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Problems with the Psychopathy Construct

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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 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 naïve 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.