Development and validation of the super-short form of the Elemental Psychopathy Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Current measures of psychopathy are limited in a number of ways, including length, administration methods, and reliance on history of antisocial behavior. Both the full and short forms of the Elemental Psychopathy Assessment (EPA) have demonstrated convergent validity and strong relations to other psychopathy measures and external criteria empirically associated with psychopathy.
Methods: In order to create an even briefer version of the EPA-SF, the EPA was administered to two separate undergraduate samples (n = 907 and n = 787) and a smaller sample of male prison inmates (n = 77) along with widely used measures of psychopathy and measures of Big Five personality traits and antisocial behavior.
Results: Eighteen items (one per EPA subscale) were chosen to comprise the final "super-short" form. Exploratory factor analyses performed at the item level showed a three-factor solution (Antagonism, Disinhibition, and Emotional Stability). The factor scales and total score of the EPA super-short form demonstrated strong relations to other psychopathy measures and external criteria associated with psychopathy.
Conclusions: The EPA super-short form could be a promising alternative to other psychopathy measures currently used in criminology due to its brevity and basis in an empirically validated personality model.

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1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a complex personality construct with a long history in personality and clinical psychology (Cleckley, 1941), characterized by dysfunction in a number of areas. Interpersonally, psychopaths tend to be antagonistic, dominant, and exhibit superficial charm. Affectively, psychopaths can be described as callous, lacking self-directed negative affect and empathy, and demonstrating negative other-directed affect. Behaviorally, psychopaths tend to exhibit pan-impulsivity (Lynam et al., 2011) and a number of externalizing behaviors, including substance use (e.g., Lynam et al., 2013; Gustavson et al., 2007), aggression (e.g., Walters, 2003), and sexual offending (e.g., Knight & Guay, 2006). Much of the interest in psychopathy is driven by its relatively strong relations with antisocial behaviors (e.g., Lykken, 1995; Hare & Neumann, 2008), particularly violence and criminality. The Hare Psychopathy Checklist (PCL; e.g., Hare, 1991; 2003) family of measures has consistently yielded moderate to large effect sizes for predicting violent recidivism among both juvenile and adult offenders (Rice & Harris, 2013), and also more accurately predicted recidivism than a widely used violence risk assessment tool, the HCR-20.

Because of the strong theoretical and empirical overlap between psychopathy and criminal and antisocial behavior (e.g., Hare, 1999), psychopathy is emerging as an important construct in criminology (e.g., Polaschek & Daly, 2013). DeLisi (2009) argued that psychopathy should be considered the unified theory of crime because of its embodiment of the "pejorative essence of antisocial behavior" as well as its ability to accommodate both dimensional and categorical conceptualizations of antisocial behavior across diverse populations. DeLisi et al. (2014) argue that one possible mechanism for psychopathy's relationship with antisocial behavior and criminality is moral disengagement, defined as the tendency to selectively disengage from moral censure. Moral disengagement allows for an individual to engage in often self-serving behaviors that are in contrast with moral principles without feeling guilt or remorse (DeLisi et al., 2014). The callousness that characterizes psychopathic individuals directly relates to moral disengagement as it prevents the individual from emotionally relating to others, which is required to trigger self-conscious emotions such as guilt or shame. Without guilt or shame, the impetus to inhibit antisocial behaviors is missing; for this reason, it is unsurprising that individuals with

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high levels of psychopathy continue to commit antisocial behaviors (DeLisi et al., 2014).

Some research suggests that psychopathy may be useful in identifying the prolific but small group of offenders (Wolfgang et al., 1972; Tracy, Wolfgang, & Figlio, 1990; Hare, 1999) sometimes described as "career criminals" (Vaughn & DeLisi, 2008). A recent study (Vaughn & DeLisi, 2008) found that psychopathic traits nearly doubled the total explanatory power for career criminality when demographic and mental health variables had been taken into account. In addition, psychopathic traits demonstrated 70–88% accuracy when predicting career criminal membership (Vaughn & DeLisi, 2008). Thus, although multiple environmental factors have also been implicated in becoming a career criminal, such as substance use history and having parents who are criminal offenders, personality traits seem to play a significant role in determining delinquent and violent activity (Loeber et al., 2001).

Criminologists initially eschewed the concept of psychopathy (and personality in general), even though psychopathy overlapped to some degree with other constructs within criminology. Perhaps the closest example was Gottfredson and Hirshci's (1990) construct of self-control, although the authors explicitly distanced themselves from psychology. In a revised version of this model, Hirschi (2004) acknowledged that the initial description of self-control was similar to a personality trait; however, he argued that self-control should not be considered a personality trait and expressed regret at using language from psychology. One explanation for the field's reluctance to use psychological models to understand the etiology of criminal behaviors is that some measures include explicit assessments of antisocial and other externalizing behaviors, which leads to a potential tautology in which one measure of antisocial behavior is used to predict another measure of antisocial behavior. A second explanation is the potentially pejorative connotation of the term "psychopath," a label which some criminologists argue could lead to harmful stigmatization (Walters, 2004).

These problems would seem to depend upon the measure employed. The most widely used psychopathy measure in forensic research is Hare's Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 1991; 2003), adapted from the original PCL, which was modeled after Cleckley's (1941) conceptualization of psychopathy. The PCL-R consists of 20 items that are rated by an interviewer following an interview and a review of records. Antisocial behavior is directly built into the measure. Several items explicitly assess antisocial behavior—early behavior problems, juvenile delinquency, revocation of conditional release, and criminal versatility. Several more items instruct the interviewer to rely on certain types of antisocial behavior when making a rating; for example, interviewers are instructed to look for criminal charges for fraud and embezzlement in rating Conning/Manipulative or for charges and convictions that involve spontaneous and unprovoked violence to rate Poor Behavioral Controls. This problem with predictor-criterion overlap is also present for the self-report scales that are based on the conception of psychopathy inherent in the PCL-R including the commonly used Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP; Hare, 1985; SRP-II; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press).

Personality researchers have worked to develop new measures using trait-based and theoretically grounded definitions of psychopathy that rely less heavily on the explicit assessment of antisocial behavior. The first was the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996; now PPI-Revised; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005), developed in an attempt to measure the specific personality traits composing psychopathy without assuming any links to antisocial or criminal behavior. The PPI-R is a self-report scale comprised of 154 items organized into eight subscales, seven of which load onto two higher-order factors: Fearless Dominance and Self-Centered Impulsivity; the Coldheartedness scale does not load on either factor. The modified short form (mPPI-SV) consisting of 56 items has been used in criminology with some success, particularly among juvenile justice-involved adolescents (Vaughn & Howard, 2005). Similarly, the Triarchic Psychopathy Measure (TriPM; Patrick, 2010) was developed based on a three-factor

conceptualization of psychopathy that includes Boldness, Meanness, and Disinhibition. Although the TriPM total score has demonstrated strong correlations with total scores of the PPI and SRP-III ($rs = 0.78$ and 0.69), its individual factors, particularly Boldness, have shown less consistent relations with similar subscales of other measures (Drislane, Patrick, & Arsal, 2014). The TriPM is also limited by the fact that it is relatively new, was developed outside of academic peer review (Evans & Tully, 2016), and includes items that assess frankly antisocial behavior (e.g., "I have robbed someone," and "I have stolen something out of a vehicle"). Despite these limitations, the TriPM demonstrated good construct validity in a sample of incarcerated offenders (Stanley, Wygant, & Sellbom, 2013).

The Elemental Psychopathy Assessment (EPA; Lynam et al., 2011) was developed using single traits from the five-factor model (FFM) of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992)-a model derived from basic research on personality without reference to any kind of behavioral outcome or specific form of psychopathology. The FFM was originally derived from work on natural language (i.e., how people talk about people), which ensures that important aspects of personality are represented (John & Srivastava, 1999). As assessed by the NEO Personality Inventory – Revised (NEO PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992), the FFM includes five broad personality domains: agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, openness, and neuroticism. Each of these domains includes six underlying facets, providing a lexicon of 30 facets. Agreeableness is characterized by warmth and compassion, including facets such as sympathy and altruism. Those low on agreeableness tend to be competitive and antagonistic toward others. Neuroticism encompasses traits such as anger, anxiety, and vulnerability, and represents one's emotional stability (or instability). Individuals who have high levels of extraversion tend to be outgoing and assertive; in contrast, those with low extraversion scores tend to be reserved and shy. Openness represents an individual's openness to experience and is comprised of traits such as intellectual curiosity and imagination. Finally, individuals who have high levels of conscientiousness demonstrate a sense of responsibility toward others and demonstrate dutiful and well-thought-out behavior. The FFM has received much empirical support in terms of its convergent and discriminant validity across self, peer, and spouse ratings (Costa & McCrae, 1988), cross-cultural support (Ashton & Lee, 2001), and behavioral genetic support (Yamagata et al., 2006). It has also been shown to relate to important outcomes, such as antisocial behavior (Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011; Miller, Lynam, & Leukefeld, 2003) academic achievement (Poropat, 2009), psychological (Samuel & Widiger, 2008) and physical health (Bogg & Roberts, 2004), substance use and abuse (Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, & Watson, 2010), and risky sexual behavior (Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000).

Rather than beginning with a theoretical description of psychopathy and generating items to assess the features of that description, the EPA was developed by examining which FFM traits described psychopathy across a variety of approaches, including expert ratings of the prototypical psychopath (Miller, Lynam, Widiger, & Leukefeld, 2001), correlational profiles (e.g., Derefinko & Lynam, 2006), and translations of PCL-R items into FFM traits (Widiger & Lynam, 1998). Using a validated personality model to understand disordered personality is useful because it provides an elemental, trait-based language that can be used to describe complex personality constructs; the benefits of this approach are demonstrated by its inclusion as an alternative model of personality disorder (PD) diagnosis in the newest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Further, it provides a dimensional definition to a construct previously described as dichotomous and gives a multi-faceted definition that can be widely understood across fields, which may alleviate prior concerns voiced in criminology literature (Walters, 2004). Using the FFM, psychopathy has been characterized by extremely low agreeableness and conscientiousness, as well as a combination of high and low traits comprising neuroticism (e.g., higher anger; low anxiety) and extraversion (e.g., high assertiveness and