

The Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale: Empirical data from a sample of employed adults in New Zealand

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Abstract

This brief report describes an exploratory study that sought to investigate scores on the “Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale” (LSRP; [1]) in a sample of employed adults in New Zealand. Descriptive statistics for the LSRP are reported and scores compared across two employed groups: professional and casual workers. Additionally, LSRP mean scale scores were contrasted with existing reported means from a random sample of volunteer, student, and incarcerated population studies in the USA. Most notably, current findings revealed that “casual workers” scored higher on both the LSRP scales than “professional workers”, while males scored higher than females on the LSRP (Primary) scale, but not the Secondary scale. Additionally, when contrasted with data from other studies, it was noted that the current sample of casual workers scored higher than student/volunteer comparison groups and at a similar level to (or higher) than incarcerated samples on both LSRP scales.

Key words: Corporate-psychopaths; LSRP; Personality; Psychopathy

Introduction

While there is a long standing literature regarding “normal” personality in the workplace [2], there is also a growing interest in “disordered” personalities at work – most notably, narcissism [3] and psychopathy [4- 6]. Subsequently, empirical research into disordered personalities in the workplace has begun. For example, research has found that UK business leaders and senior managers demonstrated similar levels of narcissism as a sample of patients in Broadmoor Special Hospital in the UK, and that the management sample actually profiled higher in histrionic personality [7]. Likewise, [8] found that histrionic personality positively predicted transformational leadership, while [9] found narcissism to be negatively related to (others’ reports) of leadership, and (unsurprisingly) positively related to self-reports of leadership. Additionally, in a study of management-level employees, [10] found there to be a curvilinear (i.e., an inverted U-shaped curve) relationship between multi-source leadership performance ratings and a composite variable comprising of scale scores reflecting anti-social, narcissistic, schizotypal and histrionic personality. This finding is particularly notable as it suggested that some degree of these more negatively-connotated traits may actually be necessary for “effective” performance – at least, to an extent [10]!

What is of particular concern though, is the recent popularization of the notion of the “corporate (or organizational) psychopath”, for which there is notable paucity in the empirical research. While there is general acceptance that psychopaths exist in all domains of life [11], it is still early days in the empirical study of psychopathy in the workplace. Subsequently, there is a need for research to be conducted within organizations in order to empirically validate the claims made about corporate and workplace psychopaths, given the possible consequences of such claims. This is illustrated by those concerned with issues of occupational health and safety who believe the labelling of psychopaths to be problematic [12]. One way in which to investigate psychopathy in the occupational context is to obtain data from psychometric scales of psychopathy. Additionally, despite [13] recommendation that further validity data on the LSRP be obtained from community samples, including labourers and white collar workers, this has not been forthcoming to date. Thus, the aim of the current study was to gather data specifically from a sample of employed individuals on the LSRP in New Zealand, and contrast these with findings from other study samples described in the research from the USA. By contrasting data in this manner, it provides an indication of psychopathy levels in the target samples.

Method

Participants

208 employed participants completed an on-line survey of the LSRP; however, due to missing data in some of the response sets, only 168 (74 males; 94 females) fully-completed surveys were included in subsequent data analyses. The mean age was 30.4 years ($SD = 10.32$). 122 of the sample were employed as “qualified professionals” working in New Zealand (e.g., lawyers, accountants, academics), while the remainder of the sample ($n = 46$) were “non-qualified” workers (call centre workers). Non-qualified workers were included as a sample of “casual” workers in order to balance the literature on white-collar workers/management and psychopathy.

Measures

The “Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale” (LSRP; [13]) is a 26 item self-report psychopathy scale that assesses both primary (interpersonal style/traits) and secondary (behavioral characteristics) psychopathy. The LSRP was designed to assess similar domains as [15] “Psychopathy Checklist” (PCL-R) [13], and has been shown to have generally acceptable validity and reliability [16]. The LSRP is a relatively short measure and as such is ideal for gathering data from occupational samples.

Procedure

Initially, participants were randomly selected using the New Zealand White Pages online, using a key word search, and invited to partake in the research via email. Additionally, the academic participants consisted of professors within the departments of the researchers’ university, while the call centre workers were all recruited from a large call centre in New Zealand. From there on, snowballing was used to further build up participant numbers. That is, participants were asked to send the email on to other adults employed within their occupational group. In the email there was a link to a secure website: “www.surveymonkey.com”, which took respondents directly to the survey comprising of a study information sheet, a basic demographic questionnaire and the LSRP. Completion of the survey was anonymous, therefore, proceeding beyond the participant information sheet constituted “consent” to take part in the study. This procedure was approved by the researcher’s University Human Participants Ethics Committee.

Results

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1 for the LSRP Primary and Secondary scales for the total sample, and also across professional grouping and gender. Gender was included in the analysis given previous findings of gender differences in scores on the LSRP [16]. A 2x2 MANOVA was performed in order to examine the observed differences on the two dependent variables (LSRP Primary and LSRP Secondary). The independent variables were profession (professional vs. casual) and gender (male vs. female). Multivariate tests revealed a main effect of both profession, $F(2, 163) = 9.14$; $p = .000$; Wilks’ $\lambda = .899$, and gender $F(2, 163) = 3.46$; $p = .034$; Wilks’ $\lambda = .959$; however, no significant interaction effect was revealed, $F(2, 163) = 0.60$; $p = .552$; Wilks’ $\lambda = .993$. Tests of between-participants effects revealed that on the LSRP (Primary) scale, the causal employee group scored significantly

higher than the professional employee group ($F = 7.67$; $p = .006$), and males scored significantly higher than females ($F = 5.21$; $p = .024$), while on the LSRP (Secondary) scale, the causal employee group scored significantly higher than the professional employee group ($F = 17.05$; $p = .000$), while there was no significant difference between males and females ($F = 0.6$; $p = .803$). Additionally, effect size differences were computed between mean scores from the current study data and mean scores from a random sample of reported studies from the USA, see Table 2. It can be seen that the current sample of casual employees scored higher on the LSRP (Primary) scale than three of the contrast groups (including an incarcerated sample), and at the same level on the LSRP (Secondary) scale as incarcerated samples and higher than student/volunteer samples. Meanwhile, the professional sample generally scored at similar levels on both LSRP scales as all the student/volunteer contrast groups, and lower than all the incarcerated samples.

Discussion

The current study was an exploratory investigation into psychopathy within a small sample of employed adults in New Zealand. Overall, the findings revealed some interesting results, most notably that the causal worker group scored higher than the professional worker group on both the LSRP scales, and that the causal workers’ mean LSRP scale scores were generally higher than student/volunteer study samples, and at a similar level to the incarcerated samples. Additionally, results revealed that males scored higher on the LSRP (Primary) scales than did females – consistent with previous findings [16].

These findings are of interest as much of the literature on organizational psychopaths has tended to focus on professional white-collar workers, yet by incorporating an analysis of casual worker data into the study, a wider perspective is obtained, with call centre workers demonstrating higher levels of psychopathy than is typically observed in “normal” samples and at similar levels to incarcerated samples. It is not clear as to why this should be. While there is research available regarding personality of call centre workers as a predictor of service performance [19], as far as we are aware, no data is currently available with reference to psychopathy. Rather than being reflective of a requirement for the job of a call centre worker, the current findings may reflect the personality of those taking up such a position, which may be temporary and a “quick fix” solution for income generation (e.g., for students). However, it is important to be careful in making any generalizations from this finding as this was a small scale study, which should only provide a basis for on-going research into psychopathy in the workplace. The hallmark of good exploratory research is the quality and quantity of questions that it raises. This research has raised numerous questions and clearly lays a foundation for future empirical research into organizational psychopathy.

With this call for further research, it is at this juncture worth noting [12] advocacy that the focus of research should be on “bullying” in the workplace, not psychopathy, as they believe that the labelling of “psychopaths” at work is counter-productive to research and practice into workplace bullying. While we do not necessarily disagree with their point, which

	Profession	Gender	n	Mean	SD	
LSRP (Primary) $\alpha = 0.86$	Professional	Male	46	30.61	6.48	
		Female	76	28.74	6.16	
		Total	122	29.44	6.32	
	Casual	Male	28	35.11	10.41	
		Female	18	31.22	5.99	
		Total	46	33.59	9.07	
	Combined	Male	74	32.31	8.41	
		Female	94	29.21	6.17	
	Total			168	30.58	7.39
	LSRP (Secondary) $\alpha = 0.70$	Professional	Male	46	18.94	4.66
Female			76	18.86	4.49	
Total			122	18.86	4.54	
Casual		Male	28	21.96	3.79	
		Female	18	22.44	5.22	
		Total	46	22.15	4.35	
Combined		Male	74	20.08	4.57	
		Female	94	19.54	4.82	
Total				168	19.78	4.71

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the LSRP scale scores across profession and gender, along with Cronbach's alpha (α) for total scale scores.

Current Study	Comparison Study	Sample	LRSP (Primary) Mean (SD) [d]	LRSP (Secondary) Mean (SD) [d]
168 male & female employees (New Zealand)			30.58 (7.39)	19.78 (4.71)
	Levenson et al. (1995)	487 male & female university students (USA)	29.13 (6.86) [d = 0.20]	19.32 (4.06) [d = 0.11] ¹
	Brinkley et al. (2001)	279 African-American male state prison inmates (USA)	34.08 (8.02) [d = -0.45]	21.17 (4.87) [d = -0.29]
	Brinkley et al. (2001)	270 Caucasian male state prison inmates (USA)	31.86 (8.22) [d = -0.16]	22.20 (5.18) [d = -0.49]
	Walters et al. (2008)	1,972 male & female federal prison inmates (USA)	28.70 (7.60) [d = 0.25]	21.10 (5.64) [d = -0.25]
	Glenn et al. (2009)	2,517 male & female adult volunteers (USA)	26.60 (7.54) [d = 0.53]	19.57 (4.92) [d = 0.04]
122 male & female professional employees (New Zealand)			29.44(6.32)	18.86 (4.54)
	Levenson et al. (1995)	487 male & female university students (USA)	29.13 (6.86) [d = 0.05]	19.32 (4.06) [d = -0.11]
	Brinkley et al. (2001)	279 African-American male state prison inmates (USA)	34.08 (8.02) [d = -0.64]	21.17 (4.87) [d = -0.49]
	Brinkley et al. (2001)	270 Caucasian male state prison inmates (USA)	31.86 (8.22) [d = -0.33]	22.20 (5.18) [d = -0.69]
	Walters et al. (2008)	1,972 male & female federal prison inmates (USA)	28.70 (7.60) [d = 0.12]	21.10 (5.64) [d = -0.44]
	Glenn et al. (2009)	2,517 male & female adult volunteers (USA)	26.60 (7.54) [d = 0.41]	19.57 (4.92) [d = -0.15]
46 male & female casual employees (New Zealand)			33.59 (9.07)	22.15 (4.35)
	Levenson et al. (1995)	487 male & female university students (USA)	29.13 (6.86) [d = 0.55]	19.32 (4.06) [d = 0.61]
	Brinkley et al. (2001)	279 African-American male state prison inmates (USA)	34.08 (8.02) [d = -0.06]	21.17 (4.87) [d = 0.21]
	Brinkley et al. (2001)	270 Caucasian male state prison inmates (USA)	31.86 (8.22) [d = 0.20]	22.20 (5.18) [d = -0.01]
	Walters et al. (2008)	1,972 male & female federal prison inmates (USA)	28.70 (7.60) [d = 0.58]	21.10 (5.64) [d = 0.21]
	Glenn et al. (2009)	2,517 male & female adult volunteers (USA)	26.60 (7.54) [d = 0.84]	19.57 (4.92) [d = 0.56]

¹ The d-value expresses the difference between the groups in standard deviation units, thus negates any artefacts caused by sample size differences. Effect sizes of .80 or greater can be considered to be large differences, those around .50 moderate, and those around .20 small [11]. Positive d-values indicate that the current sample scored higher. D-values at 0.4 are highlighted in bold for clarity.

Table 2: Means, standard deviations, and effect sizes [Cohen's d] between mean LSRP scores of current study and existing studies.

comes from an occupational health and safety perspective, we do believe however, that curtailing our research endeavours to just bullying behaviors in the workplace would be detrimental to the wider understanding of psychopathy at work. Such behaviors go beyond bullying, and there are a range of other counter-productive behaviors that need to be examined [20-22]. For example, the propensity towards deception and fraud raises some very critical corporate governance issues that simply cannot be ignored by clinical and organizational researchers. Additionally, while we would agree with [12] concerns regarding the “labelling” of psychopaths in the workplace, it is important to highlight that the wider research is converging on a consensus that psychopathy is a dimensional, rather than categorical, construct [23]. This is of advantage to those involved in the study of personality disorder in the workplace, [24] have pointed out, the dimensional view is concerned with the labelling of behaviors rather than the individual per se. Additionally, as [25] have suggested, taking a dimensional view should provide more hope for effective interventions with individuals with varying degrees of psychopathic personality and behavior – we would add to this, including in the workplace!

To conclude, following calls for further research into disordered personalities in the workplace [26], including on the LSRP [13], the current study reported data from the LSRP in a small sample of employed adults in New Zealand; samples from whom such specific data has not been typically obtained. Some interesting findings were observed, which make a small but useful contribution to the limited literature on psychopathy in the workplace and lay a foundation for on-going research.

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