



# Psychopathy and the dimensions of personality disorder in violent offenders

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## Abstract

The relationship of factors of personality disorder to psychopathy was investigated to determine whether psychopathy is more appropriately construed as a dimension of personality disorder rather than as one of several discrete categories of personality disorder. Comparisons were also made of the associations of personality disorders and psychopathy with measures of established personality dimensions, criminality and lifetime psychopathology. Male violent offenders detained in English prisons and a maximum security psychiatric hospital ( $N=167$ ) were assessed with the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-III Axis II disorders (SCID-II) and the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R). Factor analysis of personality disorder measures yielded four factors identified as impulsivity, detachment, sensitivity and compulsivity. The first three factors were related to measures of the personality dimensions of agreeableness, extraversion and neuroticism, respectively. The PCL-R correlated highly with the impulsivity factor. Both had significant associations with violent and nonviolent criminality, but relationships to psychopathology were limited to substance abuse history. The results replicate previous findings on the dimensional structure of personality disorders and support a dimensional conception of psychopathy. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Key words:* psychopathy; PCL-R; personality disorders; violent offenders; criminality; five-factor model

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## 1. Introduction

The place of psychopathic personality in the classification of personality disorders has long been a source of perplexity. This is reflected not only in historical shifts in the boundaries of the concept

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but also in variations in the extent to which psychopathy has denoted personality deviation rather than simply socially objectionable behaviour (Pichot, 1978; Millon, 1981; Blackburn, 1988). Pichot (1978) observed that the broad class of personality disorders in recent classifications is essentially the generic class of psychopathic personalities originally described by Schneider (1950) and defined as those abnormal personalities who cause suffering for themselves or others. However, within the current classifications of personality disorder in DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and ICD-10 (World Health Organisation, 1992), psychopathy is explicitly identified with the categories of antisocial or dissocial personality disorder.

The more specific concept of psychopathy originates in the work of North American writers such as Gough (1948) and Cleckley (1976) and the operationalisation of this construct by the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R: Hare et al., 1990; Hare, 1991, 1996) has served to establish its validity. The PCL-R consists of 20 items each scored 0–2 from information obtained through a semistructured interview and from case history. Total score provides a homogeneous measure of a unitary construct, and extreme scores reliably discriminate the more recalcitrant offender or forensic psychiatric patient (e.g. Kosson et al., 1990; Harris et al., 1991; Serin, 1996). Further discrimination can be achieved by the subdivision of scores into two oblique factor scales, factor 1 measuring a callous and remorseless style of relating to others, factor 2 a socially deviant lifestyle (Harpur et al., 1989). Factor 1 more closely identifies the central personality characteristics of psychopathy as described by Cleckley and others.

Research with the PCL-R appears to support the utility of a relatively specific concept of psychopathy, but several issues about the relationship of this concept to the classification of personality disorders remain unresolved. The claim that the category of antisocial personality disorder (APD) in DSM-III, DSM-III-R and DSM-IV is equivalent to this concept of psychopathy has been challenged on the grounds that the more central personality traits defining psychopathy are not adequately represented by the criteria for APD (Millon, 1981; Blackburn, 1988; Hare et al., 1991). It has, in fact, been consistently found that although there is a significant association between APD and the PCL-R, APD is more strongly related to factor 2 of the PCL-R than to factor 1 (Hare, 1991). Nevertheless, Cleckley (1976, p. 134) considered the DSM-II version of APD to be “a recognisable entity in a fairly large group of different and distinct disorders”. Hare and Hart (1993, p. 104) similarly describe psychopathy as “a specific form of personality disorder...similar in many respects to the category antisocial personality disorder”. However, the assumption that psychopathy is one of several discrete categories of personality disorder raises questions not only of the degree of specificity of the concept but also whether it is more appropriately construed as a dimension rather than a discrete category.

At the descriptive level, traits associated with psychopathy are not specific to any one category of personality disorder proposed in the current classifications. In DSM-III and DSM-IV, for example, such traits can be detected among the criteria for several personality disorders in addition to APD, notably histrionic (superficial charm, insincerity, egocentricity, manipulativeness), narcissistic (grandiosity, lack of empathy, exploitativeness), borderline (impulsivity, suicidal gestures) and paranoid (mistrust). Cleckley’s “distinct entity” therefore seems to encompass more than a single category of personality disorder. Empirical data also reveal relationships of psychopathy with several disorders. Hart and his colleagues have reported correlations of the PCL-R with both questionnaire and interview-derived diagnoses of the DSM-III-R personality disorders in prison and forensic psychiatric samples (Hart and Hare, 1989; Hart et al., 1991, 1994). In all three studies,

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