

BRIEF REPORT

The Psychopaths' Moral Decision Making

Katrin Lieck

Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience
Maastricht University

The present paper will investigate whether psychopaths are more prone to make utilitarian decisions in moral dilemmas. This 'talent' may be caused by a dysfunction in emotional brain circuits in psychopaths. Since utilitarian decisions are seen as the 'right' decision – in an economic point of view - one can make in moral dilemmas, it is interesting to see, whether psychopathic traits may also have its advantages.

Keywords: psychopath, utilitarian decision, emotional brain circuit

Studi pendahuluan ini meneliti apakah para psikopat cenderung membuat putusan bermanfaat dalam dilema moral. "Talenta" ini mungkin disebabkan disfungsi dalam sirkuit emosional di otak para psikopat. Karena putusan bermanfaat dilihat sebagai putusan yang "benar" – dari sudut pandang ekonomis – yang dapat diambil dalam dilemma moral, adalah menarik melihat, apakah sifat-sifat psikopat juga memiliki kelebihanannya juga.

Kata kunci: psikopat, putusan bermanfaat, sirkuit emosional otak

The Role of Emotions in Moral Judgment

There are two main philosophical approaches to moral decision making. Deontological approaches emphasize the role of morality in the sense of what is good and what is bad in decision making. In contrast, for utilitarianism a decision is morally acceptable when an action brings the greatest total well-being (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011). This sounds logical, but when one faces a social dilemma, it seems not that easy to make a utilitarian decision. To examine decision making in moral dilemmas, two scenarios are often used: The trolley and the footbridge dilemma. In the trolley dilemma subjects have to decide whether to hit a switch and kill one person but save five other persons, or else 5 persons would die instead of one. Studies have shown that most subjects would hit the switch in this situation. In the footbridge dilemma, the subjects have to decide whether to push a fat person the bridge to save five other persons. In this situation, most subjects refuse to act. This made many researchers begin to wonder, why subjects decide differently in the

two quite similar dilemmas. A possible explanation was that some moral dilemmas may be more emotional than others (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001). Greene et al. (2001) tested this hypothesis and predicted that brain areas associated with emotion would be more active when deciding about highly emotion-evoking dilemmas such as the footbridge dilemma. Their results confirmed their hypothesis and also found that subjects were responding slower to moral-personal dilemmas compared to moral-impersonal and non-moral conditions, indicating more procrastinating in the moral-personal condition.

Psychopathy Increases Utilitarian Moral Judgments

Research has shown that damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC) leads to less emotional responsiveness and reduced social emotions (e.g., compassion, guilt, shame), but preserved cognitive functioning (Koenigs et al., 2007). Therefore, Koenigs et al. (2007) hypothesized that individuals with damage to the VMPFC would show more utilitarian – thus more practical and less emotional - decision-making in emotionally salient moral dilemmas. The researchers found that the subjects with VMPFC lesions were more likely to decide in a utilitarian way (e.g., throw-

The author thanks Henna Toppenberg, expert in Social Neuroscience, who supervised this brief review.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Katrin Lieck, Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Maastricht, Universiteitssingel 50/23 6229 ER Maastricht, Netherlands. E-mail: katrin.lieck@gmail.com/kn.lieck@alumni.maastrichtuniversity.nl