

# Psychopathy, pain, and pain empathy: A psychophysiological study

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## Abstract

**Aims:** The present study examined whether people higher in psychopathy experienced less self-reported and psychophysiological pain than people lower in psychopathy. We also examined via self-reports and psychophysiological measures whether psychopathy affects empathy for others' pain. **Method:** Three hundred and sixty-nine students (18-78 years;  $M = 26$ ,  $SD = 9.34$ ) were screened for psychopathic traits, and stratified sampling was used to recruit 49 adults residing in the highest ( $n = 23$ ) and lowest ( $n = 26$ ) 20% of the psychopathy spectrum. Using skin conductance response (SCR) and self-report measures, participants responded to directly experienced pressure pain and observing others' pain images. **Results:** People higher in psychopathy self-reported feeling less physical pain compared to people lower in psychopathy, however, we did not find any differences in SCR to physical pain. High psychopathy group displayed lower SCR to viewing other people's pain compared to low psychopathy. Additionally, high psychopathy group self-reported less empathy to other people's pain compared to low psychopathy group. **Discussion:** Our results suggest that psychopathic traits relate to problems with empathising with others' pain as well as rating pain as feeling less intense. Additionally, a lack of awareness to ones' body sensations may underlie emotional impairments in psychopathy. We suggest psychopathy interventions for empathy should focus on recognising and empathising with pain.

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