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Fearless Dominance

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Synonyms

[Boldness](#); [Fearlessness](#); [Parmia](#)

Definition

Fearless dominance is a broad set of traits encompassing a lack of sensitivity to potential threat, physical and interpersonal boldness, social poise and persuasiveness, relative immunity to stressors, and emotional resilience. The relevance of fearless dominance to psychopathic personality has been a flash point of contention in the literature.

Introduction

Psychopathic personality (psychopathy) is a condition characterized by a distinctive constellation of interpersonal, affective, and behavioral features (Cleckley 1941/1988; Hare 1991/2003). Specifically, psychopathy is marked by superficial charm and poise conjoined with grandiose narcissism, callousness, guiltlessness, dishonesty,

manipulativeness, emotional detachment, and poor impulse control, among other traits. This combustible combination of traits places psychopathic individuals at heightened risk for antisocial and criminal behaviors, although such actions are not traditionally regarded as either necessary or sufficient indicators of psychopathy (Lilienfeld 1998). Nevertheless, the nature and boundaries of psychopathy, especially the relative roles of boldness and other potentially adaptive features in this condition, remain unclear.

The Role of Adaptive Features in Psychopathy

Over the past decade, scientific controversy has swirled around the question of whether psychopathy is a purely maladaptive condition or whether it is also marked by adaptive personality attributes (Lilienfeld et al. 2015b). Some authors maintain that psychopathy is by definition associated with unsuccessful outcomes, such as criminality and otherwise irresponsible behavior, so the very notion that psychopathy is tied to adaptive traits is conceptually incoherent (Lynam and Miller 2012). Others maintain that psychopathy is, by definition, a personality disorder and therefore cannot be associated with adaptive outcomes.

In contrast, other authors contend that psychopathy is inherently a hybrid condition marked by a paradoxical combination of superficial charm, poise, emotional resilience, and

venturesomeness on the outside but deep-seated affective disturbances and impulse control deficits on the inside. From this perspective, psychopathy is in part characterized by psychologically adaptive traits (Blonigen 2013), which provide afflicted individuals with a superficial veneer of normality. Furthermore, according to this view, psychopathy may be linked to at least some interpersonally successful outcomes, such as effective leadership, business accomplishments, and heroism (Lilienfeld et al. 2015b; Lykken 1995).

The Emergence and Conceptualization of Fearless Dominance

The construct of fearless dominance emerged from Lilienfeld's (1990) work on the construction of the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI), which has since been revised (now the Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised, or PPI-R). The PPI is a self-report inventory that was designed to detect the core personality traits of psychopathy. It contains eight subscales developed using a combination of deductive and factor analytic approaches: Machiavellian Egocentricity, Social Potency (now termed social influence in the PPI-R), Fearlessness, Coldheartedness, Stress Immunity, Carefree Nonplanfulness, Impulsive Nonconformity (now termed rebellious nonconformity in the PPI-R), and Blame Externalization (Lilienfeld and Andrews 1996). Higher-order factor analyses of these subscales by Lilienfeld (1990) pointed to three broad dimensions, one marked by low social and physical anxiety, one marked by impulse control deficits, and one marked by emotional detachment.

Subsequent work helped to clarify the nature of this first higher-order dimension. Specifically, research revealed that the PPI subscales of Social Potency, Fearlessness, and Stress Immunity tended to coalesce into a reasonably coherent higher-order dimension that Benning et al. (2003) dubbed "Fearless Dominance." This dimension appears to assess a lack of sensitivity to potential threat, physical and interpersonal boldness, social poise and persuasiveness, relative immunity to stressors, and emotional resilience.

Although the fearless dominance construct per se is relatively novel, clinical descriptions of

individuals with elevated levels of allied traits have a lengthy history in clinical psychology and psychiatry. For example, French psychologist Theodule Ribot (1839–1916) described the "active" personality type as comprising persons who are highly energetic, adventurous, spontaneous, and heroic (Crocq 2013). Personality psychologist Raymond Cattell (1905–1998), too, anticipated fearless dominance in his descriptions of "parmia," a personality dimension characterized by social boldness, venturesomeness, and equanimity (Cattell and Eber 1966). Later, Patrick et al. (2009) termed the disposition assessed by PPI Fearless Dominance "boldness" and contended that it reflects a relative threat insensitivity of the brain's defensive systems. They further contended that boldness may help to account for many of the adaptive correlates of psychopathy in everyday life, such as effective deception and short-term corporate success. In this respect, boldness may shed light on the contentious and still inadequately researched construct of "successful psychopathy" (Hall and Benning 2006).

Fearless Dominance: Correlates and Behavioral Implications

The correlates of PPI/PPI-R fearless dominance have been the subject of numerous investigations. In the personality domain, fearless dominance is consistently associated with several traits in the widely adopted five factor model of personality, most notably extraversion, stability (reversed neuroticism), and certain aspects of openness to experience, especially those tied to seeking out novel experiences (Lilienfeld et al. 2015b). In contrast to other major psychopathy dimensions, fearless dominance tends to confer a relative immunity to distress-related psychopathology. For example, high scores on this dimension are associated with low levels of anxiety-related and depressive symptoms (Benning et al. 2003, 2005; Sellbom et al. *in press*) and low levels of suicidal ideation and attempts (Douglas et al. 2008; Verona et al. 2001). Consistent with the hypothesis that PPI Fearless Dominance is linked to adaptive interpersonal outcomes, studies suggest that scores on this dimension are associated with (a) "everyday heroism," that is, risky altruistic

actions that are relatively common in daily life (Smith et al. 2013b); (b) historians' ratings of effective leadership, including crisis management and public persuasiveness, among US presidents, whose levels of psychopathy dimensions were estimated by presidential biographers (Lilienfeld et al. 2012); and (c) holding high-risk occupations, a category that included such diverse jobs as police officer, lifeguard, bobsledder, and fire-works technician (Lilienfeld et al. 2014).

Fearless Dominance: Controversies and Unresolved Questions

These findings aside, the nature and correlates of fearless dominance are controversial. Two meta-analyses (Marcus et al. 2013; Miller and Lynam 2012) indicate that PPI Fearless Dominance scores tend to display low or at best modest correlations with total and factor scores on the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare 1991/2003), an interview-based measure that is widely regarded as the most extensively validated indicator of psychopathy. Some authors have interpreted these findings to imply that fearless dominance is largely or entirely irrelevant to psychopathy (Vize et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, because the PCL-R was developed and initially validated in prison samples, it is unlikely to contain much representation of boldness or other largely adaptive personality features. Indeed, given that fearless dominance traits are thought to parlay individuals into more successful outlets, these traits may not be well represented in forensic settings insofar as these samples comprise predominantly unsuccessful individuals on account of their incarceration. Along these lines, community or undergraduate samples may better represent boldness and may comprise individuals who evade detection for their crimes, channel their traits into more constructive outlets, possess certain protective factors (e.g., higher levels of intelligence) that contribute to their success, or have some combination of these possibilities.

As a consequence, psychopathy measures developed in nonclinical (e.g., student, community) samples may display more pronounced associations with boldness. Corroborating this possibility, Lilienfeld and colleagues

(2015) meta-analyzed PPI Fearless Dominance's relations with a broader swath of psychopathy measures, namely, those not closely aligned with the PCL-R. Their findings revealed that scores on PPI Fearless Dominance and closely allied measures of boldness were moderately to highly (mean weighted $r=.39$) associated with total scores on psychopathy measures that were not derived from the PCL-R, with the correlation being higher for well-validated measures of psychopathy ($r=.44$). These results strongly suggest that fearless dominance is substantially associated with at least some established measures of psychopathy, especially those designed for settings in which adaptive correlates would be expected to be manifested. Moreover, our findings suggest that previous meta-analyses may have underestimated the relevance of fearless dominance to psychopathy.

In addition, the content of fearless dominance requires clarification. In the PPI and derivative measures, this dimension is heterogeneous, comprising three lower-order factors that are only modestly intercorrelated. Nevertheless, some data suggest that low levels of trait anxiety, as assessed by the PPI Stress Immunity scale, may be largely unassociated with other key features of psychopathy (Visser et al. 2012). Hence, the internal structure of fearless dominance is worth revisiting in future research (Neumann et al. 2008).

At least two other questions regarding the behavioral correlates of fearless dominance remain unresolved. First, it is unclear whether fearless dominance alone is related to psychopathy or whether it is associated with psychopathy-related sequelae only in the presence of other personality features, such as deficits in impulse control or empathy. Hence, in future research it will be crucial to ascertain whether the association between fearless dominance and other psychopathy features is additive or multiplicative (interactive) when it comes to statistically predicting real-world outcomes, such as criminality, substance abuse, and high-risk sexual behavior. The data bearing on this question are mixed (Smith et al. 2013a; Vize et al. 2016). Second, it is unknown whether the relation between fearless

dominance and life outcomes is purely linear or whether it may in some cases be curvilinear. For example, fearless dominance may be associated with adaptive outcomes at medium levels but maladaptive outcomes at high levels; this intriguing conjecture has received scant research attention (but see Vize et al. 2016).

Conclusion

Fearless dominance is a set of traits linked to social and physical boldness, emotional resilience, and closely related features. Research strongly suggests that this dimension is substantially associated with some, but not all, measures of psychopathy. It is plausible, if not probable, that fearless dominance helps to account for the interpersonally successful manifestations of psychopathy, especially those that have long been observed in the business and political worlds. Although the correlates and boundaries of fearless dominance are controversial, further investigation of the structure and correlates of this dimension are likely to elucidate a number of unresolved mysteries regarding the causes and behavioral manifestations of psychopathy.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Boldness](#)
- ▶ [Callousness](#)
- ▶ [Hare Psychopathy Checklist](#)
- ▶ [Manipulativeness](#)
- ▶ [Psychopathic Personality Inventory \(PPI\)](#)
- ▶ [Psychopathy](#)
- ▶ [Psychopathy Checklist Revised \(PCL-R\)](#)

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