

# *Unique Moral Judgements of Psychopathic Individuals*

Wenhui Zhao<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of History and Culture, Qufu Normal University, Qufu, 273165, China*

*a. eve1005@163.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Emotions are important in human moral judgment and behavioral decision making. In the case of psychopaths, emotional deficits due to low fear response and dysregulated control prevent them from feeling the consequences of wrong behaviors, and therefore they cannot fully understand social moral behaviors or internalize the public's social moral system. Thus psychopathic individuals have their own unique moral judgment system based on their emotional deficits.

**Keywords:** Psychopathy, Emotional deficits, Low fear, Moral judgement

## 1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by egocentricity, impulsivity, callousness, lack of self-blame and guilt, antisocial behavior, deceptiveness and manipulation in interpersonal relationships, and an inability to form warm emotional bonds with others [1-2]. Of these, lack of emotional empathy and lack of responsibility are often considered to be key personality traits in psychopaths and are referred to as callous-unemotional traits (CU). Whereas emotional deficits, especially low fear response and behavioral dysregulation are considered to be the core processes leading to the development of psychopathy [2-4]. The low reactivity and low emotional response of the amygdala leads to low sensitivity to punishment and emotional learning difficulties in psychopaths, and the resulting severe deficits in social-emotional and socialization skills, which may lead to some inappropriate antisocial behaviors.

Although there has been much research on the emotional deficits of psychopaths, there has been little research on the moral judgments that these individuals possess. Historically, psychopaths have been described as "moral monsters" [5], and lacking moral knowledge [2]. Some researchers have argued that the well-known emotional deficits of psychopaths are causally related to their moral knowledge, leading to morally inappropriate behavior [6-7]. This CU traits, and especially the lack of emotional empathy, leaves them without typical moral internalization and understanding of moral behavior; they do not experience wrongdoing emotionally [8].

Based on the above, this review explores the possibility that building on the emotional deficits of psychopaths, emotional deficits correspond to moral knowledge and may lead to psychopaths having their own unique system of moral judgement.

## 2. Psychopathic Personality Traits

Psychopaths have been described in a variety of ways. The first concept of psychopathy was developed by the American psychiatrist Hervey Cleckley in his book "The Mask of Reason". In this

book, psychopaths are described as seemingly normal, confident, intelligent, superficially attractive individuals who slowly reveal pathological problems such as an inability to learn from experience, unreliability, lack of empathy, and a general lack of emotion. Here, however, Cleckley does not mention antisocial behavior or delinquency associated with psychopaths. It was McCord and McCord (1964) and Robins (1966, 1978) who associated psychopathy with criminal behavior because they worked with criminal offenders, and therefore psychopathy was more often described by them as persistent cruelty, ruthlessness, and emotional indifference. The psychopaths observed by these authors, however, shared some emotional deficits with Cleckley's patients, both manifesting as transient, superficial emotions and behaviors lacking obvious motivation [9].

Therefore, although there are various perspectives on psychopathic personality traits, among them, CU traits are usually considered as the key personality traits of psychopaths, and this personality trait is mainly manifested emotionally by emotional deficits such as indifference to others, lack of empathy, lack of responsibility and guilt, and insensitivity to negative emotional processing, which are responsible for the inability of psychopaths to internalize understanding of moral behavior and to experience wrongdoing is the main reason for this. Whereas emotional deficits, inability to especially low fear response and behavioral dysregulation are considered to be the core processes leading to the development of psychopathy [2-4].

### **3. Emotional Deficiencies**

The core of psychopathy is difficult or abnormal emotional processing, and psychopaths are thought to lack the ability to feel emotions, such as fear, guilt, or anxiety [10-12]. Currently, there are two main models that attempt to explain why psychopaths exhibit mood disorders, these are the low fear model [13] and the response regulation model [14].

#### **3.1. The Low Fear Model**

The emotional and behavioral abnormalities of psychopaths reflect a core deficit of anxiety or fear [11]. Thus, in order for people to understand psychopathy, the low fear hypothesis was developed [15]. The low-fear model is that of being born with low fear, not feeling the emotion of fear when criticized or punished for doing something bad, and therefore not changing the bad behavior.

This hypothesis was tested in an experiment by using tones and electric shocks. Two tones, one normal and the other accompanied by electric shocks, were then tested by testing heart rate and electrical activity on the skin in response to individuals suffering from psychopathy, and the results showed that those suffering from psychopathy had similar heart rates to normal individuals, but did not respond strongly to the tones accompanied by electric shocks [15]. This shows that they do not feel fear and therefore they have not learned to fear certain things. Therefore, when they are punished, they do not learn from it.

This suggests that individuals or psychopaths may do bad things and be criticized or punished, but because psychopaths don't learn from fear, don't really feel the emotions, and don't learn from the punishment, their bad behavior doesn't eventually change.

#### **3.2. The Response Modulation Model**

The behavior of people with psychopathy is thought to reflect a core fear deficit that prevents these individuals from understanding the consequences of their actions. However, there is growing evidence that emotional deficits associated with psychopathy are modulated by attention. Joe Newman and colleagues have argued that response modulation plays a key role in mitigating emotional deficits associated with psychopathy [16]. The response modulation model refers to the idea that people with psychopathy have difficulty integrating many goals, that response modulation

deficits interfere with their ability to use secondary information to regulate their behavior, and that they have difficulty shifting their attention to the goal they should be focusing on.

The experiment to verify this model is the reward and punishment experiment. A set of numbers was given and divided into two groups, one with rewards and punishments, where numbers that should be responded to would be rewarded and numbers that should not be responded to would be punished, and the other with only punishments, where numbers that should be responded to would be punished if they were not responded to and numbers that should not be responded to would be punished. The results were obtained that psychopaths made more mistakes in the experiments with rewards and punishments, while in the experiments with only punishments, they made fewer mistakes when they focused only on the punishments [14].

This shows that psychopathic individuals are poorly regulated from their responses and they have difficulty shifting their goals or attention to information that is not related to the goal. This leads to difficulties in learning from their fears, in focusing on any cues that are not part of their goals, and ultimately to poor self-regulation or the ability to control their behavior completely.

Overall, psychopaths are believed to be unable to effectively understand the emotional aspects of meaning, and this emotional deficit may interfere with moral socialization, thus predisposing individuals to antisocial behavior [17].

#### **4. Emotional and Moral Judgments**

Emotions provide the basis for morality. While emotions by themselves do not produce much social behavior, as they are further combined with cognition, they produce some moral judgement. This typical moral emotion is thought to provide the motivation to "do good" and to avoid "doing bad"[18]. According to this view, emotional deficits correspond to moral knowledge, which, together with the deficits in self-control of the psychopaths, are likely to lead to morally inappropriate behavior [19]. As a whole, psychopaths exhibit a moral judgment system that is different from that of ordinary people.

##### **4.1. Moral Cognition**

Moral cognition can be divided into basic moral judgment and moral reasoning[20]. When researchers use moral dilemmas to test basic moral judgement, such as the typical tram dilemma where a train is about to head towards five people on the tracks and participants can flip a switch to make the train turn towards one person, the results show that psychopaths make the same basic moral judgments as non-psychopaths, meaning that psychopaths have the correct basic moral judgement. And at the same time, research has shown that psychopaths have a low moral reasoning capacity, meaning that they consider their behavior less serious, while also using cognitive distortions to rationalize their behavior [21]. For example, a perpetrator who robs someone of their money will distort their behavior to reason that "society is predatory and everyone is selfish." Some also believe that although psychopaths have normal moral perceptions, they do not care [22], meaning that psychopaths are able to cognitively distinguish between right and wrong, but are unable to internalize moral content and do not care about the consequences of immoral behavior.

##### **4.2. Moral Emotions**

Moral emotions have an evaluative function that conveys different information about various events, enables people to experience the feelings of others, and helps people to judge the moral value of different events [23]. In contrast, psychopathic individuals have difficulty in the process of emotional learning and are unable to correctly identify the emotions of others. It has also been shown that psychopaths seem to be able to understand the feelings of others[24-25], but lack the ability to feel emotions themselves[26-27]. That is, they know how they should feel after committing an immoral

act, but they do not experience it. Combined with the psychopaths' low sensitivity to punishment and their inability to understand the consequences of wrong actions, these can lead not only to problems such as inadequate socialization, but also to their inability to have the right moral emotions and to recognize the right moral values. This is also consistent with the previously mentioned emotional deficits of psychopaths such as lack of empathy and low fear of punishment[28]. And this lack of moral emotions can then lead to externalization of problematic behaviors[21], causing psychopaths to engage in some wrong behaviors.

### 4.3. Moral Decision Making

After perceiving different external information, emotions can help people react differently to different events in an appropriate manner [23]. Whereas psychopaths, although they have correct basic moral judgments of right and wrong, after realizing that their actions are morally wrong, they develop distorted perceptions to rationalize their actions and thus do not feel emotions such as guilt and fear, and therefore lack the necessary emotions to motivate them to act according to the correct moral code [21]. That is to say that psychopaths, although they have intact moral knowledge, they do not have the typical moral connotations due to deficient moral emotions, and are unable to be motivated by emotions to act appropriate moral behaviors.

## 5. Conclusion

This review of psychopathy research highlights the core features of emotional deficits in psychopaths and builds on the emotional deficits to examine the moral judgment system of psychopaths. Morality can be viewed as a multidimensional structure involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions[23]. Among these, emotions are the central driver in the moral judgment process. Moral emotions elicit responses to stimuli that drive their decision making judgments and behavioral responses based on cognition. However, although psychopathic individuals have correct basic moral judgments of right and wrong, their low moral reasoning ability, combined with emotional deficits due to difficulties in the emotional learning process and low sensitivity to punishment, determine that psychopaths have a different understanding of moral values and moral behaviors than normal people, and thus have a moral judgment system of their own.

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