

## A Rorschach Investigation of Narcissism and Hysteria in Antisocial Personality

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We investigated Rorschach responses associated with narcissism and hysteria in a group of antisocial personality disordered offenders. The Rorschach protocols of 42 subjects who met the criteria from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed., rev. [DSM-III-R]; American Psychiatric Association, 1987) for antisocial personality disorder were analyzed using Exner's (1986) criteria for pairs, reflections, and personal responses, and Gacono's (1988) criteria for the impressionistic response. Severe, or primary psychopaths ( $n = 21$ ), scoring  $\geq 30$  on the Hare (1980) Psychopathy Checklist (PCL), were compared to moderate, or secondary psychopaths ( $n = 21$ ), scoring  $< 30$  on the PCL.

The mean number of pair and impressionistic responses did not significantly differ for the two antisocial groups. The highly psychopathic group, however, did exhibit a significantly greater mean number of reflection and personal responses. We discuss pair and reflection responses and their relationship to narcissism in psychopathic disturbance. We recommend interpreting the personal response within the context of the psychopathic character and view personal responses as expressions of narcissism and omnipotence in highly psychopathic subjects. We also hypothesize that the impressionistic responses are indicative of primitive dissociative processes and hysteria in psychopathic subjects, and that their presence provides construct validity for the work of Guze (1976) and others who suggested an underlying histrionic dimension to psychopathy.

Narcissism is one of two primary factors associated with psychopathic disturbance (Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989). Hysteria has also been linked to

psychopathy (Guze, 1976; Guze, Woodruff, & Clayton, 1971; Hart & Hare, 1989; Meloy, 1988). Psychodynamic theorists have come to view the psychopath as an aggressive and pathological variant of narcissistic disorder (Gacono & Meloy, 1988; Kernberg, 1975; Meloy, 1988) whose intrapsychic functioning relies on primitive splitting and dissociative mechanisms (Gacono & Meloy, 1988; Meloy, 1988). Although antisocial personalities have been found to be more egocentric than other diagnostic groups (Exner, 1969, 1973), their degree of narcissism has not always correlated with level of psychopathy (Gacono, 1988, 1990; Heaven, 1988).

The relationship between the Rorschach pair and reflection (both form and nonform) responses and narcissism has been discussed (Kwawer, 1980; Lerner, 1988; Meloy, 1988; Smith, 1980) and demonstrated (Exner, 1969, 1973) by researchers. These indices tend to increase in narcissistic individuals. The combination of pairs and reflections has been theorized to be an empirical measure of the grandiose self-structure (Kernberg, 1975) in psychopathic individuals (Meloy, 1988).

Although the personal response (PER) has been associated with narcissism (Lerner, 1988) and omnipotence (Cooper & Arnow, 1986; Cooper, Perry, & Arnow, 1988), it was not utilized in formulating the egocentricity ratio (Exner, 1986) which Exner linked to narcissism. In fact, within Exner's (1986) character disordered sample, felons' and nonfelons' mean number of personal responses were not compared (Exner, personal communication, 1989).

We decided to investigate Exner's (1986) pair, reflection, and PERS, and Gacono's (1988, 1990) impressionistic response in samples of primary psychopaths and moderate psychopaths who were antisocial personality disordered (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) offenders. We predicted a greater proportion of these responses would be produced by severe (primary) psychopaths.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Subjects were 42 male felons who met the *DSM-III-R* (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) criteria for antisocial personality disorder. They were between the ages of 18 and 43 ( $M = 28$ ) and free of a diagnosis of schizophrenia, mental retardation, or bipolar illness. Subjects with an  $IQ < 80$  were excluded. The mean  $IQ$  for subjects was 101.87. The diagnosis for antisocial personality disorder was determined utilizing both interview and record data and was based on agreement among any pair of the authors.

All subjects were voluntary participants selected from inmates incarcerated in a California state prison or county jail or metropolitan federal correctional

facility in San Diego County. Subjects were taken from a randomly selected pool ( $N = 60$ ) of antisocial personality disordered (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) inmates who had been rated on the Hare (1980) PCL. Twenty-one subjects were Caucasian (50%), 11 were Black (26.2%), 9 were Hispanic (21.4%), and 1 subject was Black and Samoan (2.4%).

### Instruments

The subjects for this study were administered the Rorschach Inkblot Technique (Rorschach, 1942) using the Comprehensive System (Exner, 1986). Intelligence estimates were taken from scores on the Shipley Institute of Living Scale (Shipley, 1940; Zachary, 1986) and the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised (WAIS-R; Wechsler, 1981). Subjects also participated in a semistructured interview by two researchers to reliably determine, in conjunction with a review of records, their score on the PCL (Hare, 1980).

Rorschach protocols were scored for selected Exner indices (pair, reflection, and PERS) and Gacono's (1988, 1990) impressionistic response. Gacono (1988, 1990) defined the impressionistic response (IMP) as associations to the blot stimulated by color and containing abstract concepts or events. Using Exner (1986) scoring, the impressionistic response must include achromatic or chromatic color and an abstraction (Ab). Examples include: "The red made me think of Christmas" (Card II), "The red made me think of abortion" (Card III), "I see laughter and gaiety. The colors" (Card X), and "These would be angry thoughts, because they're red" (Card II). Temperature responses stimulated by colors are also included in this category.

The PCL was used to determine a subject's level of psychopathy. Hare utilized Cleckley's (1941) criteria to establish his 20-item, 40-point scale. The PCL has been found to be both a reliable and valid measure of psychopathy in prison populations. Interrater reliabilities have ranged from .88 to .92, whereas test-retest reliabilities have ranged from .85 to .90 (Schroeder, Schroeder, & Hare, 1983). Criminals scoring high on the Hare scale ( $\geq 30$ ) have been found to differ significantly from low scorers ( $< 30$ ) in lower levels of physiological responding (Hare, 1965, 1966; Hare, Frazelle, & Cox, 1978), greater quantity and variety of offenses committed (Hare & Jutai, 1983), greater frequency of violent offenses (Hare & McPherson, 1984), greater likelihood of reoffending, and lengthier criminal careers (Hare, McPherson, & Forth, 1988).

### Procedure

Two hundred two records were randomly selected from the files of the entire inmate population of a California state correctional facility. An initial sample of 102 records was selected based on successive admission to the facility between

July 1987 and September 1987. An additional 100 records were screened for admissions after September 1987 and are part of our ongoing research.

Of the initial sample ( $N = 102$ ), Gacono (the first author) and Heaven (the third author) determined that 75% ( $N = 76$ ) of the inmates met criteria for the diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder. Of the 76 inmates, 34 refused to participate, 4 were excluded because the researchers determined that they met *DSM-III-R* criteria for schizotypal or schizophrenic disorder, 1 completed the testing but refused to participate in the interview process, and 13 were eliminated from the subject pool due to low intelligence ( $IQ < 80$ ). Twenty-six subjects were obtained from the state prison and from the initial sample ( $N = 102$ ). Seven subjects were included from the second record screening ( $n = 100$ ). Nine additional subjects were inmates from other correctional facilities within San Diego County, including a probation violator preparing to be sentenced to prison.

Each subject completed an intelligence measure and the Rorschach. Once testing was completed, the subject participated in a structured interview for the purpose of completing the PCL. The interviews were conducted by one researcher and observed by the other. PCL scores for each subject were rated independently by each researcher. An average of the researchers' scores represented the final score. The PCL score was used to order the subjects on a psychopathy continuum from 0 to 40 (Meloy, 1988). Subjects were then placed into either a severe psychopathy ( $\geq 30$ ) or moderate psychopathy group ( $< 30$ ).

Rorschach protocols were scored blind to the psychopathy rating or interview data. As suggested by Exner (1986), protocols with 11 or fewer responses were considered invalid if Lambda ( $L$ ) was greater than 1.2 (Exner, 1986). Only one subject included in this study had 11 responses, the remaining subjects produced  $\geq 13$  responses.

### Analysis of Data

Means, standard deviations, and ranges were determined for age, approximate IQ, PCL scores, egocentricity ratio, and number and type of Rorschach response (refer to Table 1). Because of the small sample size and distributions that did not approximate normal curves, means for all variables were compared between the severe psychopathy and moderate psychopathy groups utilizing the Mann-Whitney  $U$  nonparametric test. Findings were considered to be significant if they reached the .05 level. Spearman's Rho (Siegel, 1956) was used to assess the degree of agreement between the two raters' PCL scores.

## RESULTS

We placed 21 subjects in the severe psychopathy group (mean PCL score = 33.4) and 21 subjects in the moderate psychopathy group (mean PCL score = 23.90).

TABLE 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Frequencies for Pair, Reflection, Personal, and  
Impressionistic Rorschach Responses in Psychopaths

Category	Severe Psychopathy (n = 21)			Moderate Psychopathy (n = 21)		
	M	SD	Frequency	M	SD	Frequency
Pair	5.52	3.72	21	5.19	2.58	21
Reflection	.86*	1.06	10	.14*	.36	3
Egocentricity Ratio	.46*	.18	21	.30*	.14	21
Personal	3.05*	2.64	17	1.33*	1.35	14
Impressionistic	.43	.81	6	.24	.89	1
	Nonpatient Adults <sup>a</sup> (n = 600)			Outpatient Character Disorders <sup>a</sup> (n = 200)		
Pair	8.44	2.65	600	6.59	2.43	198
Reflection	.12	.46	47	.41	.54	63
Egocentricity Ratio	.39	.11	600	.42	.17	600
Personal	1.06	1.01	406	.86	1.57	93

<sup>a</sup>Based on data reported by Exner (1985), which are included for comparison purposes and are not analyzed statistically in relation to the psychopathy groups.

<sup>a</sup>Mann-Whitney *U* analysis yielded significant differences for reflections  $p = .04$ , personals  $p = .02$ , and the egocentricity ratio  $p = .004$ . Frequencies equal the number of individual subjects who produced at least one response in the given category.

A comparison of the two raters' psychopathy scores produced a Spearman Rho of .89. There were no significant differences between groups in relation to intelligence, age, or total number of Rorschach responses.

### Rorschach Variables

Consistent with previous findings (Heaven, 1988), there was no significant difference between the severe psychopathy and moderate psychopathy groups in number of pair responses (see Table 1). Like the Exner nonpatient adults and outpatient character disorders, all subjects produced at least one pair response regardless of psychopathy level. The severe psychopathy group did produce a significantly greater,  $p = .04$ , number of reflection responses than the moderate group. In comparing groups (See Table 1), 48% of the high psychopathy group, 31% of the outpatient character disorders, 14% of the moderate psychopaths, and 8% of the nonpatient adults produced at least one reflection. As the egocentricity ratio is directly affected by the number of reflection responses, it also differentiated between the psychopathy groups,  $p = .004$ . The mean score for the severe psychopaths (see Table 1) exceeded both the Exner nonpatient adults and outpatient character disordered groups, and the mean egocentricity score for the moderate psychopaths fell below all groups. Although this trend is

consistent with our predictions, we suggest a conservative interpretation of this finding. Previous findings (Gacono, 1988, 1990; Heaven, 1988) have failed to correlate level of psychopathy with the egocentricity ratio or degree of narcissism within an antisocial sample.

Consistent with previous findings (Heaven, 1988), the severe psychopathy group produced a significantly greater number of personal responses,  $p = .02$ , than the moderate psychopathy group. Although 81% of the severe psychopaths produced at least one personal, only 66% of moderate psychopaths, 47% of the outpatient character disorders, and 68% of nonpatient adults produced this type of response.

The impressionistic response did not statistically discriminate between the two psychopathy groups, although 29% of the highly psychopathic individuals produced this response compared to only 5% of the moderate group.

## DISCUSSION

We think the personal response may be an important discriminating variable for psychopathy within antisocial samples and possibly other character disordered samples. The personal response has been interpreted as a defensive maneuver used by subjects needing to protect their self-image or as a means to fend off a possible challenge from the examiner (Exner, 1986). Personal responses may also represent an identification with the aggressor (A. Freud, 1936/1966) in psychopathic subjects. The examiner is perceived as a potential threat to the psychopath's grandiosity. Through presentation of the self-referential, overvalued personal response (a form of omnipotence), the psychopath bolsters his grandiosity by identifying with the perceived omnipotence of the examiner, thereby preventing any feelings of vulnerability or devaluation.

In lower levels of psychopathy, we observed the personal response to aid the subject defensively by providing a "last ditch" rationale for a self-perceived inadequate response or explanation. In these cases, self-reference becomes the final avenue for providing an explanation and maintaining grandiosity, but for the highly psychopathic individual, it is often the first choice.

Because indices of narcissism have failed to correlate with level of psychopathy previously (Gacono, 1988, 1990; Heaven, 1988), we cautiously interpret the significance of the egocentricity ratio finding, pending evaluation with a larger sample size. We do not, for example, interpret the similar mean reflection scores or egocentricity ratios (see Table 1) between the Exner outpatient adults and the moderate psychopaths as indicating similar levels of narcissism. In fact, Exner (1969, 1973) demonstrated the difference between antisocial personalities and normals on these indices. Rather, the low mean egocentricity ratios for the moderate psychopaths suggests a reduced effectiveness for bolstering grandiosity and warding off the disruptive effects of internal

(anxiety) and external (incarceration) threat. The internal regulating mechanisms of the severe psychopath are less tenuous. For some character disorders, both the pair and reflection responses may represent two different developmental levels of narcissism (Kohut, 1971), twinship and mirroring; in primary psychopaths, an increase in reflections may represent a more regressed form of narcissism.

Although Exner (1986) divided the reflection response into only form (Fr) and nonform (rF) dominated, our evaluation of severe psychopaths prompted us to define another type of reflection, the pure reflection response (*r*). In this type of reflection, there is an absence of form of object. For example, a severe psychopath ( $\geq 30$ ), who was a violent rapist, provided the following response to Card III: "Strange, each picture has a line in the middle and has somewhat the same reflection." (Inquiry?) "Center of the card is the same reflection of the other side, not exact but close." Formless or pure *r* in the severe psychopath may indicate a global, diffuse, and suggestible perceptual-associative process, what Shapiro (1965) termed "hysterical cognition" (p. 111). This same subject's record included three personals (PER) and one impressionistic response indicative of self-referenced hysterical cognition.

Sometimes the reflection response in the severe psychopath includes only a reflection of the object and not the object itself. A severe psychopath presented the following response to Card VI: "A reflection off the water." (Inquiry?) "If you're on a lake sometime and looking at a bank, you will see the reflection of the bank" (What makes it look like a reflection?), "I think I just described it." In this response, the mirror is more important than the object itself. Confusion between object and mirror is also exhibited in this partial response from another severe psychopath who committed a rape and murder. He saw "a male gorilla watching his reflection in a pool" on Card III and responded: "Yea, that's interesting. If one was looking down into a pool you would see themselves, not a reflection." The presence of "reflection only" and "confused reflection" responses may support the clinical and theoretical assertion that severe psychopaths are chameleonlike and find their identity through the imitation and simulation of others (Deutsch, 1942; Gaddini, 1969; Greenacre, 1958; Meloy, 1988).

The association between hysteria and antisocial personality has been discussed by many authors (Guze, 1976; Guze et al., 1971; Hart, 1989; Lilienfeld, Van Valkenberg, Karntz, & Akiskal, 1986; Meloy, 1988). Lilienfeld et al. (1986) hypothesized that "an individual with histrionic personality is likely to develop either antisocial personality or somatization disorder, with the outcome dependent primarily on the sex of the patient" (p. 721). We view one commonality between hysteria and psychopathy to be the presence of dissociative defenses and states (Gacono & Meloy, 1988; Meloy, 1988), evidenced by impulsivity, gross denial of sectors of reality, a confusion of reality and fantasy content, and superficial, dramatic expressions of affect. The impressionistic (IMP) response,

combining color and abstraction, may signal an hysterical cognitive style and briefly capture the primary psychopath's tendency to split off affect through rapid and diffuse symbolization.

Narcissism and hysteria are personality or character traits that determine the severity and expressive nature of psychopathy. Although the PER response appears to be an important discriminating variable in understanding the grandiosity and omnipotence in severe psychopaths, the idiosyncratic nature of pair, reflection, and IMP responses, rather than providing firm conclusions, should be interpreted in the context of other data and suggests further avenues of research into the psychopathology of the psychopath.

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