1986) emphasized the social factors involved and noted that individuals with a psychopathic personality emerge from homes characterized by negligence and parental indifference. He suggested that aggressive and violent behaviors are learned and serve as a defense strategy for coping with a hostile environment.

The biological perspective maintains that in some individuals, there is a predisposition toward developing psychopathic traits that may be potentiated by living in hostile environments. Genetic studies (Frazzetto, Di Lorenzo, Carola, Proietti, Sokolowska, Siracusano et al., 2007) have found a functional polymorphism leading to reduced

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3 expression of a monoamine oxidase A (MAOA) promoter gene, thus, increasing
4 catecholaminergic and indolaminergic transmission (specifically of dopamine,
5 norepinephrine and serotonin). In adult victims of child abuse or negligence, this
6 polymorphism appears to be associated with the manifestation of violent and antisocial
7 behaviors. It is worth noting that these aggressive behaviors are not observed in adults
8 with the same polymorphism but whose life circumstances were not traumatic. The
9 researchers concluded that this genetic predisposition increases the sensitivity of adults to
10 negative experiences, leading to the manifestation of aggressive behavior as a defense
11 mechanism.
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19 It has also been observed that the experience of traumatic events (TE) during critical
20 developmental stages directly affects the maturation of various cerebral structures and
21 essential neurobiological systems (De Bellis y Keshavan, 2003; De Bellis, Keshavan,
22 Frustaci, Shifflett, Iyengar, Beers, et al., 2002; Foley, Eaves, Wormley, Silberg,
23 Maes, Kuhn, et al., 2004). For example, the increase in cortisol, catecholamines, and
24 dopamine excretion present in situations of intense anxiety or chronic stress has
25 neurodegenerative effects on the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex, and can
26 lead to hyperactivity of the sympathetic nervous system, thereby increasing the propensity
27 toward aggressive behaviors.
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36 De Bellis (2005) notes that TE interfere in various ways with the development of the
37 prefrontal regions. For example, TE (i.e. stressful events and negligence) may affect the
38 projections this structure receives from the amygdala, while a lack of appropriate
39 stimulation during the first years of life, the abnormal increases in dopaminergic
40 transmission and the serotonergic deregulation may also affect prefrontal development. In
41 addition, it has been observed that the age of onset and duration of abuse have
42 detrimental effects in terms of damaging cerebral development (De Bellis, Baum,
43 Birmaher, Keshavan, Eccard, et al., 1999; De Bellis, Keshavan, Clark, Giedd,
44 Boeing, et al., 1999; De Bellis et al., 2003; De Bellis, 2005).
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3 Supporting these observations, studies using neuroimaging techniques have found that
4 individuals with high levels of psychopathy present reductions in some areas of prefrontal
5 grey matter (Blair, 2001; Blair, Peschhardt, Budhani , Mitchell & Pine, 2006) .
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7 Neuropsychological studies have revealed that individuals with a history of abuse,
8 antisocial personality disorder, and psychopathy who exhibit impulsive and premeditated
9 aggression have a deficient performance in tests related to the appropriate functioning of
10 the orbitofrontal and ventromedial cortex, mimicking the execution and damage observed
11 in patients with traumatic brain injury. In addition, autonomic deficits have been observed
12 in these patients, in which an inability to produce anticipatory autonomic responses
13 manifests in the election of risky options; in other words, these individuals show an inability
14 to “make good decisions”, contributing to impulsivity, rule-breaking and lack of
15 responsibility. These are features that the DSM-IV includes in the classification of
16 antisocial behavior (Lapierre, Braun & Hodgins, 1995; Anderson, Bechara,
17 Damasio, Granel & Damasio, 1999; Bechara, Damasio, Tranel & Damasio, 1997).
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19 Additionally, structural and metabolic changes have been found in the systems and neural
20 circuits crucial for the processing of emotions and aggression. A close association
21 between the degree of psychopathy and the volume and function of the amygdala has
22 been observed, in which individuals with higher levels of psychopathy exhibit a greater
23 reduction of the amygdala as well as hypoactivity during the processing of negative stimuli
24 (Raine, Lencz, Bihrlé, Lacasse & Colletti, 2000; Raine, 2002). It is thought that
25 changes in the function of this structure interfere directly with the process of socialization
26 by disrupting normal fear conditioning and instrumental learning, thus, inhibiting the
27 recognition of feelings of fear and sadness in others, and the ability to modify one’s actions
28 based on negative experiences, such as the observed insensibility to punishment (Blair,
29 2001; Blair, Peschhardt, Budhani , Mitchell & Pine, 2006).
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5 Raine (2001) found that adult victims of past child abuse exhibit a decrease in the activity
6 of the left hemisphere while performing tasks that involve working memory. However,
7 another group of violent individuals and victims of abuse in that study showed a reduction
8 in the right hemisphere in the same tasks, which was associated with deficits in emotional
9 processing (specifically, with conditioning to fear), the perception of pain, and the
10 recognition of anger and fear, in a way that contributed to the manifestation of violent
11 behaviors.
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18 The TE or adverse experiences are the occurrence of stressful events -- for example,
19 witnessing violent acts, accidents and deaths, and physical, emotional, or sexual abuse in
20 children and/or adolescents before the age of 18 (Luntz y Widom,1994; Johnson,
21 Cohen, Brown , Smailes, Bernstein, 1999; De Bellis, 2005). As proposed previously,
22 the development of violent, antisocial, delinquent, and psychopathic behaviors may be
23 potentiated via various mechanisms (Lang S, af Klinteberg B, Alm P-O, 2002; Luntz y
24 Widom, 1994; Krischer & Sevecke, 2008). Weiler and Widom (1996) argue that the TE
25 are directly correlated with psychopathy, which increases the manifestation of violent
26 behaviors. However, Lang et al. (2002) affirm that children with psychopathic traits (e.g.,
27 impulsivity, hyperactive and aggressive behaviors, and childhood disorders) are at a
28 higher risk of witnessing and suffering a greater number of violent acts, leading to violent
29 behaviors and, probably, a psychopathic personality. In a study of a reclusive population,
30 Krischer and Sevecke (2007) found that physical and emotional abuse contributed
31 significantly to the observed level of psychopathy.
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43 Given the importance of the TE as a factor associated with psychopathy, the objectives of
44 this study are: 1) to understand the influence of victimization on the level of psychopathy
45 observed in the inmate population; 2) to understand the difference across the various
46 types of TE in inmates with different levels of psychopathy; 3) to assess whether one type
47 of abuse can predict the level of psychopathy observed, and 4) to determine if differences
48 exist in the level of psychopathy between individuals that only witnessed violent acts vs.
49 those who were victims of violence as a direct punishment.
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58 MATERIALS AND METHODS

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Participants

Our sample consisted of 194 inmates in a male-only prison in Mexico City, including those residing in high security modules as well as other areas. Confidentiality and the use of all data for research purposes were guaranteed to all participants. Inmates with self-reported or documented histories of neurologic disorders, mental retardation, and psychopathic symptoms were excluded from the study.

Evaluation

Traumatic Events

The degree of abuse and/or neglect was obtained using the Early Trauma Inventory (ETI; Bremner, Vermetten & Mazure, 2000), an instrument of 56 variables that evaluates the frequency, impact, and age of individuals who experienced TE before the age 18 was employed. Each variable was assigned a value of 1 if an incident occurred at any time, 2-4 if it occurred on two or more occasions, and 0 if it never occurred.

The inventory is divided into four sub-scales:

-Stressful events (SE; 11 items) - includes events such as having experienced the death or murder of family and/or friends; having witnessed violent acts, intra-familial violence, or parental separation; having lived in foster homes; and having suffered accidents, hospitalizations, robberies, or deprivation of freedom.

-Physical abuse (PA; 5 items) - includes having been a victim of physical punishment, e.g., striking with the hands or objects, strangulation, burning, or having been locked in a closet or small space.

-Emotional abuse (EA; 3 items) - includes having been a victim of verbal abuse or threatened, having been ridiculed or treated with frivolity, and having been deprived of basic needs.

-Sexual abuse (SA; 7 items) - includes the experience of unwanted sexual events, e.g., touching or being touched by someone else, being watched or spied upon while without clothing, and being forced to watch or participate in sexual acts of any other type, including prostitution.

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3 The TE scale has a level of validity, reliability of retest, and internal consistency of 0.91
4 d.f.=9; $p \leq 0.00$; and $r = .55-.68$, respectively [26].
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8 ***Psychopathy***

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10 Case files related to criminal history were reviewed to classify the participants according to
11 their level of psychopathy. Also, a semi-structured interview that lasted approximately
12 three hours was conducted to obtain details about the criminal and other social, familial,
13 and occupational aspects of the participants' lives. Following this, and according to the
14 information gathered in the interview, the participants were classified according to the level
15 of psychopathy present using the Hare Psychopathy Scale-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003)
16 adapted for a Mexican population (Ostrosky-Solís, 2008). Based on this, participants with
17 a low level of psychopathy (LP) were classified as those who had a score of 0-19 points;
18 participants with a medium psychopathy (MP) with a score of 20-29 points; and
19 participants with high psychopathy (HP) with a score of ≥ 30 points.
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29 **Treatment of Data**

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31 To classify the TE incidence, a cutoff point was established wherein participants had to
32 obtain a score of ≥ 8 points to belong to the low victimization (LV) group and ≤ 8 points to
33 belong to the high victimization group.
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35 The ETI was divided between those items that relate to being a victim of abuse of directed
36 physical punishment (e.g., beating, strangling, insult, violation) and those that relate to
37 witnessing violent acts (e.g., deaths, accidents, assaults, divorces, intra-familial violence).
38 With this classification, 14 items pertained to direct abuse and 12 to indirect or "witnessed"
39 abuse.
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45 The degree of psychopathy was calculated using the three intervals established by Hare
46 [1]: low psychopathy, medium psychopathy, and high psychopathy. This resulted in
47 proportions of 48%, 29%, and 22%, which coincides with the percentage of psychopaths
48 that the author previously reported in the inmate population (15-25%).
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53 **Statistical Analysis**

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3 The statistical program SPSS (SPSS, Chicago, IL) was used to analyze the distributions to
4 determine whether the observed frequencies were lower or higher than those expected
5 from a random distribution model.
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8 To evaluate the difference between the TE among the different groups and the PCL-R
9 according to the level of victimization, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted
10 with a Bonferroni correction.
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13 Finally, a stepwise regression analysis was conducted, in which the totals from each
14 subscale and the total TE were evaluated as independent variables to establish if these
15 significantly contributed to the PCL-R score.
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20 RESULTS

21 The total sample consisted of 194 inmates convicted for different criminal offenses. Table
22 I presents the descriptive characteristics of the participants, classified according to their
23 level of psychopathy. Significant differences were found with regard to the age of the
24 inmates; those of medium and high psychopathy were, on average, younger ($F= 10.0$;
25 $p<0.00$).
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31 PLEASE ATTACH TABLE I
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34 A contingency table examining the relationship between the level of victimization and
35 degree of psychopathy shows significant associations [$X^2(2)=30.06$, $p<0.01$]. Inmates with a
36 high psychopathy level appeared more often in the high victimization group than expected,
37 while inmates with low levels of psychopathy appeared less often than expected in the
38 same group ($P<0.01$). Additionally, inmates with low psychopathy level appeared more often
39 than expected in the low victimization group ($P<0.01$). These results are presented in Table
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50 Significant differences were found in the total number of stressful events and the total
51 number of TE reported between the three groups, in terms of the variance analysis ($F= 2.3$,
52 $p\leq 0.01$; $F= 13.5$, $p\leq 0.01$). Significant differences were observed among the three groups
53 with regard to the total score for PA ($F=11$; $p\leq 0.00$). Additionally, differences were found
54 between the low and high psychopathy groups in the areas of EA and SA ($F=4.5$, $p\leq 0.01$;
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3 F=13.5 $p \leq 0.01$). In Table III, we present details about the variables and totals by scale
4 found to be significant across the groups, as well as the total score for the ETI by group.
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10 PLEASE ATTACH TABLE III

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17 A regression analysis revealed that total TE experienced during infancy and EA (lack of
18 basic needs) were variables that significantly affected the score and the level of
19 psychopathy of the participants ($r^2 = .23$, $p \leq 0.00$; $r^2 = .25$; $p \leq 0.01$).
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21 Finally, the variance analysis revealed that the medium and high psychopathy groups
22 witnessed more violent events than the group with low psychopathy ($F = 12.5$; $p \leq 0.04$).
23 Significant differences were observed in direct abuse between the low psychopathy and
24 high psychopathy groups ($F = 12.5$; $p \leq 0.04$).
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32 CONCLUSIONS

33 Our investigation evaluated the relationship between traumatic events experienced before
34 the age of 18 and the level of psychopathy in adult male criminal convicts. An association
35 was found between the experience of TE and the level of psychopathy of male inmates.
36 Similarly, it was observed that a greater percentage of inmates with high psychopathy
37 scores underwent significant victimization compared to inmates with low and medium
38 psychopathy scores. In particular, inmates with high psychopathy had experienced more
39 EA and SA than those with low psychopathy scores and had experienced more stressful
40 events than those with low and medium psychopathy scores. Also, the rates of PA were
41 significantly higher in inmates with medium and high psychopathy scores when compared
42 to the low psychopathy group.
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51 It is important to note that the regression analysis revealed that EA contributed significantly
52 to the total psychopathy score. We believe the lack of early affective emotional bonds with
53 caregivers (or other closely related people) at critical ages may have led to an inability to
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3 establish these bonds later in adult life, and as a result, the inability to experience feelings
4 of empathy and guilt observed in the most violent psychopaths.
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8 An important part of our study aimed to corroborate the origin and direction of the TE.
9 Specifically, we attempted to determine if individuals with psychopathic characteristics
10 were exposed to more “direct” abuse as a form of punishment for their behavior or if the
11 environment acted as an important mediator. As Lang et al. [23] observed, individuals with
12 the highest level of psychopathy also received the most intentional or direct abuse and the
13 groups with medium and high psychopathy scores witnessed the highest number of violent
14 acts. Based upon these results, we concluded that the TE originated as forms of
15 punishment for the behavioral disorders or infantile manifestations of psychopathic
16 characteristics. Undoubtedly, however, a hostile environment plagued with violence would
17 also potentiate the manifestation of these traits (i.e. violent acts as defense mechanisms).
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25 In this analysis, it can be observed that the frequency of all varieties of TE increases with
26 the level of psychopathy in the inmates. For this reason, we cannot deny the role of TE in
27 the development of this personality disorder, independently of the biological factors that
28 predispose it.
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33 We believe that the psychopathic personality is a complex personality that conforms to the
34 specific interaction of the previously mentioned components, accounting for its infrequent
35 occurrence in the general population. Individuals at risk, including those with low
36 expression of MAOA, who at critical ages live in hostile environments and who suffer
37 abuse as a result of their impulsive behavior are likely to have deficiencies in their cerebral
38 structure that in turn disrupts their emotional processes and their ability to socialize. As a
39 result of this chain of events, these individuals will learn antisocial behaviors as survival
40 strategies, thereby increasing their level of psychopathy.
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48 This type of studies is of increasing relevance as the number of individuals who harm
49 others using extreme violence and manipulation increases. The manifestation of such
50 personalities could be decreased by identifying the factors that influence their
51 development, especially within vulnerable groups. Interventions at an early age could also
52 decrease their manifestation. In this way, groups of children and adolescents who present
53 with impulsive and hyperactive behaviors and who are at risk for being victims of abuse
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3 and infantile negligence could be referred to early intervention programs to help prevent
4 the development of a psychopathic personality.
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34 **FIG. 1 TE (%) reported by Psychopathy Groups**

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36 ◇ **$p \leq 0.05$ Low Psychopathy vs Medium Psychopathy**
37 ✦ **$p \leq 0.05$ Medium Psychopathy vs High Psychopathy**
38 ☆ **$p \leq 0.05$ Low Psychopathy vs High Psychopathy**
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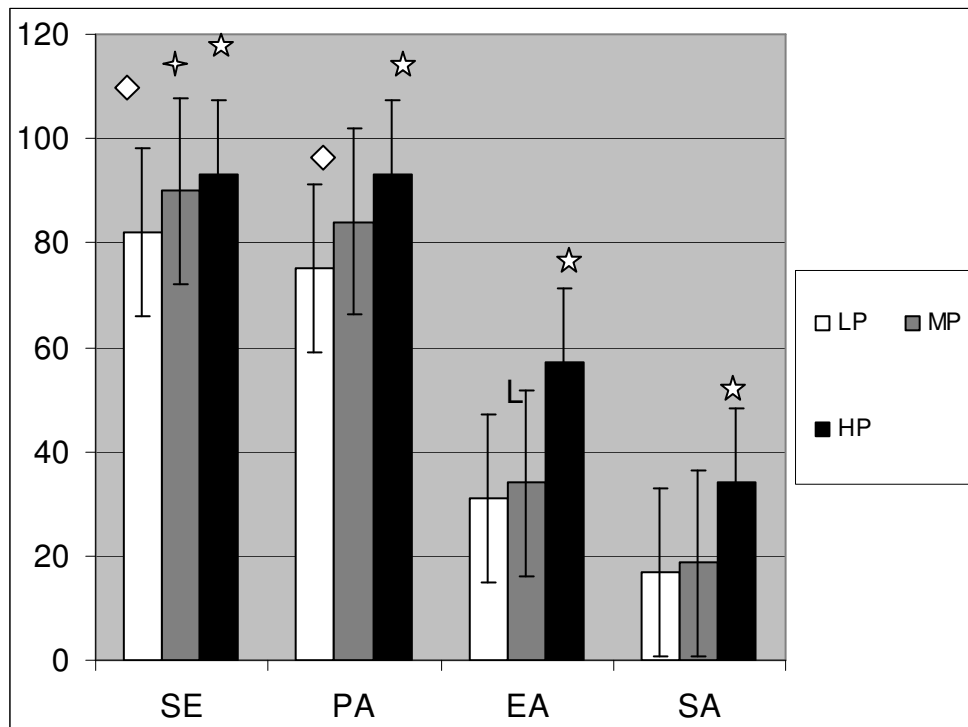


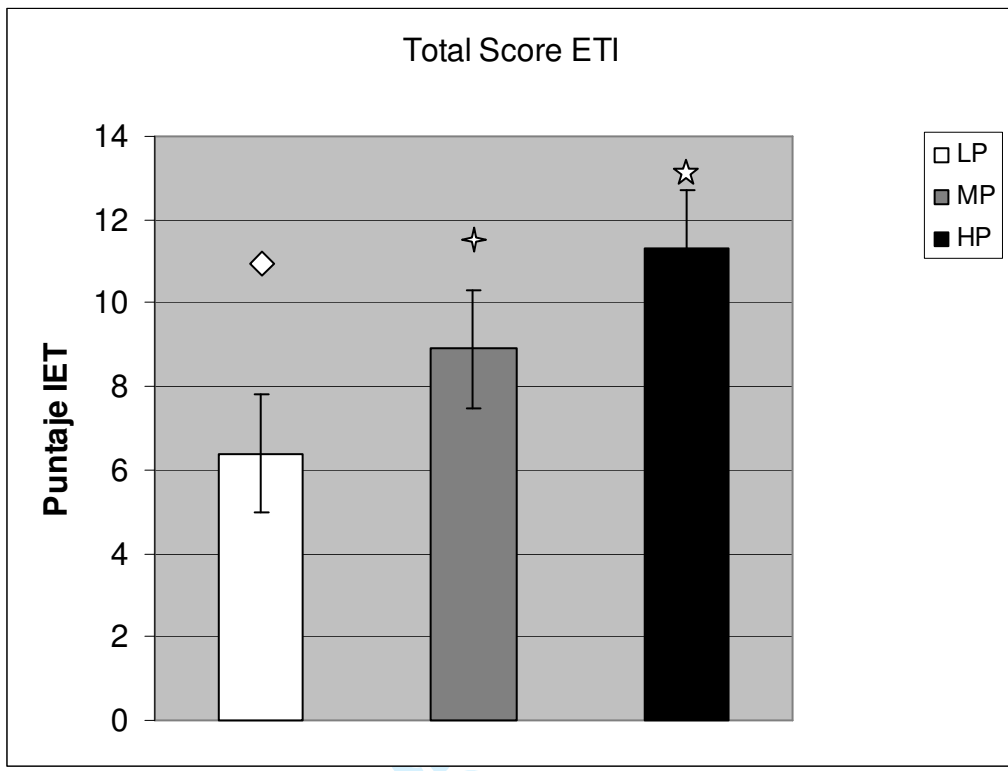
FIG. 2 Total scores of the ETI by Psychopathy Groups

◇ $p \leq 0.05$ Low Psychopathy vs Medium Psychopathy

☆ $p \leq 0.05$ Medium Psychopathy vs High Psychopathy

☆ $p \leq 0.05$ Low Psychopathy vs High Psychopathy

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Peer Review

Table I. Descriptives

	PSYCHOPATHY			F	p	Sig. Dif.
	Low N=94	Medium N=57	High N=43			
Age(years)	38.7 (10.6)	32.2(9.1)	32.6 (8.6)	10.9	*	LP vs MP LP vs HP
Education (years)	9.8 (3.8)	8.7 (2.8)	9.7 (3.6)			
Years of imprisonment	6.7 (4.4)	3.4 (1.9)	6.4 (3.8)			
Sentence (years)	22.1 (12.6)	17.2 (13)	14.3 (9.3)			
PCL-R	11(4.3)	24.7 (2.8)	32.4 (2)	679.4	*	LP vs MP LP vs HP

X(d.e.)

* $p \leq 0.01$

LP = Low Psychopathy; MP = Medium Psychopathy; HP = High Psychopathy

Table II. Frequencies (and expected frequencies) of Ss classified into groups of psychopathy according to the level of victimization.

	PSYCHOPATHY			n
	Low Psych. N=96	Medium Psych. N=59	High Psych. N=44	
LV ¹	66 (51.4) *	1 (31.1)	9 (23.5)*	106
HV ²	28 (42.6)	26 (25.9)	34(19.5)*	88

Total $X^2 = 30.06$

$p < 0.001$

¹ Low Victimization

² High Victimization

Table III. Early Trauma Events in Psychopathy Groups

STRESSFUL EVENTS	PB	PM	PA	F	p	Dif. Sig.
1. Accidents, injures	26%	49%	56%	9.9	0.00	LP vs HP
2. Illness / hospitalization	22%	36%	39%	4.3	0.01	LP vs HP
6. Death/Homicide of close friends	41%	63%	58%	8	0.03	LP vs HP LP vs MP
7. Violent acts, domestic violence	33%	44%	53%	2.3	0.00	LP vs HP
Total	3.4 (3.1) 82%	4.6 (3) 90%	6.2 (3.2) 93%	13.3	0.00	LP vs MP LP vs HP MP vs HP
PHYSICAL A.						
2. Slapped in the face	30%	46%	57%	5.6	0.00	LP vs HP
3. Kicked, choked, burned	17%	40%	48%	8.5	0.00	LP vs MP LP vs HP
4. Hit with objects	46%	63%	75%	5.6	0.00	LP vs HP
Total	75%	84%	93%	11	0.00	LP vs MP LP vs HP
EMOTIONAL A.						
1. Ridiculed, treated in a cold, uncaring way	31%	34%	57%	4.5	0.01	LP vs HP
SEXUAL A.						
3. Forced to watch sexual acts	2%	0%	11%	5.5	0.01	LP vs HP
TOTAL	16.9%	18.7	34%	13.5	0.04	LP vs HP
ETI TOTAL	6.4 (4.5)	8.9 (4)	11.3 (4.1)	19.1	0.00	LP vs MP LP vs HP MP vs HP

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