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A NEW CRYSTAL BALL

Reliability concerns plague a widely-used test for psychopathy

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Can someone be tested for psychopathy? And if so, are the results useful? These are some of the tantalizing questions addressed by [a thought-provoking NPR report](#) that examines the promises and consequences of trying to apply scientific knowledge to identify persons who assumedly pose the gravest threats to society.

As used today, the construct of psychopathy was popularized by Dr. Robert D. Hare, a psychologist who was skeptical of the usefulness of [Antisocial Personality Disorder \(ASPD\)](#). Unlike psychopathy, ASPD is officially recognized as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association. A diagnosis of ASPD, though, isn't based on underlying traits such as impulsivity and lack of empathy [but is wholly defined by behavior](#); for example, having an arrest record or being repeatedly out of work. Dr. Hare worried that ASPD's lack of a theoretical basis could lead psychologically dissimilar persons to be lumped together. There was also no way to distinguish persons with ASPD from psychopaths, a character type that had drawn his interest. So he decided to find one.

Twenty-eight years ago, at a time when violent crime rocked the U.S., Robert Dixon Jr. was very much part of the problem. Raised in Oakland, California, a community that remains one of the most dangerous in America, Dixon had been convicted as a youth for a beating and a rape. Then one day he and a friend robbed a man. Soon the victim lay dead of a bullet wound (it was supposedly fired by Dixon's partner.) Dixon was arrested and got fifteen to life.

He became eligible for parole in 2009. As part of the process a psychologist administered the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), an exam that's been found useful in predicting violent recidivism. Dixon scored high, which in this test isn't a good thing. According to the psychologist, "Mr. Dixon obtained a total score on the PCL-R which placed him in the high range of the clinical construct of psychopathy." In other words, Dixon was a certified psychopath. It's a label that will likely keep him imprisoned for a good while longer.

Dixon has one man to thank for that exam. Dr. Hare's research took him to penal institutions in his home country of Canada. There he developed a scale to identify

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inmates [who fit the ideal type of a psychopath](#): “remorseless predators who use charm, intimidation and, if necessary, impulsive and cold-blooded violence to attain their ends.” His tests revealed that only 15-20 percent of prisoners scored high enough to make the cut. Those who did also tended to be rearrested more frequently once released. Indeed, [a recent, independent meta-analysis](#) of nearly 100 studies confirmed that higher PCL-R scores were associated with future antisocial and violent behavior.

1	Glibness, superficial charm	11	Promiscuous sexual behavior
2	Grandiose sense of self-worth	12	Early behavior problems
3	Need for stimulation	13	Lack of realistic goals
4	Pathological lying	14	Impulsivity
5	Cunning, manipulative	15	Irresponsibility
6	Lack of remorse or guilt	16	Failure to accept responsibility
7	Shallow affect	17	Many short-term relationships
8	Callousness, lack of empathy	18	Juvenile delinquency
9	Parasitic lifestyle	19	Revocation of conditional release
10	Poor behavioral controls	20	Criminal versatility

The PCL-R has twenty items. Administering it is a two-step process that includes a lengthy, approximate 90-minute interview and an extensive review of the subject’s prison, police and clinical records. Psychologists use this information to rate items on a 0-1-2 scale, with 0 signifying the absence of a characteristic and 2 its definite presence. A score of 30 points or higher (the maximum is 40) defines a psychopath. According to Hare, the average score for offenders is 22; for non-criminals it’s supposedly only 5.

Hare’s scale has been subject to extensive validation. Most studies agree that it identifies a select group of hardened offenders. Really, the indicators encompass so many damning traits (cunning, manipulative) and behaviors (juvenile delinquency, criminal versatility) that it could hardly be otherwise.

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For sure, something's getting measured. But is it the construct of "psychopathy"? To the extent that PCL-R items reflect behaviors (i.e., 11, 12, 18, 19, 20) rather than traits (i.e., 1, 2, 5, 7) the test seems vulnerable to the same objections that Dr. Hare flung at the ASPD: that it describes rather than explains. Perhaps a psychopath is simply someone so screwed up that they manage to breach the PCL-R's arbitrary threshold.

Factor analysis is a statistical technique that assesses the inter-connectedness of items. [When Dr. Hare and his colleagues applied it to actual sets of PCL-R data](#) two underlying dimensions became evident. Factor 1, which Dr. Hare defined as the "selfish, callous, and remorseless use of others," includes items 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 16. Factor 2, "a chronically unstable, antisocial, and socially deviant lifestyle," includes items 3, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19. (Items 11, 17 and 20 were the only loners.)

Assume that these two latent mega-traits are real. Does that suggest that the larger construct of psychopathy also exists? Dr. Hare says "yes." Others aren't so sure. In "[Psychopathic, not Psychopath](#)" Edens and his co-authors argue that the case for a "taxonic" (meaning categorical, yes/no definition of psychopathy) is yet to be made:

To the extent that our results undermine the implicit or explicit legal presumption that psychopaths are a discrete category of criminals, they suggest that it is largely arbitrary to draw precise categorical boundaries between psychopathic and nonpsychopathic offenders. Although decision makers can and do use PCL-R scores to inform legal decisions that are by definition categorical (e.g., presence or absence of a behavioral abnormality, indeterminate commitment), there is no clear scientific evidence for a natural breaking point at which such categories should be defined regarding psychopathy.

Even if psychopathy is a fiction, the PCL-R could be a cost-effective way to decide whether inmates such as Robert Dixon Jr. should be released, and when. Since high scorers are notoriously unresponsive to treatment, the test might also help judges mete out more appropriate punishments. Surprisingly, though, it's when PCL-R is applied this way that its creator seems the most reticent. Although Dr. Hare earns royalties from the sale of the test, its use outside the laboratory leaves him conflicted. "I feel ambivalent about it," he admits.

Dr. Hare is right to be concerned. Studies by Murrie, Bocaccini et al of sex offenders being evaluated for civil commitment suggest that when the PCL-R is administered and scored for penal purposes things can easily go wrong. In [one example](#) mean PCL-R scores assigned by two "prolific" contract psychologists differed by nearly ten points. In [another](#) PCL-R scores assigned by prosecution and defense psychologists were

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consistently biased in their client's direction. Of course, [Pearson](#) isn't about to pull a popular and profitable test from the market just because a few researchers are whining. And there's no indication that Dr. Hare, who conducts training seminars on the PCL-R, has asked them to.

Dixon's family hired their own psychologist. As one might expect, [he contradicted the state psychologist](#): "I concluded that [Dixon] has developed, among other things, a sense of caring, an ability to be compassionate with other people, that he's matured in that way." But as long as that high score on the PCL-R stands, the expert's opinion counts for little. In March [the California parole board formally rejected a request](#) that the PCL-R and other psychometric tools not be used because they are unreliable. PCL-R may be the psychological equivalent of a crystal ball, but it affords a patina of objectivity that is highly prized by those who make sentencing and release decisions. If its use might occasionally exaggerate the threat posed by criminals and lead to their prolonged and unnecessary incarceration, it's a cost that society seems more than willing to bear.