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Personality and Individual Differences 39 (2005) 283–295

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Searching for the pan-cultural core of psychopathic personality disorder

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Received 14 April 2004; received in revised form 24 May 2004; accepted 17 January 2005

Available online 9 March 2005

Abstract

Previous research has reported that psychopathy ratings of offenders in Canada and the United States made using the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised were metrically equivalent with each other, but not with ratings of Scottish offenders or with ratings of offenders from the rest of the UK. In this study, we further evaluated the cross-cultural validity of psychopathic personality disorder by comparing ratings from a number of different continental European countries to those from North America. Overall, the findings indicated the presence of a significant culture bias in PCL-R ratings. Cross-cultural stability was highest for symptoms related to deficient affective experience, suggesting that they may be the pan-cultural core of the disorder. The findings are consistent with cultural facilitation models of psychopathology. They have important implications for cross-national comparisons of research based on the PCL-R and implications for the clinical and forensic application of the PCL-R in Europe.

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Keywords: Psychopathy; PCL-R; Cross-cultural; Factor structure; Measurement problems

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1. Introduction

Personality disorders are mental abnormalities characterized by chronic disturbances in relating to self, others, and the environment. Because personality is inherently relational in nature, manifested largely in the interpersonal sphere, culture may have a greater impact on personality disorders than on most other forms of mental disorder (Cross & Markus, 1999). Because complex and manifold social processes encourage interpersonal behaviors consistent with important norms and values (Weisz, Suwanlert, Chaiyasit, & Walter, 1987), personality disorders may tend to be an exaggeration of prevalent patterns of adaptation within a society (Alarcon, Foulks, & Vakkur, 1998).

There has been considerable debate concerning the impact of culture on the expression of psychopathic personality disorder. Historical and anthropological evidence suggests that psychopathic personality disorder is found across time and across cultures (Cooke, 1996), however, it has been speculated that the disorder may be more prevalent in highly individualistic cultures (Lykken, 1995; Paris, 1998). Individualistic cultures promote the development of self-identity that is independent of relationships with others; factors that at their extreme characterize psychopathy are highly valued in individualistic cultures (Cross & Markus, 1999).

To date, there has been little quantitative research on the cross-cultural validity of psychopathic personality disorder (Cooke, 1996). Some studies have examined the distribution of test scores or prevalence of diagnoses across different cultural groups (e.g., Compton et al., 1991; Lorange, 1999; Robins, Tipp, & Przybeck, 1991). Research of this sort is sometimes referred to as the “transport-and-test” approach (Cross & Markus, 1999): researchers take an existing measure, translate it into different languages, and then compare the distribution or reliability of scores across cultures. There are several problems with this strategy (Cooke & Michie, 2002; Cross & Markus, 1999; Lopez & Gurnaccia, 2000; Rogler, 1999). First, although it is relatively straight-forward to translate a test into another language, it is not at all easy to ensure the *cultural equivalence* of literal translations. Second, tests may lack *cultural relevance*, even when they have been translated adequately. It is always possible to administer an old test in a new culture and obtain scores, but it is not at all certain that the validity of test scores is the same across cultures. Third, even assuming cultural equivalence, and cultural relevance of a test, most commonly-used statistics do not provide an adequate means of evaluating potential *cultural bias*. Methods and indexes commonly used to describe the distribution and structure of scores—such as the mean and standard deviation of total scores and the internal consistency—do not provide a strong test of whether individual items and total scores operate equivalently across cultures. Specialized techniques including Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Item Response Theory (IRT) methods are preferable (Cooke & Michie, 2002; Embretson & Reise, 2000; Lopez & Gurnaccia, 2000).

The PCL-R (Hare, 2003) is a 20-item symptom rating scale of psychopathic personality disorder intended for use in forensic settings. The test manual provides a definition of each item, and evaluators rate the lifetime presence of symptoms on a three-point scale (0–2) on the basis of an interview with the subject and a review of case history information.

The PCL-R is North American by birth: it was developed originally in Canada, written in English, and validated primarily in Canada and the United States. Psychometric evaluations conducted within the framework of Classical Test Theory (CTT) indicate that the test has high

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