Invited essay

Methodological advances and developments in the assessment of psychopathy

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Abstract

The last decade has witnessed a number of significant methodological advances and developments in the assessment of psychopathy. The Psychopathy Checklist—Revised and the two-factor model of psychopathy have facilitated the assessment of psychopathy and clarified the differential correlates of the personality- and behavior-based operationalizations of this syndrome. Although preliminary evidence suggests that certain features of psychopathy may be underpinned by a latent taxon, the categorical versus dimensional status of psychopathy requires clarification. Researchers have accorded increasing attention to the assessment of psychopathy in non-criminal samples, although the construct of subclinical psychopathy remains controversial. Other recent methodological developments include: (a) the extension of the Five-Factor Model and other higher-order personality taxonomies to psychopathy; (b) development of a Q-sort methodology to permit the assessment of psychopathy by observers; (c) standardized assessment of psychopaths' interpersonal behaviors; (d) assessment of psychopathy in children; and (e) examination of gender, ethnic, and cross-cultural differences in psychopathy. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Key words: Psychopathy, Psychopathic personality, Antisocial personality, Antisocial behavior, Assessment, Measurement

1. Introduction

Although psychopathic personality (psychopathy) has been the subject of intensive research, it remains among the most controversial of all psychopathological syndromes. Psychopathy has not appeared as a diagnosis in any of the last three editions of the American Psychiatric Association's (APA's) *Diagnostic and statistical manual* (DSM-III, DSM-III-R, DSM-IV; APA, 1980, 1987, 1994, respectively). Moreover, as recently as a decade ago one researcher argued that this disorder "remains a mythical entity" and that "Given the lack of demonstrable

scientific or clinical utility of the concept, it should be discarded" (Blackburn, 1988, p. 511). The lingering doubts besetting the diagnosis of psychopathy are perhaps best exemplified by the following quotation from Sir Aubrey Lewis: "The diagnostic subgroupings of psychiatry seldom have sharp and definite limits. Some are worse than others in this respect. Worst of all is psychopathic personality, with its wavering outlines" (Lewis, 1974, p. 139). Why has the psychopathy construct been so plagued by controversy?

Until recently (i.e. 10 years ago), the methodological obstacles presented by the assessment of psychopathy were regarded as extremely formidable, if not intractible. The results of several studies (Hare, 1985a; Hundleby and Ross, 1977; Widom and Newman, 1985) indicated that most measures of psychopathy are weakly intercorrelated. Moreover, even these low correlations appear to reflect method factors (e.g. self-report vs interview) more than content overlap (Hare, 1985a). In addition, most self-report psychopathy measures, including the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) Psychopathic deviate (Pd) scale (McKinley and Hathaway, 1944) and the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) Socialization (So) scale (Gough, 1969), correlate neglibly with many of the central personality features of psychopathy (Harpur et al., 1989).

Nevertheless, the last decade has witnessed a dramatic resurgence in research on psychopathy, along with a renewed optimism regarding its assessment. In this article, I examine advances and developments in psychopathy assessment that have transpired since the last comprehensive review of research on the measurement of psychopathy (Hare and Cox, 1978). I argue that several methodological innovations have improved our capacity to reliably and validly operationalize this construct, and enchanced our understanding of its behavioral and laboratory correlates. Some of these innovations have, however, revealed new challenges and unresolved questions for future researchers.

For reasons to become clearer in the next section, I focus on the classical construct of psychopathy, rather than the DSM-IV (APA, 1994) diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder (ASPD). Issues in the assessment of ASPD have been reviewed elsewhere (Lilienfeld, et al., in press; Widiger and Corbitt, 1993) and will not be examined here. Before examining recent trends in the assessment of psychopathy, however, a review of longstanding problems in its conceptualization is required.

2. The personality-based vs behavior-based conceptualizations

Much of the poor convergence among psychopathy measures (e.g. Hare, 1985a) appears to stem from a persisting disagreement concerning the nature of the psychopathy construct itself. Two approaches to the conceptualization of psychopathy can be distinguished: personality-based and behavior-based (Lilienfeld, 1994). Although operationalizations of these two approaches typically overlap moderately (Harpur et al., 1989), they differ substantially in their assessment implications.

The personality-based approach, which originated largely with Cleckley (1941/1982) (see also Karpman, 1941; McCord and McCord, 1964), regards psychopathy as a constellation of personality traits. Although some disagreement persists regarding the traits comprising psychopathy, virtually all proponents of the personality-based approach agree that