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Problems with the Psychopathy Construct

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Title: Problems with the Psychopathy Construct

Author: Editor

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Abstract. This article highlights problems with the construct validity of psychopathy at the interface of clinical and social description.

The construct of psychopathy often denotes at least four classes of descriptors. Behaviorally, people to whom psychopathy is attributed are assumed to violate social norms, become engaged in criminal behavior, and manipulate others more often than other people do. Affectively, they are assumed to be emotionally labile--i.e., experiencing emotions that change--more than or more often than others. Cognitively, they are assumed to be primed to attend to information that is concrete and of immediate personal relevance, very responsive to reward contingencies and much less responsive to punishment contingencies, and experience difficulties in shifting awareness of changes in such contingencies more than others. As to concatenations of cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral aspects--often called personality traits--people to whom psychopathy is attributed are assumed to be narcissistic, impulsive, and sensation seeking more than others.

One critique of psychopathy's construct validity is that the various classes of descriptors approach tautological status--just different ways of describing a naive phenomenology of violating laws, rules, and norms. For example, one violates in quest of the positive and is not dissuaded by the potential negative. Problems in shifting awareness of contingency changes inexorably lead to a higher probability of being identified as a violator. Affective lability precludes an aversive emotional state of long duration with a concomitant lessened probability of suffering from mistakes and learning from them. The empirical data seemingly supporting psychopathy's construct validity is in actuality supporting the language used by experimenter's and subjects alike in describing the tautology--not the ontological status of affective and cognitive phenomena of behavior labeled psychopathic.

More basically, psychopathy--even more than other psychological constructs--cannot be meaningfully divorced from sociocultural, historical, and ultimately, political contexts. The psychopathy construct yields a narrative of and on violation--apparently consensual across cultures. It is not causally related to violation but constitutes the latter's text. (See Cleckley, H. (1976). *The mask of sanity*. St Louis, MO: Mosby; Cooke, D.J., & Michie, C. (1999). *Psychopathy across cultures: North America and Scotland compared*. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 108, 58-68; Edwards, D., & Potter, J. (1993). *Language and causation: A discursive action model of description and attribution*. *Psychological Review*, 100, 23-41; *Leadership and psychopathy*. (November 8, 1996). *IBPP*, 1(2); Murphy, J. M. (March 12, 1976). *Psychiatric labeling in cross-cultural perspective: Similar kinds of disturbed behavior appear to be labeled abnormal in diverse cultures*. *Science*, 191, 1019-1028; Robins, L. N., Tipp, J. & Przybeck, T. (1991). *Psychiatric disorders in America*. In L. N. Robins & D. A. Regier (Eds.), *Antisocial personality disorder* (pp. 258-290). New York: Free Press.) (Keywords: Psychopathy, Typology.)