

Are psychopaths moral-psychologically impaired? Reassessing emotion-theoretical explanations

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Psychopathy has been theorized as a disorder of emotion, which impairs moral judgments. However, these theories are increasingly being abandoned as empirical studies show that psychopaths seem to make proper moral judgments. In this contribution, these findings are reassessed, and it is argued that prevalent emotion-theories of psychopathy appear to operate with the unjustified assumption that psychopaths have *no emotions*, which leads to the hypothesis that psychopaths are *completely unable* to make moral judgments. An alternative and novel explanation is proposed, theorizing psychopathy as a *degree-specific* emotional deficiency, which causes *degree-specific* differences in moral judgments.

KEYWORDS

emotion, forensic psychology, moral psychology, moral sentimentalism, psychopathy

1 | INTRODUCTION

Psychopathic personality, or the term *psychopathy*, refers to a widely recognized personality disorder associated with egocentric character traits and antisocial behaviors (for clinical descriptions of psychopathy, see Hare, 2003; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005; Patrick, Fowles & Krueger, 2009). Although there is pervasive debate and disagreement about the exact diagnostic criteria of psychopathy (Blackburn, 1988; Patrick, 2006; Skeem & Cooke, 2010), clinical psychologists generally speak of psychopaths as a distinct subgroup within the antisocial and/or criminal populace, namely, those individuals who exhibit an extensive history of reckless behavior and a genuine lack of concern for others (Hare, Neumann & Widiger, 2012; Hart & Cook, 2012).

While contemporary research is primarily focused on the forensic and clinical *utility* of the disorder as assessed by clinical scales (Hare, 2003), for instance, these scales' ability to predict criminal recidivism and institutional adjustment (Gacono, 2016; Hare & Neumann, 2009), a central research question concerns what precisely the disorder consists of, that is, *theoretically* accounting for the underlying psychological and etiological mechanisms of psychopathy. Historically, this branch of research has fostered a number of different competing accounts (Blackburn, 2006), and the field has yet to reach a consensus as to which theory (if any) is best supported by the empirical data (Brazil & Cima, 2016; Lilienfeld, Smith & Watts, 2016; Stratton, Kiehl & Hanlon, 2015).

Of these different accounts of psychopathy, one cohort of theories has been broadly endorsed by psychologists, namely, the theories that posit psychopathy to be a disorder of emotion (different from those positing it to be a disorder of *cognition* or *rationality*, for example, Hamilton, Racer & Newman, 2015; cf., S. F. Smith & Lilienfeld, 2015). Though these emotion-theories differ in both their specific and general emphasis, most of them tend to expand on its *moral psychological* implications outlined in Hervey Cleckley's work, *The mask of sanity* (1988 [1941]). In this work, Cleckley hypothesized that psychopaths were incapable of processing emotions, which in turn made them oblivious to the moral values that guide and shape human existence (Cleckley, 1988, p. 59). According to such (Cleckleyan) emotion-theories, then, psychopathy is essentially an emotional disorder, which is importantly manifested in profound moral psychological impairments such as the inability to make proper moral judgments and appreciate moral values (which presumably also give rise to strong antisocial propensities).

Some of the more prevalent and cited emotion-theoretical research is James Blair's work (e.g., 1995, 2005, 2007, 2017), which expands on a premise that emotions play a central role in acquiring or learning moral and social rules. According to Blair, psychopathy is a neurobiological condition that impairs or hinders the processing of emotions, leading to abnormalities in acquired social psychology and behavior. Central to Blair's theory is that the capacity to process *negative* emotions is lacking in psychopaths, making them heavily impaired when navigating social situations insofar that negatively valenced emotions are what teaches us what is *bad*, and therefore what must be *avoided* with regards to personal well-being and social expectations (R. J. R. Blair, 2017, pp. 40–42). According to Blair, one might tell a psychopath that this or that is wrong, and psychopaths may also repeat that they understand, but since the actual emotional gravity of these semantics is importantly missing, psychopaths therefore lacks a proper moral perspective, and as a result they are significantly less sociable. As it has been stated metaphorically: Psychopaths know the words, but not the music (K. S. Blair et al., 2006).

However intuitive, the approach put forth by Cleckley, Blair, and others faces a number of problems that have yet to be convincingly addressed in the literature. One particularly thorny issue has to do with the empirical data on clinically diagnosed psychopaths' *actual* or *measurable* performances when making moral judgments. According to emotion-theories of psychopathy, it follows straightforwardly that psychopaths must have fundamental, measurable impairments of their moral psychology, such as being incapable of making moral judgments and appreciating moral values (Adshead, 2014; R. J. R. Blair, Mitchell & Blair, 2005; Cleckley, 1988; Hare, 1993; Lykken, 1995; McCord & McCord, 1964; Maibom, 2017; Meloy, 1988; Schramme, 2014). The problem is, though, that empirical research offers little evidence of this claim. In fact, a recent meta-analysis (23 studies, $n = 4,376$) of psychopathic individuals' moral judgment and values concluded that it could not be ruled out that psychopaths were equally disposed compared to controls. Although psychopaths may show subtle differences in various tests, these “are by no means robust and thus are not consistent with popular

belief' that psychopaths are profoundly lacking moral values and the ability to make moral judgments (Marshall, Watts & Lilienfeld, 2018, p. 48; for review studies with a similar conclusion, see Borg & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2013; Larsen, Jalava & Griffiths, 2020).

Consequently, one interpretation of these moral psychological studies is that the data seems to *falsify* emotion-theories and thereby wholly undermine their alleged relevance for explaining what makes clinically diagnosed psychopaths distinct from other (normal) people. Indeed, if what these theories propose is that psychopathy consists in an emotional impairment that gives rise to wholesale moral psychological abnormalities (e.g., an inability to make proper moral judgments), the fact that such differences between diagnosed psychopaths and controls are not detected appears to suggest that emotion-theories are unfounded, and therefore misleading accounts of individuals clinically assessed as psychopaths.

In light of these challenges, this contribution aims to reassess and qualify emotion-theories of psychopathy, that is, those theories that hypothesize a link between emotional abnormality and moral psychological impairments. The paper will expand on the premise that the aforementioned discrepancies found between theoretical predictions and empirical data are not so much an indication of null-findings, as it is a result of unnuanced theories, hypotheses, and analyses. One potential problem with current research, as outlined above, is that it appears to theorize that psychopaths have *no emotions*, which leads researchers to hypothesize that psychopaths should have a full-fledged *deficiency*, for example, a *complete inability* to make moral judgments. In this contribution it is argued that such hypotheses about full-fledged incapacities are theoretically overestimated. Instead, researchers should abandon the theory that psychopaths have *no emotions*, and replace it with the more nuanced and probable notion that psychopathy may be a disorder of *degree-specific* emotion deficits. Such theoretical assumption supports the (alternative and novel) hypothesis that psychopaths have much more complex, nuanced, and *degree-specific* differences in terms of moral judgments and values.

2 | PSYCHOPATHY THEORY: EMOTION AND MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Central to emotion-theories of psychopathy is the view that psychopaths are *lacking* emotions, which is hypothesized to give rise to *profound* moral psychological incapacities (and antisocial behaviors). This view is perhaps the historically most prevalent description of psychopathy dating back centuries (Sass & Felthous, 2014), and it takes center-stage in contemporary research (R. J. R. Blair et al., 2005; Cleckley, 1988; Hare, 1993; Helfgott, 2019; Lykken, 1995). In this section, I shall first highlight some reasonable objections to emotion-theories, and thereafter attempt to reassess and qualify this theoretical approach in light of such criticisms.

One major problem for emotions-theories is that they appear to be falsified by the empirical research record. Indeed, while emotion-theorists soundly builds off the fact that controlled studies have found weak to moderate evidence that clinically diagnosed psychopaths are differently disposed in terms of emotions (R. J. R. Blair, 2017; Brook, Brieman & Kosson, 2013; Stratton et al., 2015; Venables, Hall, Yancey & Patrick, 2015), the more fundamental assertion—that such an abnormality also has a *profound* bearing on the individual's moral psychology—has so far *not* been empirically substantiated (Borg & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2013; Cima, Tonnaer & Hauser, 2010; Glenn, Iyer, Graham, Koleva & Haidt, 2009; Larsen et al., 2020; Maibom, 2017; Marshall et al., 2018). Therefore, it would be reasonable at this point to reject emotion-theories of psychopathy.

However, if we set aside for a moment the failure to empirically measure moral psychological incapacities in psychopaths, the initial and more fundamental concern must be to first determine whether the various emotion-theories are at all soundly construed (because theories are what guide empirical studies in terms of forming research hypotheses). Consider, for instance, Blair's moral learning hypothesis, which places significant weight on the premise that psychopaths lack the ability to process *negative* emotions, which Blair claims is what teaches human agents what is bad or what must be avoided in social contexts (R. J. R. Blair, 2017). One critical remark could be to question whether it is at all possible to have such a discrete and peculiar dysfunction, that is, lacking negative emotions, but not positive emotions. There is seemingly little in Blair's own research that suggest this. What appears to be obvious, however, is that psychopaths have degree-specific diminished capacities such as *lower* fear response; but not *lacking* fear at large (R. J. R. Blair et al., 2005).

A second critical point about Blair's theory is that it seems to be caught up in more fundamental theoretical inconsistencies familiar to other emotion-focused theories on moral and social learning, for example, similar to those criticisms raised against the work of Jeffrey Gray (1975, 1987). Gray's well-known theory about social learning and motivation identifies negative emotions such as fear and anxiety as some of the main stimulations in behavioral inhibition. When we refrain from doing *x*, this is primarily because of cues that trigger fear and anxiety. Thus, if these emotions are absent or diminished, behavioral inhibition will then be overpowered by active behavioral drivers. In simplified terms, negative emotions mainly *inhibit* behavior, while positive emotions *activate* behavior. One criticism of Gray's proposition is that the scope is too narrow, failing to take into consideration that negative and positive emotions can serve equally as inhibitors and activators in human behavior (Prinz, 2004, pp. 169–173). For instance, we routinely inhibit our behavior because we desire the outcome of our passivity (e.g., not eating meat because one cares about the environment), and sometimes we act because we fear what will happen if we do otherwise (e.g., participate in bullying because one fears becoming the bullied) (see also, Berkman, Lieberman & Gable, 2009; Poythress et al., 2008). Similarly, Blair's theory seems to assume (or at least being substantially committed to the assumption) that lacking negative emotions overwhelmingly lead to negative moral and social outcomes, where it is a trivial fact that immoral judgments and behaviors are regularly undergirded by the very negative emotions Blair hypothesizes psychopaths are lacking.

Although such critical remarks may undermine emotion-theories of psychopathy, there are also good reasons to think we should take such skeptical remarks with a grain of salt. One reason for this is that the theories—at least the way they are presented in the published record—rarely explicate and qualify their deeper theoretical commitments. For instance, since these theories assert a robust connection between emotion deficits and an abnormal moral psychology, this then implies the view that emotions take a *necessary* and/or *sufficient* role in the forming of moral values, judgments, perspectives, motivation, and so forth. Such a theoretical position is commonly referred to as *moral sentimentalism* (Driver, 2013), but there is very little (if any) detailed discussion of moral sentimentalism in the mainstream psychopathy literature.

Thus, if we wish to determine the general soundness of emotion-theories of psychopathy, analyzing and scrutinizing moral sentimentalism—including its implication for theorizing about psychopathy—then appears to be a natural starting point insofar that it may unveil important, qualifying details about said emotion-theories.

It should be emphasized, though, that since there are a handful of different versions of moral sentimentalism (Kauppinen, 2018), it obviously follows that these versions will yield different perspectives on what consequences it will have to be differently disposed in terms of emotions. For the sake of clarity and brevity, this paper shall adhere only to the philosopher

Jesse Prinz's recent version, *constructivist sentimentalism* (Prinz, 2007), well knowing that there are important differences to consider when invoking alternative sentimentalist formats.¹

At the base of Prinz's constructivist sentimentalism is the view that moral values are necessarily and sufficiently *constructed* by our emotional dispositions. To say that something is either right or wrong is, according to Prinz, the same as associating such assertions with feelings of either approbation or disapprobation (i.e., an emotion of positive or negative *valence*). Moral values and judgments are not outcomes of principles derived from cold human *reasoning* (as many philosophers and psychologists have argued, for example, from Plato to Immanuel Kant, to more contemporary psychologists such as, Lawrence Kohlberg, Jean Piaget, Elliot Turiel, etc.). Instead, Prinz suggests that moral judgments are derived from instilled and intuitional emotional responses (Prinz, 2007, pp. 13–14).

According to Prinz, then, moral values necessarily imply emotional dispositional attitudes, or sentiments as Prinz calls them. If a person *truly believes* that, say, murder is wrong, this is cached out in terms of holding a negative sentiment about murder, and it will then be the case that in the event of witnessing a homicide, the sentiment (i.e., disposition) will be triggered, eliciting a negative emotion and therefore a feeling of disapprobation. The wrongness, so to speak, is a *felt* experience. From Prinz's theory it follows that if a person does not feel disapprobation when witnessing a murder, despite having declared that murder is wrong, this means that she did not truly believe such an act to be immoral. Similarly, if she did not care about a given moral situation, it also equals that she did not find such a situation morally vexing in the first place (Prinz, 2007, pp. 82–84).

This is not to say that when we *think* of murder we simultaneously need to feel disapprobation before we can believe it to be wrong. Clearly, humans often express moral beliefs without immediately feeling anything. Moreover, Prinz thinks that moral beliefs have dispositional truth-values, such that these beliefs are only true if we are, in fact, feeling the wrongness when perceiving the said moral transgression. In a trivial way, we are often mistaken about our own true moral beliefs, that is, when we fail to get emotionally aroused by certain moral situations, which may or may not lead us to change our expressions and opinions about such issues. As such, true moral beliefs are emotional sentiments induced into our long-term memory (Prinz, 2006, p. 32).

Prinz holds that there are both *intuitive* reasons as well as *empirical* data supporting his theory. In terms of the intuitive reasons, Prinz believes that everyone would readily agree that whenever they make moral judgments, these appear to be intimately associated with our feelings (e.g., we often say that we *feel* that something is right/wrong).² Regarding the empirical

¹Although, it is likely that the constructivist sentimentalist perspectives drawn about psychopathy in this contribution would also follow from other sentimentalist theories, making these perspectives relatively uncontroversial within the sentimentalist framework (for a comparison of constructivist sentimentalism against other sentimentalist theories, see Prinz, 2016; for a review of the empirical data corroborating constructivist sentimentalism, see Cameron, Lindquist & Gray, 2015).

²With regards to *intuitive* reasons to think sentimentalism is correct, Prinz invites us to consider a thought experiment about a woman named Mary who was raised in solitude without any moral feelings and beliefs. 1 day Mary decides to learn about morality and she barricades herself in her study with the books of classic moral philosophers. She reads about normative principles of right and wrong, such as the maximization of pleasure and minimization of harm in the consequentialist program, as well as the universalization of maxims in deontological ethics. While Mary is now properly educated in normative moral theory, according to Prinz, her acquaintance with morality is still incomplete. What Mary is crucially lacking in her understanding of morality are the feelings associated with rightness and wrongness. Even if Mary learns that killing someone for no reason defies moral duties, it is only truthfully believed insofar as it also disturbs her emotionally if she did so. Prinz will have it that it is only in the moment that Mary attributes negative and positive emotions (or sentiments) to her moral beliefs that she is taking a *genuine* moral standpoint (Prinz, 2007, pp. 38–42).

data in support of constructivist sentimentalism, Prinz cites a number of interdisciplinary efforts to map the relation between emotions and moral judgment. One compelling set of indices is found in neurobiological studies. When people make moral judgments, neural activity is traceable in those cortical regions typically associated with emotions (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Yoder, Harenski, Kiehl & Decety, 2015). This evidence suggests that moral judgments are reliably *on-line* with emotional processes.

One of the key premises in Prinz's theory is that emotions can be *sufficient* for a moral judgment; that moral judgments can occur without consulting rational principles. The investigation of so-called *moral dumbfounding*, a concept coined by Haidt, Koller and Dias (1993); Haidt, Björklund and Murphy (2000), appears to empirically support Prinz's hypothesis. In their study, Haidt et al. (2000) found that when making moral judgments, people tend to first report on their emotionally driven intuitions, and only thereafter provide a reason or explanation for their judgment (as opposed to first finding a reason, and then judging). Reason appears to operate *post-hoc* to an emotional *pre-hoc* reaction. What seems to be the main factor in moral judgment, then, is the person's initial emotional reaction. This process is particularly evident when test subjects are asked to deliberate about scenarios that are heavily laden with culturally normative content, such as questions about hygiene, incest, patriotism, cannibalism, etc. For example, when Haidt et al. (2000) asked participants whether it was right or wrong for a person to cook and eat discarded human flesh that was initially donated to a research institution, subjects generally reported that this was wrong, but when asked to give reasons for their intuition, they failed to provide compelling explanations. Many test subjects even admitted that they were "dumbfounded", often uttering sentences such as "I know it's wrong, but I just can't come up with a reason why" (Haidt et al., 2000, pp. 10–11; see also, Haidt & Björklund, 2008; Uhlmann & Zhu, 2014; cf., Rozman, Kwanwoo & Leeman, 2015).

The connection between psychopathy (as a disorder of emotion) and constructivist sentimentalism should now be clear: If psychopaths are, in fact, deprived of robust emotional dispositions, we then seem to have articulated a possible theoretical answer to what it means to be morally incapacitated, namely, being incapable of feeling approbation and disapprobation, leading to an incomplete moral understanding and (comparatively) distorted moral values. It may even be tempting to conclude that it is exactly along these moral sentimentalist lines that Cleckley was arguing when he compared psychopaths to *colorblind* people:

[The psychopath] is unfamiliar with the primary facts or data of what might be called personal values and is altogether incapable of understanding such matters. It is impossible for him to take even a slight interest in the tragedy or joy or the striving of humanity as presented in serious literature or art. He is also indifferent to all these matters in life itself. Beauty and ugliness, except in a very superficial sense, goodness, evil, love, horror, and humor have no actual meaning, no power to move him. He is, furthermore, lacking in the ability to see that others are moved. It is as though he were colorblind, despite his sharp intelligence, to this aspect of human existence. It cannot be explained to him because there is nothing in his orbit of awareness that can bridge the gap with comparison. He can repeat the words and say glibly that he understands, and there is no way for him to realize that he does not understand. (Cleckley, 1988, p. 59)

Similar to Cleckley's observations in the quote above, Prinz also argues that psychopaths must be understood as the *morally blind*, those who are fully unaware of the emotional content

undergirding moral values, and for that reason they are also profoundly unmotivated by moral values (Prinz, 2006, p. 33, 2007, pp. 42–47).³

From a jointly empirical and theoretical standpoint, though, there seems to be good reasons to think that Prinz's (and Cleckley's) way of describing psychopaths as *absolutely* morally deprived or blind is an overstatement. According to Prinz (2007), psychopaths are morally blind because they have an “emotional blindness” (p. 46). The problem is, however, that psychopaths are not fully deprived of emotion. Psychopaths may have emotional abnormalities in terms of deprivations and attenuations, but not full-fledged absence of emotions (R. J. R. Blair et al., 2005; Brook et al., 2013; Maibom, 2018; Stratton et al., 2015; Venables et al., 2015). On a more obvious note, we know from other strands of research that people who cannot process emotions loses basic human functions (such as motivational impulses), which manifests in general paralysis (Damasio & Van Hoesen, 1983; Nagaratnam, Nagaratnam, Ng & Diu, 2004). And since this form of dysfunction is not observed in clinically assessed psychopaths, it logically follows (by *modus tollens*) that psychopaths are not *lacking* emotions. Instead, for all we know, psychopaths have real (although perhaps attenuated or relatively weak) passions and desires, experiences that are *incompatible* with the view that they are utterly deprived of moral and/or emotional impulses. The hard claim made by emotion-theorists about psychopaths' alleged lack of emotions—and that such emotional blindness leads to moral blindness—must therefore be adjusted to a more nuanced claim about subtle moral psychological differences, undergirded by similarly subtle emotional abnormalities. This is the theme of the next section.

3 | SENTIMENTALISM AND PSYCHOPATHY: THEORY, HYPOTHESES, AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Following the theory and evidence from the prior section, the paper will proceed from the working assumption that psychopathy is fundamentally defined by an abnormality of emotion, more specifically, a *global* emotional shallowness (i.e., general emotional *hypoactivity*). This theoretical assumption may not be unproblematic though. While there is evidence that some diagnosed psychopaths do exhibit such global emotional shallowness (Baskin-Sommers, Curtin & Newman, 2013; Sethi et al., 2015), the data also suggests that clinically diagnosed psychopaths are not uniformly similar in terms of emotional dispositions (for a meta-analysis, see Brook et al., 2013). Therefore, the following theoretical outline will only adhere to such individuals that exhibit the *general* and *global* emotional deficit, and therefore it obviously does not pertain to all clinically diagnosed psychopaths.

The assumption about global emotional shallowness is not novel, but it has yet to be discussed in the literature how it theoretically deviates from the various aforementioned views about psychopaths, for example, that they are (a) fully *lacking* emotions (Cleckley, 1988;

³Prinz also discusses psychopathy research because some philosophers believe (opposite to Prinz) that the very existence of psychopaths—those who seems to know about morality, but are not motivated by it—actually *falsifies* moral sentimentalism (Brink, 1986; Smith, 1994). Indeed, one undermining argument could be that since psychopaths are fully capable of moral reasoning, but remain utterly unmotivated by such reasons, this appears to infer that psychopaths do not *care* about moral values (see also, Cima et al., 2010). But if psychopaths do not care about moral values, it could be taken to imply that moral sentimentalism is false, since moral values, according to sentimentalists, inherently implies care (i.e., moral values are constituted by emotions). However, Prinz argues that it is false to portray psychopaths as not caring about morality, since he believes psychopaths do not form proper moral beliefs in the first place (i.e., their lack of emotions leads to moral blindness).

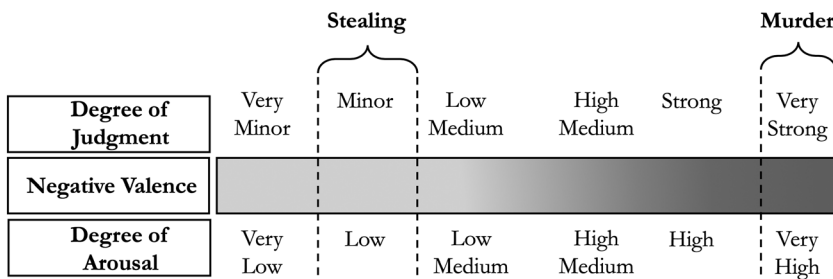


FIGURE 1 The two-dimensional value spectrum of moral disapprobation or negative judgments. An example of how a negative moral judgment has a two-dimensional value spectrum, namely, the qualities of having (a) a basic negative valence, paired with (b) a degree-specific level of value. The bottom signifier of “Degree of Arousal” may be one way for a constructivist sentimentalist to account for the *degrees* of a value judgment

Hare, 1993; McCord & McCord, 1964; Prinz, 2006); (b) that psychopaths predominately lack one emotion *type* (R. J. R. Blair, 2017); and (c) that psychopaths only lack *some* emotions (Cima et al., 2010; Schramme, 2014). Quite differently, by following the empirical data we may work from the assumption that psychopaths have *all* their emotional dispositions intact, but that these emotions function/process on a generally *lowered level* (Brook et al., 2013). For example, this may be analogous to how people with bad vision has their basic vision functions intact, but that it processes on a globally lower level of vision acuity. In other words, the empirical data suggests that if ordinary people on average respond with one level of emotional arousal to a specific stimulus, psychopaths will on average respond with comparatively *lower* arousal. Thus, by embracing this working premise—that is, that psychopathy is a condition of having degree-specific, yet globally diminished emotional dispositions—the question that must now be answered is what moral psychological consequences that can be hypothesized to follow from such an emotional disposition?

One way to approach this question is to first acknowledge a crucial quality about moral judgements, namely, that they have a *two-dimensional* value spectrum: (i) A foundational negative or positive value (i.e., moral disapprobation vs. approbation); and (ii) a degree-specific nuance of *how* negative or positive the judgment is. Put in simpler terms, whenever we make a moral judgement, it is always intuitively given to us whether we (i) *fundamentally* approve or disprove, as well as (ii) to what *degree* we approve or disprove. For instance, we can imagine a person who intuitively holds that murder is wrong, and that it is *more wrong* than, say, stealing from the local grocery. Similarly, a person may also think that it is good to give \$5 to a homeless person, and that it is *better* to help such a person with shelter, healthcare, and education (see Figure 1).

One way for constructivist sentimentalism to explain the basic difference between various degree-specific moral judgments is by referencing the degree of arousal (i.e., emotional vigor).⁴ As such, in the moment of making a moral judgement/evaluation, low arousal may be hypothesized to lead to low valuation, and high arousal to high valuation. Now, such a basic description is, of course, overly simplified, and in reality, moral judgments are processed with a much more

⁴The idea of a *two-dimensional* moral spectrum is not explicitly discussed in Prinz's work, but he appears to (heavily) hint at such a framework when he speaks about the *degrees* of value judgments, which he also appears to link to the degrees of emotional arousal (Prinz, 2011, p. 77, 2016, pp. 53–54).

complex interplay between our cognitive reflections and our emotions (Prinz, 2007, pp. 87–102). For instance, we may get extremely aroused by some insignificant episode, say, a driver making a left turn during rush hour when left turns on this particular road are prohibited, suggesting that we are strongly morally appalled by such behavior. However, while we may be strongly against such behavior in the moment (and our behavior may similarly indicate this, for example, by verbally expressing our dismay), upon reflection, our emotions will probably cool down, leading to more tempered moral beliefs and judgments about said traffic violation (and then again, some people may not cool off, continually feeling that traffic violations are highly inappropriate). The complex question is, then, what stage of this process is best representative of the person's moral attitude? The answer is probably that it is the *entire process* that is accurately representative, underlining the difficulty of capturing moral attitudes in a research setup where researchers typically focus on one single answer, in one given moment.

These complexities notwithstanding, we can now paint a comparatively clearer theoretical picture of what exactly a (constructivist) sentimentalist theory seems to hypothesize about psychopaths' moral psychology. If a person is having such a diminished emotional disposition, being globally incapable of emoting with relative *normal* arousal, such a person will—all things being the same—feel morally less strongly about the issue at hand (i.e., due to literally feeling less aroused, whether negative or positive).

However, and perhaps more interestingly, there seems to be no reasons to think that psychopaths should lack the capacity to perform equally well on simple moral judgment tasks. For example, on questions pertaining to moral categorical issues (e.g., is it *right* or *wrong* to murder? Or is it *permissible* to bully another person?), psychopaths should not be expected to answer differently compared to random controls since their emotional deficiency does not include an inability to assess the base value (i.e., valence) of their emotions. Moreover, just because psychopaths may think *less strongly* about certain moral transgressions (e.g., bullying), they should still be capable of judging that such behavior is categorically wrong, due to feeling the basic negative valence associated with such a behavior. Similarly, a person might not think that jaywalking is much of a problem, but when being asked about, or seeing a person jaywalking they might express that it is more wrong than right (since it may still arouse slightly negative emotions).

If this sentimentalist account of the two-dimensional value spectrum is sound, it then seems to be problematic that moral psychological studies predominately hypothesize that psychopaths should show differences in terms of their basic categorical responses to moral issues (e.g., moral categorical questions). Even when studies explicitly endorse the basic format of emotion-theories, these categorical questions dominate research designs (Aharoni, Sinnott-Armstrong & Kiehl, 2014; Cima et al., 2010; Glenn et al., 2009; Kahane, Everett, Earp, Farias & Savulescu, 2015; Koenigs, Kruepke, Zeier & Newman, 2012). Indeed, moral psychological studies of psychopaths are mostly composed of three different type of research designs, namely, studies of *sacrificial moral dilemmas*, *moral development*, and *moral foundations* (Borg & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2013; Marshall et al., 2018). Of these three types, the more frequent studies are those that explore sacrificial moral dilemmas, where participants are asked to make decisions such as whether to save a group of people on the cost of one person (e.g., versions of classic trolley problems). These studies test for differences in answers between diagnosed psychopaths (or individuals with psychopathic traits) and controls, typically hypothesizing that psychopaths will respond differently to moral dilemmas due to them allegedly perceiving the moral situation in a fundamentally different way. But as we have just seen, it is not at all clear that emotion-theories—due to their commitment to moral sentimentalism—should be committed to such a strong hypothesis.

Consider, for instance, Cima et al. (2010) who tested diagnosed psychopaths ($n = 14$) against non-psychopathic incarcerated offenders ($n = 23$) and random controls ($n = 35$) in terms of their answers to impersonal and personal moral dilemmas. The study concluded “that psychopaths make the same kind of moral distinctions as healthy individuals when it comes to evaluating the permissibility of an action embedded in a moral dilemma” (Cima et al., 2010, p. 66). The more interesting aspect seems to be, though, that the researchers took this as a null-finding, since the study was testing the hypothesis that the emotional deficits of psychopaths lead to corresponding deficits in moral knowledge (Cima et al., 2010, p. 60). However, according to the above sentimentalist consideration, what was found in Cima et al. (2010) should not be interpreted as a null-finding, but, moreover, the findings are exactly what we should expect from psychopaths, that they do not have problems with answering categorical moral judgment questions. Where psychopaths may perform differently is when assessing the *degree* to which something is right or wrong. This hypothetical nuance has never been directly tested for (as is evident from reviews and meta-analyses, for example, Borg & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2013; Larsen et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2018).

With these considerations in mind other widely cited studies appears to make similarly misleading predictions, namely, those that test for psychopaths' ability to make the so-called *moral* versus *conventional* distinction. It has been reliably demonstrated that ordinary children and adults firmly distinguish between (at least) two types of normative transgressions, namely, interpersonal violations (i.e., moral) and mere rule-based, non-interpersonal violations (i.e., conventions) (from Nucci & Turiel, 1978). The first study to examine this ability in psychopaths was R. J. R. Blair (1995), where diagnosed psychopaths ($n = 10$) were tested against non-psychopaths ($n = 10$). One central hypothesis was that psychopaths would be incapable of making the moral versus conventional distinction due (in part) to an alleged incapacity to empathize, that is, internalize the feelings of others. Blair's study made quite an impact in the field, reporting significant differences in psychopaths when making the moral versus conventional distinction. However, Blair was not able to fully replicate these findings in adults (R. J. R. Blair, Jones, Clark & Smith, 1995) and in children (R. J. R. Blair, 1997), and all subsequent studies of this kind have likewise shown that psychopaths are not incapable of making the moral versus conventional distinction (Aharoni et al., 2014; Aharoni, Sinnott-Armstrong & Kiehl, 2012; Dolan & Fullam, 2010).⁵ Again, when analyzing these studies from a sentimentalist framework, it is not clear why these results should be interpreted as null-findings, since it is not obvious why we would hypothesize that psychopaths should have difficulties in distinguishing between mere rule-based violations (e.g., chatting in a classroom) and interpersonal violations (e.g., physical assault). Now, we may correctly hypothesize that psychopaths will feel comparatively less aroused about interpersonal harm than ordinary people, but this does not necessarily imply that they are not expected to feel comparatively stronger, and qualitatively different about interpersonal harm as opposed to mere conventional rule breaking. If so, psychopaths should be hypothesized as being fully capable of making these, after all, intuitive distinctions (see also, Shoemaker, 2011).

In light of such critical remarks, one might ask whether it is at all possible to measure any potential moral psychological differences between psychopaths and controls? And if so, how would one design a research protocol that can adequately execute such a measure? Speaking to

⁵On a curious note: According to Google Scholar (May 23, 2019), Blair (1995) has been cited 1,723 times, making it one of the most cited studies in psychopathy research. Blair's subsequent research that failed to replicate the 1995-findings (Blair, 1997; Blair et al., 1995) have been cited respectively 163 and 346 times.

the first question, one concern could be that we may never be able to correctly capture the subtle differences between an ordinary person and a psychopath's moral beliefs, due to the fact that although psychopaths may have diminished feelings about all moral issues, this diminishment may be thoroughly consistent insofar that they will report the same relative degrees of rightness/wrongness between random moral scenarios. For example, they may agree on the basic claim that murder is *more wrong* than stealing, but capturing the difference in perceived wrongness and compare it to an ordinary (non-psychopathic) person's perceptions of the same moral difference appears to be an increasingly difficult thing to do in a reliable way (at least within the limiting realms of ordinary language).

One approach that might work, however, would be to assume the (speculative) premise that we all operate with internal thresholds for when we deem something *strictly impermissible* and therefore also *legally forbidden* (Hurka, 2019). That is, among all the issues a person deems morally wrong—ranging from trivialities such as a feisty practical joke, to the most severe cases such as homicide—there might be a metaphorical, yet rule-based line drawn somewhere on this spectrum, where a person begins viewing immoral issues as something that ought to be legally impermissible or sanctioned (see Figure 2). For example, we may think that some pranks can be denigrating enough for us to see them as moral wrongs (e.g., pouring blue ink into a shampoo bottle, so the user's skin turns blue for the better part of a week), but still do not view these acts as something that should be illegal. Put differently, perhaps you would see it as moral progress if there were no grim pranksters, but you would not enjoy living in a society that straightforwardly forbade such pranksters to pull people's legs.

Now, if such a threshold exists, we may think that this threshold is robustly connected to an underlying level of arousal, the same quality that might generally control for the degree to which one otherwise deems something immoral. For instance, maybe the threshold on average is located somewhere between *minor* and *low-medium* arousal (as illustrated in Figure 2), either as an absolute threshold or a threshold with wavering, yet relatively stable confines. If this is the case, what may be hypothesized is that psychopaths effectively place more moral issues below that threshold compared to ordinary individuals, due to their inability to process higher levels of arousal, and therefore only associating relatively few moral issues with moderate levels of arousal (i.e., that which they see as impermissible). Another hypothesis could be that psychopaths, due to their globally low emotions, are not able to consistently define their threshold, that is, that their threshold has substantially wider wavering confines.

Moral Issue	Prank	Bullying	Cheating	Stealing	Violence	Murder
Degree of Judgment	Very Minor	Minor	Low Medium	High Medium	Strong	Very Strong
Negative Valence						
Degree of Arousal	Very Low	Low	Low Medium	High Medium	High	Very High

FIGURE 2 Impermissibility threshold. An example of how there might be vague, yet detectable thresholds where moral judgments go from being morally wrong *but* permissible, to moral wrong *and* impermissible

A crucial aspect to acknowledge when testing for these moral psychological differences in psychopathic samples is that it might not be as straightforward as it seems. Indeed, research samples in empirical studies are typically selected using a clinical assessment tool (Hare, 2003). The problem with this assessment procedure is that these samples are not representative of what is here assumed about psychopathy, that it is a condition of having global degree-specific diminished emotional dispositions. In fact, there are good reasons to think that clinical samples are more heterogenous than typically assumed (Hicks & Drislane, 2018), but also that these clinical assessment tools yield a substantial number of false-positives regardless of what theory of psychopathy we operate with (Larsen, 2018). In order for us to develop a proper research protocol that can actually test the moral psychological capacities of psychopathy (as defined here), it seems that we first need to develop a reliable and valid method to select people who can be said to have, for instance, globally degree-specific diminished emotional dispositions (assuming that such a condition even exists). And only then can we test whether such individuals also have important differences in terms of moral judgment and values.

4 | THEORETICAL LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Motivated by a suite of ostensibly undermining empirical studies, this paper sought to defend and qualify emotion-theories of psychopathy by explicating in detail the philosophical and psychological commitments these theories appear to be implicitly endorsing, namely, a (constructivist) sentimentalist framework. This explication demonstrated, above all, that psychopathy studies appear to operate with an inconsistent set of hypotheses when trying to capture the differences between diagnosed psychopaths and controls in terms of their moral judgments and values. This led to a consideration of alternative research designs particularly aimed at capturing the potential moral psychological differences that follows from having diminished emotional dispositions, namely, degree-specific differences related to the *two-dimensional value spectrum*, as opposed to differences related to answers on moral *categorical* issues.

It must be underlined, however, that the present analysis has a number of important shortcomings. In particular, there are many more aspects to consider with regards to moral (constructivist) sentimentalism and psychopathy, which future attempts of theoretical refinement must address. For example, when writing this manuscript, it was purposely decided not to weigh in on the longstanding debate about what type of *behavior*, if any, follows from a psychopathic psychology (Camp, Skeem, Barchard, Lilienfeld & Poythress, 2013; Skeem & Cooke, 2010). Traditionally, psychopaths have been portrayed as being violent, intraspecies predators, undergirded by their moral psychological impairments (Hare, 1993). However, this view is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, given that recent data suggests that psychopathic *personality traits* are not associated with substantially higher risks of violence (Larsen et al., 2020; Leistico, Salekin, DeCoster & Rogers, 2008; Yang, Wong & Coid, 2010). This paper was not concerned with the type of behaviors that might be predicted from an emotion-theory of psychopathy. But neither is it clear that emotion-theories can make any sound predictions insofar that some of the strongest (psychological) behavioral predictors we know of are emotional dispositions (e.g., traits of jealousy might predict domestic violence), and it is exactly these dispositions that are here theorized to be impaired in psychopaths. Would this lead to stronger or weaker behavioral predictabilities? If the answer is the latter, then an emotion-theory would seem to predict that psychopaths are more *unpredictable* than others, which, of

course, is not necessarily a meaningful claim, and, in turn, would be increasingly difficult to test within the limited means of behavioral psychology (and presumably also undermining for the dominant use of psychopathy assessment tools as actuarial forensic risk assessments).

Another aspect that must be discussed is what *specific degree* of diminished emotional dispositions eventually suffices as psychopathy. Surely, it is a trivial fact that some people are emotionally shallower than others, and some people are more neurotic. In other words, there appears to be a spectrum of normal human variation when it comes to emotional dispositions. What emotion-theories of psychopathy implies is that there must be some point or level where the degree of shallow emotional dispositions turns *pathological* or *disorderly*, and thus separates psychopaths from normal people. Perhaps similar to how we can speak of vision as a disposition that has a spectrum of normal variation, and some outer limits of vision acuity as the disorderly cases (i.e., substantial degrees of long-sightedness and short-sightedness). The essential question is, then, to what measurable degree must one have diminished emotions before we start labeling or diagnosing such a person a psychopath?

The latter question anticipates a much more profound issue with potentially vexing ethical implications, namely, whether the term psychopathy actually denotes anything *discrete* or *real*, and if so, whether we are justified in applying the term in clinical and forensic settings. Indeed, it was argued in this contribution that the current evidence unambiguously falsified prevalent emotion-theories describing psychopathy as a *complete* or *full-fledged* moral incapacity (akin to what Cleckley, Blair, and others had traditionally described), and it was instead argued that psychopaths—insofar that they may have globally diminished emotions—could exhibit significant differences in their moral judgments and values. This hypothesis still remains to be corroborated. But even if this hypothesis eventually is backed by empirical evidence, it will still be an open question whether such relatively nuanced differences, on their own, merits invoking a clinical and forensic term/label. From an ethical point of view, it serves to notice that the psychopathy term/label is currently being broadly applied in clinical, forensic and legal settings, switching the gravity of these issues away from early abstract and inconsequential academic matters to now being a question with real-life implications (Edens, Petrila & Kelley, 2018). If psychopathy really can be defined as a moral psychological incapacity (e.g., subtle differences in moral judgments), the next thing to consider is whether such incapacities really are important to forensic practices. Such justifications must be importantly weighed against the potentially prejudicial and stigmatizing effects of the psychopathy label (DeMatteo et al., 2020; Kelley, Edens, Mowle, Penson & Rulseh, 2019).

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