



Physical Anthropology Section - 2013

14 The Juvenile Psychopath: How Young Can We Diagnose Psychopathy and Is This Even Helpful or Ethical?

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The goal of this presentation is to offer insight into whether the diagnosis of psychopathy for juveniles can be made in light of the developing brain and normal behavior variations in childhood/adolescence. It will then discuss the arguments that favor early identification and treatment as well as those proposing that psychopathy is stable and unamenable to treatment. Finally, this presentation will discuss the ethical issues and implications.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by fully exploring the identification of psychopathy in children and/or adolescents as it relates to diagnosis, treatment, and ethical considerations.

Psychopathy refers to a clinical construct that includes a behavioral pattern marked with risk-taking, sensation-seeking, lack of remorse for misdeeds, absence of empathy, narcissism, lack of emotionality, problems with impulse control, and involvement of criminal activities. Looking at this definition, one can see that some of these behaviors are consistent with normal development in children and adolescents. Consequently, it may not be advisable to make a diagnosis of psychopathy for persons other than adults as several of its clinical constructs may be too common among adolescents and reflect a transient developmental state rather than a stable personality trait. However, there have been a few studies suggesting that for adolescents: psychopathy can be measured reliably, the diagnosis is the same as that for adults, and the clinical symptoms are stable across time. This presentation will examine these opposing views to help mental health clinicians decide if psychopathy should be diagnosed in children and adolescents.

Another issue to consider is whether early identification helps to decrease the risk of youth developing into adults involved in the criminal justice system. When looking at children and adolescents, the psychopathy construct may be helpful to differentiate "life-course persistent" from "adolescent limited" antisocial behavior. In theory, the importance of studying these traits will help to identify those persons who are more amenable to intervention and treatment. There have been some studies suggesting that early intervention and treatment is possible for certain components found in the psychopathy construct. Thus, intervention for these at-risk youth may be able to impede the possibility of them becoming further disturbed and engaging in more serious antisocial behaviors. However there is also evidence to show that psychopathy is stable and difficult to modify regardless of the age of the individual.

Finally, the ethical considerations of labeling a child/adolescent as a psychopath will be discussed. Taking into consideration its highly stigmatizing effect, the psychological, social, educational, and legal ramifications should be considered if a child carries this diagnosis.

Psychopath, Diagnosis, Ethics