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Discipline: Personality and Psychopathology

Title: Assessment of psychopathic traits across the life-span (including older age)

Abstract: Psychopathy is a personality construct consisting of interpersonal, affective and behavioral features. Psychopathic traits are dimensional in nature and are present in both criminal and non-criminal populations (Hare & Neumann, 2008). Despite the large bulk of psychopathy research, there are almost no studies tackling the age-neutrality of psychopathy assessment instruments across the life-span. In 1994 Harpur and Hare studied the assessment of psychopathy as a function of age. They concluded that affective-interpersonal traits were more stable across the life-span, whereas traits and behaviors associated with an unstable, unsocialized lifestyle, or social deviance declined with age. A more recent study of Vachon et al. (2013) indicates that personality-trait information predicts the rate of decline for psychopathy over the life span. Although these studies suggest age-related differences in the expression of traits associated with psychopathy, no study has yet focused on the psychometrics of psychopathy measures among older people (Holzer & Vaughn, 2018).

An age-neutral measurement system is one of the basic conditions for an accurate personality assessment across the lifespan, both longitudinally and cross-sectionally. Often questionnaires measuring personality and personality pathology of criteria for personality disorders have been developed in younger to mid-adult populations, and are consequently not attuned to an older life context. For example based on item response theory analyses in a large, cross-sectional study of 37,000 participants, Balsis and colleagues (2007) concluded that 29% of the DSM-IV Axis II criteria lack face validity in older age groups, hence possibly leading to over- or underdiagnosis of personality pathology in old age populations. Unfortunately, the presentation of later life was not explicitly considered in the construction of psychopathy measures. Therefore studies on the age-neutrality of psychopathy instruments, giving special attention to older age, and to differential prevalence rate of deviant personality traits across the life span are sorely needed.

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