



Construct validation of a self-report psychopathy scale: does Levenson's self-report psychopathy scale measure the same constructs as Hare's psychopathy checklist-revised?

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Abstract

In an effort to validate Levenson, Kiehl and Fitzpatrick's [Levenson, M. R., Kiehl, K. A., & Fitzpatrick, C. M. (1995). Assessing psychopathic attributes in a noninstitutionalized population. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 151–158]. Self-report Psychopathy Scale (SRPS) we compared it to Hare's [Hare, R. D. (1991). *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised*. Toronto: Multi-Health Systems] (PCL-R) and examined its relation to criminal activity and a passive avoidance task. Participants were 270 Caucasian and 279 African-American participants in a minimum security state prison. Confirmatory factor analysis provided modest support for the original SRPS factor structure. Although diagnostic concordance of the two instruments ranged from poor to fair, the SRPS and the PCL-R were significantly correlated and both showed similar patterns of correlations to measures of substance abuse and criminal versatility. Both measures were also predictive of performance on a passive avoidance task. While this constellation of findings provides some evidence for the construct validity of the SRPS, it also suggests that the SRPS may not measure the same construct as the PCL-R and further refinement of the instrument appears to be warranted. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Psychopathy refers to a disorder that begins early in life and is characterized by a variety of antisocial behaviors and exploitative interpersonal relationships. Prototypical psychopathic traits include callous and manipulative use of others, shallow and short-lived affect, irresponsible/impulsive behavior, egocentricity, and pathological lying (Cleckley, 1976). Although this description includes both personality and behavioral characteristics, recent attempts to operationalize

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the psychopathy construct — such as the DSM-IV (APA, 1994) Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) diagnosis — have focused on criminal behaviors as criteria for diagnostic purposes (Hare, 1985a, 1996; Lilienfeld, 1994; Millon, 1981). Researchers dissatisfied with the APD criteria believe that personality features integral to the psychopathy construct are currently underrepresented by DSM diagnostic criteria (Hare, 1985b). Hare (1996), for example, cites work demonstrating that the APD diagnosis identifies a more heterogeneous group than do assessments based on inferred prototypical psychopathic traits.

Trait-based assessments of psychopathy have been derived almost entirely from the work of Cleckley (1976). Using his wealth of clinical experience as a guide, Cleckley was able to extract commonalities from numerous exemplar case studies to define general features which he felt represented the core of the psychopathy construct. Often referred to as the Cleckley criteria, these 16 features included such behaviors as failure to learn from experience and persistent lying as well as personality components such as callousness and egocentricity. Such traits, Cleckley argued, were prototypically psychopathic and might serve as markers for identifying those with the disorder. Although Cleckley's efforts were entirely descriptive and he never presented a formal diagnostic system, he laid the groundwork for future efforts to define psychopathy as a construct capable of reliable identification.

Hare (1980, 1991) took up where Cleckley left off. Concerned that progress in the field was being hampered by the lack of a sound psychometric instrument for the reliable and valid assessment of psychopathy, Hare sought to transform the Cleckley criteria into a reliable diagnostic instrument. The result was the initial Psychopathy Checklist (PCL) and its revision, the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R). Both versions of the checklist were multi-item scales rated on the basis of personal interviews and corroborating information. Items were constructed based on the initial Cleckley criteria, although some were modified so as to be more clearly assessed. Since its publication, the PCL-R (Hare, 1991) has been a widely used measure and has been shown to have excellent psychometric properties in a variety of incarcerated populations (Hare, 1996). Moreover, the development of the PCL-R as a standardized diagnostic tool has provided the foundation for a deluge of much-needed experimental work investigating the nature of the psychopathy construct.

Many intriguing findings about PCL-R defined psychopaths have emerged in the last decade. Among these are studies demonstrating that psychopaths display poor passive avoidance learning (Newman & Kosson, 1986; Newman, Patterson, Howland & Nichols, 1990; Thornquist & Zuckerman, 1995), less differentiated emotional responses to affective stimuli (Patrick, 1994), smaller skin conductance responses to fearful or distressing stimuli (Blair, Jones, Clark & Smith, 1997; Hare, 1978; Ogloff & Wong, 1990), and difficulties processing or producing emotional language (Day & Wong, 1996; Hare, Williamson & Harpur, 1988). Such findings have increased understanding of psychopathic behavior and helped to generate hypotheses about the etiology of psychopathy (for a review, see Hare, 1996).

Although this work has been important to advancing the field of psychopathy, it does have a major limitation. Almost without exception, all of these findings have been obtained using participants from penal institutions. Many people feel that psychopathy necessarily implies criminal activity, but Cleckley (1976) clearly believed it did not. The different case studies Cleckley presented were representative of a surprisingly large cross-section of the population. These individuals were from every social class, both genders, and different ethnic backgrounds. The doctors, lawyers, and dilettantes described by Cleckley were a far cry from the criminals more commonly discussed

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