

Antisocial Personality Disorder in Offenders: Two Case Studies in the Personal Construct Psychology¹

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This study explores the subjective worlds of offenders with Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) using Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) and repertory grid methodology to provide an alternative perspective on antisocial behavior. Given the high prevalence of ASPD in correctional settings and its association with elevated risk behaviors and treatment resistance, exploring alternative frameworks may contribute to addressing existing challenges in treatment outcomes. Two case studies were presented, employing content and structural analysis to illustrate the heterogeneity within ASPD and its overlap with other personality disorders. Case 1's personality structure is stable and permeable, defined by dominance and criminogenic constructs that position aggression as an extension of his antisocial role. In contrast, Case 2 is marked by instability between incompatible constructs of cruelty and empathy, generating internal tension that leads to impulsive aggression. Case 1 resembles ASPD with narcissistic traits, while Case 2 suggests ASPD with borderline traits, potentially situating them along primary and secondary psychopathy dimensions. The findings suggest that an integrated approach, combining categorical approach and PCP perspective, offers a more comprehensive understanding of ASPD's complexities. This idiographic study offers

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implications for risk assessments and treatment strategies based on individual ASPD profiles.

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Introduction

Correctional staff, particularly those in treatment and security roles, often manage offenders whose challenges extend beyond criminal behavior. Many of these individuals exhibit persistent rule-breaking, impulsivity, and violence, which strain correctional resources and complicate management (Međedović et al., 2024). Among these offenders, Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) is especially prevalent and frequently associated with treatment resistance, a high risk of institutional misconduct, and lifelong antisocial behavior (Black et al., 2010). Despite efforts to develop effective treatments, ASPD remains a challenging diagnosis, often manifesting with complex, overlapping symptoms of other mental health issues (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014).

Antisocial Personality Disorder and Its Complex Presentation

ASPD is defined by a longstanding disregard for the rights of others, with behaviors such as deceitfulness, recklessness, impulsivity, aggression, and a lack of remorse. The diagnosis requires evidence of conduct disorder before age 15, with traits persisting into adulthood (APA, 2022). Childhood Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a significant risk factor, as it often progresses to conduct disorder and, later, to ASPD, leading to substance abuse and potential incarceration (Young & Thome, 2011).

Historically, ASPD has been a source of diagnostic complexity due to its conceptual overlap with psychopathy and other Cluster B personality disorders, including Narcissistic (NPD) and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) (Kernberg, 1989; Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) has progressively shifted ASPD criteria from personality-focused concepts to observable antisocial behaviors. This shift has led to conflating psychopathy, sociopathy, and dyssocial personality disorder, which has further blurred distinctions and introduced diagnostic confusion.

An attempt to address these issues appears in DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022), where Section III proposes a dimensional approach, incorporating

psychopathic traits such as coldheartedness, impulsivity, meanness, and disinhibition. However, this dimensional model remains relegated to an appendix, while the categorical approach persists in the main diagnostic section, limiting the dimensional framework's impact.

Contemporary models propose that ASPD may occupy a position along a broader psychopathy spectrum, where primary and secondary psychopathy represent variations in emotional deficit and self-control (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). This continuum-based perspective acknowledges the complex presentation of ASPD and the variability of antisocial behavior across individuals. Importantly, criminal behavior is not central to all forms of psychopathy, underscoring the need for different assessment frameworks in forensic settings (Clark, 2004; Međedović et al., 2015).

Alternative Perspectives: Personal Construct Psychology

While the DSM framework provides essential diagnostic criteria, other theoretical approaches, such as Personal Construct Psychology (PCP), offer valuable insights into the subjective worlds of offenders (Horley, 2003; Winter, 2009). Developed by George Kelly (1991), PCP views individuals as 'personal scientists,' actively constructing theories to navigate their world. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding an individual's unique meaning system, rather than relying solely on static diagnostic categories.

PCP introduces the concept of 'personal constructs,' which are individualized 'theories' people use to organize and predict experiences. These constructs vary in complexity, permeability, and range, influencing how individuals interpret and respond to their environment. When constructs include theories about others, are essential for relating to others, and are central to one's identity, they are known as 'core role constructs.' In this framework, social positioning and identity stability are crucial; threats to one's core role can destabilize a sense of self and lead to disconnection and guilt.

Antisocial and Psychopathic Core Roles

Kelly (1991) proposed two distinct core roles that may be especially relevant in understanding offenders: the antisocial and psychopathic roles. The antisocial role is shaped primarily by how others perceive the individual's threatening behavior. In response, society often punishes and ostracizes these individuals, aiming to provoke guilt through exclusion.

However, when a person is repeatedly exiled from the community, they may come to embrace this outsider identity permanently:

Sometimes the punished person *turns the tables on the punishing people*. He construes his own society. He moves towards *establishing a core role for himself which includes the very behaviour which others have found threatening*. Now he can be threatened [...] by the prospect of losing his status as an ‘evildoer’. In a very real sense that is the loss which would make him feel guilty. He may be threatened by the presence of a person who is virtuous in the way he used to be virtuous. He may seek to punish such a person in order to make it clear to himself that the virtuous person is truly different from himself and that he is in no danger of slipping back into the half-familiar ways of virtue (p. 373).

In such cases, antisocial individuals construct the self around nonconformity, positioning themselves in opposition to societal norms. Rather than seeking new roles or ways of relating to society, they maintain a role firmly anchored in defiance. This process involves ‘slot-rattling’, or adopting the extreme contrast pole of social expectations to reinforce their core role.

In contrast, Kelly (1991) described the psychopathic role as one rooted in early dependence on others for survival, where others are perceived primarily as resources to fulfill needs. As development progresses, most individuals form complex role constructs to facilitate reciprocal (role) relationships. However, in the psychopathic role, this development stalls at a stage where others remain objects for fulfilling personal needs:

[A] child depends upon a relationship with his parents which is based upon a *construction of them as bovine creatures*. He sees them as animals which are concerned primarily with giving milk and making money. He writes his role accordingly. He validates. He grows up with his *core role structured in relationship to such presumed people*. When people try to make him feel guilty by pointing out that he is selfish, cruel, or immoral, he may readily agree that he is and concede that it would be nice if he were different. However, he does not experience guilt, for these interpretations are not incompatible with his core role structure [...] His psychiatrist may call him a ‘*psychopathic personality*’ (p. 371, *my italics*).

From a PCP perspective, individuals are not inherently immune to guilt, even those with a ‘psychopathic personality.’ However, guilt only arises when they begin to view others as people with needs of their own. In the

psychopathic construct, guilt does not stem from treating ‘bovine creatures’ in a selfish or cruel manner; rather, guilt could emerge if they were to view these individuals empathetically. In this reversed interpersonal world it would seem that, ‘the antisocial person’s reality becomes the typical person’s nightmare, while the normal person’s reality is the psychopath’s nightmare’ (Kernberg, 1989, p. 569).

Impulsivity

In contrast to the common view of impulsivity as a lack of control, Kelly reinterprets it as an attempt to regain control through an accelerated decision-making process. This cycle consists of three stages: circumspection, where an individual scans constructs for relevance; preemption, where a single construct is selected; and control, where the individual makes a definitive choice and acts. Impulsivity emerges when the individual skips the initial circumspection, bypassing careful consideration in favor of immediate action.

Remaining in this cycle for too long, however, can lead to indecision and increased anxiety. For individuals in distressing or humiliating situations, even impulsive decisions may feel preferable to prolonged indecision, as they restore a semblance of control (Drndarević et al., 2021).

Research indicates that offenders often have polarized and low-complexity cognitive systems (Horley, 2003; Houston, 1997). When a construct becomes invalidated or fails to explain available data, unconstructed elements can increase anxiety. In these cognitively simplistic and tightly interwoven systems, anxiety is often more intense. Rather than adapting their constructs, individuals may respond by enforcing existing constructs in a hostile manner to regain validation (Cummings, 2006). This approach reduces anxiety, but it bypasses the creative potential anxiety offers for developing new constructs, instead maintaining rigid interpretations of reality.

The present study

This study aims to explore the subjective worlds of offenders with ASPD using the PCP framework and repertory grid methodology to examine the personal constructs that shape antisocial behaviors (Kelly, 1991; Fransella et al., 2004). To the authors' knowledge, this approach has not previously been applied to offenders with ASPD. Given the high prevalence of ASPD in correctional settings and the limited success of traditional treatments, exploring alternative perspectives may offer valuable insights for risk assessment and intervention strategies (Kendall et al., 2009; Meloy & Yakeley, 2014).

Through two case studies, this research illustrates the heterogeneity within ASPD and its overlap with other disorders, with a particular focus on the personal constructs that shape how individuals interpret their experiences. By combining structural and content analysis, this study aims to provide an alternative understanding of ASPD.

Method

Participants and procedure

The two case studies outlined are derived from doctoral research within the PrisonLIFE project (Milićević et al., 2024), for which approval was obtained from both the Ethics Committee of the University of Belgrade and the Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research. The data were collected in the Serbian correctional facility of Sremska Mitrovica in May 2024.

Two out of ten cases were selected to showcase variability in ASPD while maintaining similarities in age, balancing representativeness with methodological feasibility. This approach allowed for a focused in-depth analysis of distinct presentations within the disorder without the confounding influence of age-related factors.

The main inclusion criterion was an ASPD diagnosis, with participants selected with the help of prison personnel and the Mini Neuropsychiatric Interview. Participation was voluntary; all participants signed an informed consent form. Time spent completing the instruments with each participant ranged from 60 to 120 minutes. The procedure consisted of completing two interviews with the participants.

Instruments

Mini Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI). Offenders were administered the MINI (7.0.2 version; Sheehan et al., 1998), a fully structured instrument used to assess the 17 most common psychiatric disorders (e.g. ASPD, Substance Use Disorder, Depression, Psychotic Disorder). The MINI was employed as a brief diagnostic tool to screen for ASPD and possible comorbidities.

Repertory grid. The repertory grid technique was applied, representing a matrix of interrelated constructs (Fransella et al., 2004; Kelly, 1991; Winter, 2013). Columns consist of previously elicited figures, while rows consist of both elicited and fixed constructs. Participants were asked to rate each figure on a scale of 1-7, representing a continuum of the construct poles, where 1 represents the emergent pole and 7 the implicit pole (see Appendix).

Each participant was asked to provide the first names of eight people who currently play an important role in their lives. Parents, siblings, friends, spouses, partners, and employers were suggested as possible figures. Certain restrictions applied. First, the participant must know the person for at least six months, and the person should be regarded as currently playing an important role in their life (for better or for worse). Second, the person themselves are part of the figures, specifically their construing of themselves (present, future, and ideal).

The main method of construct elicitation involves using triads of figures. Figures are compared to each other in search of a construct. Applying triads is the essence of Kelly's definition of a construct (A is in some way similar to B while at the same time different from C). The constructs are generated by asking a series of questions: 'We are interested in understanding you and these people who play an important role in your life. Now, think about these two people for a moment: Yourself (person's name), and (person's name). Is there some important way in which these two people are alike or different from each other?'. This process is repeated until the person can no longer generate more constructs or they begin to repeat. Moreover, some constructs were used as previously fixed (e.g. anger), but their idiosyncratic meaning was elicited by uncovering the opposite (implicit) pole for each individual. Two more constructs were used as fixed: 'blaming myself-blaming others' and 'impulsiveness-inhibitedness' (acting without thinking—thinking without acting).

Analysis

Both case studies were analyzed using a combination of content and structural analysis (Fransella et al., 2004). The content analysis was used for the formulation of personal theories of each participant based on clinical assessment guiding principles through the PCP framework (cf. Landfield & Epting, 1987). The structural indices and visual representation of the grid data were done using the Open Rep Grid³ package (Heckmann, 2023) in the R program.

The first structural index is principal components analysis, which can be used to plot the two-dimensional relationship between elements and constructs. In addition to visually representing the data, the Percentage of Variance Accounted for by the First Factor (PVAFF) is used as an index of cognitive complexity. When a single component explains much of the variation in the grid, cognitive complexity is considered low. The intensity

³ <https://docs.openrepgrid.org/index.html>

index, a second index, is used as a measure of construct linkage. The score reflects the degree of organization of the construct system. Lower intensity indicates a loosening of the system. Finally, implicative dilemmas and imbalanced triads are closely related to the notion of conflict. Both arise when a desired change in one construct is associated with an undesired implication in another construct.

Results and discussion

Case 1 – Stable antisocial core role

Initial presentation

A 28-year-old male offender with a primary school education and an 8-year sentence for theft and drug offenses. He has a history of juvenile delinquency and detention, is currently in a relationship, and has no children. Physically, he is of shorter stature but muscular build. During the interview, he gave the impression of being very outgoing, cheerful, open, and spontaneous in conversation. His conversation and non-verbal gestures were vivid and fast-paced.

Results of the MINI interview

Besides ASPD, the MINI interview reported no psychological disorders. The participant indicated having an ADHD diagnosis (the MINI does not screen for ADHD), which is an important prognostic factor for the later development of ASPD and potential incarceration (APA, 2022; Black et al., 2010). He also reported a history of substance abuse, specifically with amphetamines. The choice of substance is curious, given the calming effects of amphetamines on individuals with ADHD (Cortese et al., 2018).

Results of repertory grid

Description of functioning

Stable system. Contentment and euphoria.

The core constructs of Case 1 account for the majority of variance in the data, represented graphically in Figure 1. Dimension 1 on the x-axis explains 66.4% of the variance, while Dimension 2 on the y-axis accounts for 16%. The concentration of variance within a few dimensions suggests a monolithic structure with low cognitive complexity and high interrelatedness of constructs. This finding aligns with prior research suggesting lower cognitive complexity among offenders (Houston, 1997). Further supporting this interpretation is the presence of black-and-white thinking, inferred from the extremity of his ratings (see Appendix). A

monolithic, polarized structure implies tightly organized constructs, which produce clear yet rigid predictions that are easily invalidated. In such systems, invalidation easily leads to anxiety. From this perspective, felt anger leading to hostile and impulsive actions to regain control and alleviate anxiety can easily be explained in such systems—dynamics that are not exclusive to offenders (Cummings, 2006; McCoy, 1981).

However, this pattern does not fully apply in this case. According to Kelly (1991), individuals with hostile tendencies, who manipulate reality to conform to their constructs, usually experience incongruities in self-construal. No such discrepancies appear in this case; his perceptions of his present, future, and ideal selves (Figure 1) are aligned, suggesting he lives in harmony with his ideal self. His contentment, evident in the interview, instead indicates a permeable core role resilient to various stressors, including repeated incarceration.

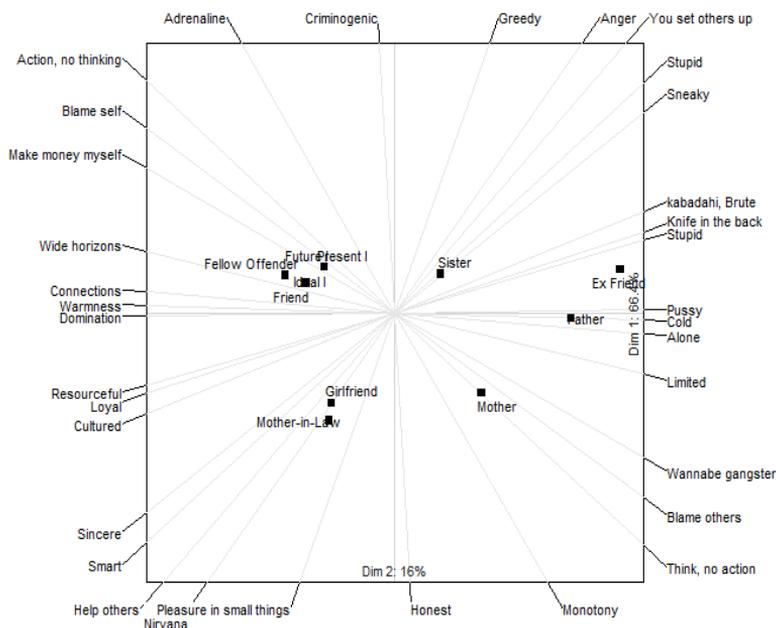


Figure 1. *Principal components analysis (varimax rotation) of Case 1. Antisocial (criminal) core role*

His primary dimension for differentiating people seems to be ‘Domination-Pussy’. Individuals on the dominant side are those who ‘make money,’ are ‘smart’ and ‘resourceful,’ possess ‘warmth,’ and maintain ‘connections.’ In

contrast, those on the opposite side are ‘wannabe gangsters,’ perceived as ‘stupid,’ ‘cold,’ and ‘alone.’

His secondary dimension, ‘Criminogenic-Honest,’ appears to serve as a mechanism for validating his primary core construct. Through criminogenic activities, he enters a world characterized by ‘adrenaline,’ ‘greed,’ and ‘setting others up.’ Without these activities, he would likely be positioned on the threatening pole of his primary construct.

This dynamic is further reflected in his expressed fascination with the criminal lifestyle during the interview. He remarked on his low socio-economic background, which may highlight the importance he places on domination and financial success as an escape from feelings of humiliation and inadequacy. In his view, honest individuals from his background do not achieve much. This could mark the point where, as Kelly suggested, he ‘turned the tables’ on society, constructing his core role in the opposite direction.

For him, honesty feels unrewarding, leaving him feeling submissive, unintelligent, and incapable of making money, blaming others for his circumstances. He even remarked on my research, questioning who would invest effort without substantial reward—a comment likely stemming from the connection he perceives between honesty and financial failure. In his cognitive system, honesty and wealth are incompatible (closeness of ‘honesty’ and ‘pleasure in small things’), so he reversed his construct, embracing criminogenic behavior as the preferred pole (‘criminogenic’ and ‘greedy’). Feelings of guilt would follow the same trajectory, now emerging when he is construed as ‘Honest.’ It also feels threatening for him to see himself as a ‘Pussy,’ unable to make money.

A notable aspect of his construct system is the intertwining of domination with warmth and connectedness. For him, warmth and connection are achieved only through exerting control and maintaining superiority. Losing dominance equates to coldness and isolation, highlighting the fundamental belief that his value and sense of worth are dependent on his ability to dominate. This may also explain the performative nature of his interactions, where his charm and playfulness are tools to assert control, rather than genuine connection. When he experiences coldness, it likely triggers deeper feelings of anger and frustration, as it challenges his sense of superiority. Coldness from others, especially betrayal, is intensely perceived as a threat to his dominance and a personal affront, which he expresses through disdain and hostility—referring to a former friend as ‘sneaky’ and ‘stupid,’ with the betrayal likened to a ‘knife in the back.’

In this worldview, loyalty may be intrinsically tied to respect and submission, reinforcing his need for others to acknowledge his dominance.

Although his anger may seem retributive (closeness to ‘setting others up’), it is ultimately aimed at preserving his sense of dominance and preventing any threat to his dominance. His choice of a dishonest, criminal role seems to have led to estrangement from his family. He now perceives himself as more similar to his criminal friends, girlfriend, and even his mother-in-law than to his family, and most distant from his betraying friend. There is also an interesting relationship with the two women in his life—his girlfriend and mother-in-law—who seem to accept and validate his criminal role, in contrast to his family. He seems to have found validation both outside the prison (e.g. friend, girlfriend) and within (e.g. fellow offender).

For him, the criminogenic path appears to provide significant rewards, as evidenced by his non-discriminating roles of present, future, and ideal selves. Even imprisonment does not invalidate his core role; he continues to elaborate it even while incarcerated. To him, a fulfilled life is achieved through domination, which is pursued through criminal activities. In contrast, honesty is associated with isolation and bitterness—making his choice of path clear. This may have evolved into a life role as well.

These two core frames seem to constitute his core antisocial role. The criminogenic path offers greater elaborative choice for his agency, channelled into domination. He seems to employ both aggression and hostility in elaborating his core role, which may be threatening to other people (Drndarević, 2021). And this role regulates his processes and provides order in his world.

Dilated field and unmodulated spontaneous elaboration.

He appears to be contained within a manic phase. The excitement he displays, along with the rapid shifting between constructs during the interview and a possible ADHD diagnosis, all point to unmodulated, spontaneous elaboration. He actively expands his interpretative field, and in Kelly’s terms, this aggressive elaboration—similar to that seen in mania—involves a short-sighted testing of reality. This is evident in the lack of differentiation between his present and future selves, which appear almost completely undifferentiated.

The maintenance of his expanded cognitive field appears to stem from his broad and permeable core constructs, especially in interpersonal realms. Regardless of his environment, he seems to adapt readily—finding and bending rules to suit his needs. It is as if he has never encountered significant invalidation capable of disrupting his seemingly perpetual manic, expansive state. His cognitive structure seems both comprehensive and adaptable enough to be imposed upon any event. Each interaction

becomes either a business opportunity or a novel experience, with even the prison setting unable to challenge or undermine his core role.

If his cognitive structure were to become fallible—such as through the decline of physical power with age—the manic phase would likely transition into a depressive one. This shift would manifest as a desperate attempt to constrain the previously expanded field, which currently lacks a stable foundation. However, at present, there is no indication that such a transition is imminent.

Treatment prospects

The absence of implicative dilemmas (Table 1), combined with a consistently positive self-construal and identical constructions of his current, future, and ideal self (see Appendix), suggests that he does not perceive a need for personal change at this time. As such, resocialization efforts focused on personality transformation are unlikely to be effective. At best, such interventions might provoke feelings of threat or guilt. This lack of perceived need for change may explain why altering behavior is often so difficult for individuals like him. From a PCP perspective, there is no internal need for his system to evolve. This perspective sheds light on why many professionals remain pessimistic about treating such individuals, and why interventions with them often yield limited results.

Risk assessment

Inferences drawn from the repertory grid suggest that his psychological system is stable, with little indication of impulsiveness. The threat of violence appears low, but remains possible. While he associates ‘Cultured’ with ‘Domination’ and ‘Brute’ with ‘Pussy,’ his anger seems to have retributive characteristics (‘setting others up’), and be located on the ‘Criminogenic’ pole. Two key areas warrant attention: his Kelian aggression and the imposition of criminogenic needs in a hostile manner. First, although Kelian aggression bears more resemblance to adventure and active field elaboration, than to destruction, it can still be threatening to other people (Drndarević, 2021). His unmodulated spontaneous elaboration, using his impulsivity to validate his antisocial role, may provoke reactions both from other offenders and prison staff. Second, his criminogenic needs add complexity to his aggression. Failing to engage in dishonest, anti-law activities may push him toward the threatening side of his core construct, as his system generates criminogenic needs that seek fulfillment, even if not necessarily through violence.

Table 1.
Structural indices for Case 1 and Case 2 construct systems

	Case 1 – stable structure	Case 2 – unstable structure
PVAFF	0.66	0.32
Intensity index	0.43	0.18
Implicative dilemmas	0	3
Conflicts (Imbalanced triads)	11.2%	33.6%

Notes. PVAFF: Percentage of Variance Accounted for by the First Factor.

Case 2 – Unstable antisocial core role

Initial presentation

A 23-year-old male offender, a secondary school graduate, currently serving a sentence for multiple counts of robbery and banditry, presented in a visibly depressive state during the interview. His movements were lethargic, his eyes half-closed, and his speech slow. His non-verbal communication conveyed a mixture of sadness and anger, creating an almost tangible sense of heaviness and distress throughout the interaction.

Results from the MINI interview

MINI registered psychological problems in several areas. In addition to the ASPD, he reported possible hypomanic episodes and depressive disorder with marked feelings of guilt bordering on obsessive thoughts. In particular, he mentioned the moment of arrest, the look in his mother's eyes, bad things he had done to others, hatred he felt. Furthermore, he disclosed a history of substance abuse, including marijuana, amphetamines, cocaine, and heroin. He claimed to have been drug-free for the past year, except for prescribed antidepressants (Zoloft) taken while in prison.

Results from the repertory grid

Description of functioning

System instability.

Anxiety and loss of prediction

The most striking finding was the level of confusion and anxiety within his construct system. His two core construct dimensions explained just over 50% of the variance (Figure 2), suggesting a limited capacity for his personal theories to structure and make sense of his world. According to Kelly's fundamental postulate, if a person forms theories to better anticipate events, the lack of clarity in his construing indicates that these theories are insufficient in providing insight into the events around him, particularly regarding important people in his life. When events cannot be adequately understood or predicted, it leaves the system vulnerable to anxiety.

Interestingly, his approach to managing anxiety does not seem to involve constricting his construct system, as his depressive state might suggest. Constriction, a common coping strategy to reduce anxiety, involves narrowing the range of constructs to eliminate incompatible elements, which would typically be reflected by a high number of midpoint ratings on the grid. However, his limited use of midpoint ratings can largely be attributed to the inapplicability of certain constructs to specific elements (e.g., a 10-year-old sister or a father who has been absent for many years). The anxiety resulting from the system's insufficient predictive power suggests one of two possibilities: either the system is experiencing frequent slot-rattling due to instability, or it is overly loose. While there are signs of looseness in the system (e.g., an Intensity Index of 0.18), this variability in predictions does not seem to shield him from anxiety. On the contrary, he appears to manage his anxiety by tightening his system, as evidenced by the levels of anger and impulsivity in his behavior. This instability may perpetuate impulsive actions, followed by intense feelings of guilt, possibly indicating a true disorder. His substance abuse appears to play a role in this vicious cycle, temporarily alleviating anxiety but further destabilizing the system in the long term.

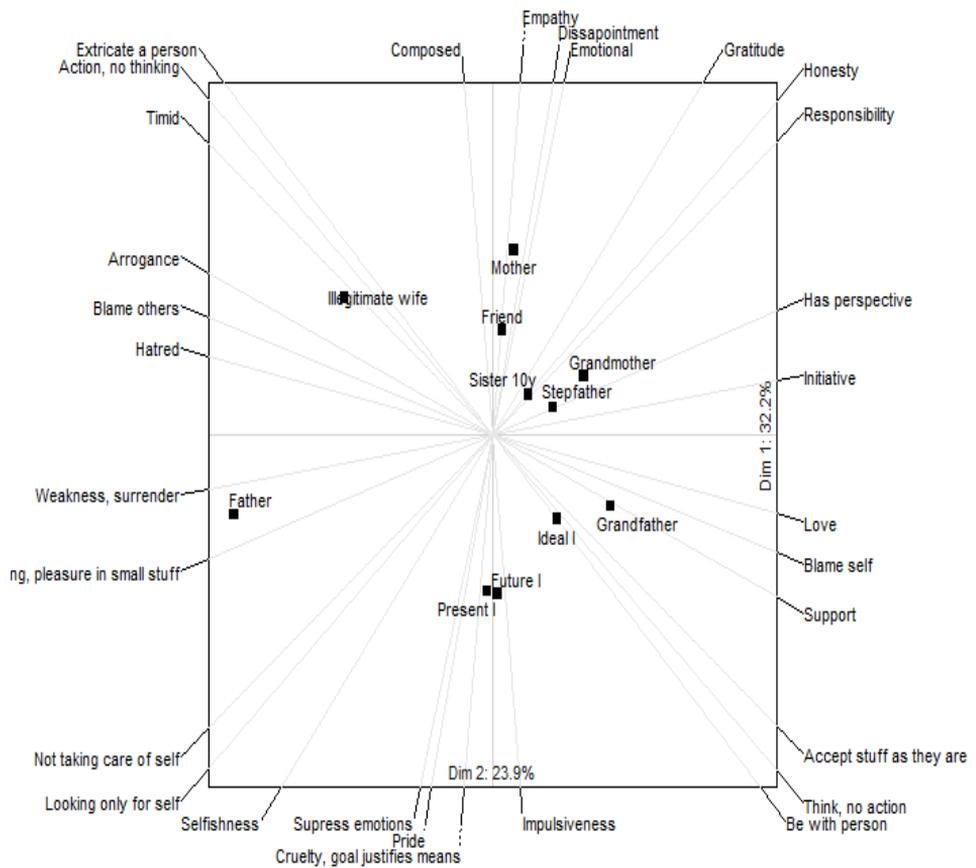


Figure 2. *Principal components analysis of Case 2.*

Shifting between cruelty and empathy role

Another way to deal with anxiety is to be impulsive. Impulsivity, as a form of control, seems to be his preferred method for managing anxiety. His impulsive behavior often manifests as violence. He was incarcerated for violent offenses and banditry and continues to display violent tendencies within prison, accumulating numerous disciplinary infractions and placements in high-security wards. Moreover, he construes himself as impulsive, which aligns with his preferred pole (see Appendix).

Impulsivity and violence are closely linked to 'Cruelty,' which seems to be his primary core construct. For him, cruelty serves an instrumental purpose—he describes it as 'the end justifies the means'—and it is associated with 'Suppressing emotions' and 'Selfishness.' He rationalizes this construct by referencing his upbringing in poverty and abandonment by his father. However, he also grew up with his mother and grandparents, from whom he received love and support. This contrasting experience may have validated the opposite 'Empathy' construct and contributed to the development of his other core constructs, such as 'Honesty' and 'Responsibility.' Together, these three constructs suggest a fragmented empathic role, which later causes guilt when he acts cruelly. He seems unable to reconcile the abandonment by his father with the love he received from his grandparents.

This instance, as reflected in the content of his constructs, may serve as an example of structural inadequacy within his construct system. The dynamic instability of his system suggests slot-rattling between constructs such as cruelty and empathy, as well as between responsibility and neglecting self-care through destructive behavior. The presence of conflicts and implicative dilemmas in his construct system further supports this interpretation (Table 1).

His slot-rattling is evident in the tension between his cruel, selfish fragment and his empathy fragment. When he acts in a cruel and selfish manner, he experiences guilt and disconnection from his ideal self, marked by sadness and guilt. On the other hand, when he attempts to embrace honesty and responsibility, his needs are not met, leading him to feel as though he loses his sense of self. This conflict reflects the instability in his construct system, where shifts between cruelty, selfishness, and empathy prevent a stable self-construal.

Amid the dilemmas and anxiety disrupting his world, drugs provide much-needed, albeit temporary, relief. From the perspective of his construct system, anxiety is most effectively regulated through selfishness and substance use. However, this approach does nothing to resolve the underlying anxiety, leaving the system burdened with guilt (dislodging

him from empathy, love, and pride) and possibly escalating anxiety due to the drug-induced disorganization of his system. This disorganization may perpetuate impulsive actions, followed by feelings of guilt, suggesting the presence of a deeper disorder. His substance abuse appears to play a central role in a vicious cycle, offering temporary relief but ultimately contributing to the deterioration of his construct system.

Childlike constructions in both content and structure

There are several indicators of childlike constructions patterns within his system. First, when asked to construe anger, he escalates it to the more extreme emotion of hatred and contrasts it with love. This tendency towards extremity is also evident in the content of his construct 'being with someone-extricating someone'. This construct is especially pertinent when considering the context of substance abuse. Additionally, he appears to rely heavily on the opinions of others, which is reflected in both his feelings of guilt and his use of the construct 'disappointment-pride'. This construct reflects how he perceives the views of significant others, either as a source of pride or disappointment. Furthermore, many of his constructs are self-focused, such as 'not looking after oneself,' 'looking after oneself,' and 'selfishness.'

Structurally, the extremity of his ratings suggests black-and-white thinking, while the overall indecisiveness of his system points to developmental stagnation. His childlike constructs reflect a Kelian 'psychopathic personality,' marked by developmental arrest at the stage of dependency in certain aspects of his system.

Treatment prospects

The impetus for change, driven by structural transitions, appears to stem primarily from anxiety. Currently, this anxiety is managed through a dysfunctional system dynamic that harms both himself and others. His indecisiveness reflects the tension within his 'cruel-empathic' roles, where the disappointment from his mother, alongside the love and support from his grandparents and sister, act as deterrents against extensive self-destruction. On the other hand, he appears to have profound personal needs but lacks an adequate figure upon whom he can depend.

A potential solution lies in the development of a superordinate construct that integrates both his empathic role and personal needs on one side, with cruelty and destructive behavior on the other. Achieving this would require him to slow down his impulsive decision-making and reduce his need for control, though this comes with significant risks, as it would expose his system to heightened anxiety. Such a comprehensive

reconstruction of his faulty core structure would necessitate an environment of extreme dependency—similar to an infantile state. This may explain why drug dependency often requires a setting of intensive, all-around care, which a correctional facility is typically ill-equipped to provide.

In this context, the treatment officer could potentially assume some of these dependency roles, while his ‘cruelty’ construct could be bound and made impermeable to the prison setting. His substance abuse could be managed with appropriate psychopharmacological interventions. Lastly, his treatment could draw upon the potential resources of his mother, sister, and grandparents – his positive role models who can provide support in this transition.

Risk assessment

This individual poses a significant risk both inside and outside the prison setting. His cycles of anxiety, which he impulsively regulates through selfish and cruel behaviors to meet his needs, are compounded by recurring feelings of guilt, creating an extremely volatile dynamic. His history of violence and misconduct, both within and beyond prison walls, is closely tied to his disorganized construct system. Violent outbursts—whether directed at others (violence) or himself (guilt)—seem to function as attempts to regain a sense of clarity.

During violent phases, he seems disconnected from others—marked by selfishness, emotional suppression, and impulsivity. Conversely, during phases of guilt, he loses sight of himself, becoming overwhelmed by emotions and feelings of disappointment. Substance abuse only exacerbates this disorganization, reinforcing the disorder and contributing to a potential further deterioration of his psychological state.

General discussion

The overrepresentation of individuals with ASPD in prison populations, alongside therapeutic pessimism about the effectiveness of their treatment and potential for reducing recidivism, highlights the need for supplementing diagnostic approaches (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014). To address this, the current research aimed to explore the subjective worlds of offenders with ASPD using a personal construct perspective and the repertory grid method. The study presented two case analyses, each showcasing the variability in personality constructs and behavioral manifestations associated with this diagnosis.

In discussing Case 1, there are clear parallels with Kernberg's (1989) descriptions of narcissistic and antisocial personality traits. The case presents a core structure of grandiosity, power-seeking, and an emotional detachment from societal norms, alongside a capacity to persistently ignore past errors and consequences. Notably, his identical, positive construal of his present and future self—despite repeated incarcerations including juvenile detention—suggests a dampened emotional response that minimizes intense reactions to future consequences, particularly anxiety and sadness. This highlights his consistent disregard for future consequences—a pattern echoing both antisocial and narcissistic traits.

His impulsivity is primarily driven by hedonistic urges, as evidenced by his frequent engagement in thrill-seeking behaviors, including descriptions during the interview of drug abuse, dominant sex, fighting, and scamming the system. These behaviors indicate low self-control and disregard for others. His dual presentation of ASPD and NPD comorbidity, marked by an inability to delay gratification, hints at a possible form of disinhibited primary or detached secondary psychopathy (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015), where affective responses are flat, and concern for others' well-being is minimal.

This subject's dominant self-construal further emphasizes an overt need for control and omnipotence, reinforced by a fascination with criminality and interpersonal dominance. His core construct "Domination-Pussy" suggests a worldview shaped by aggression and sexual power dynamics, reinforcing his coercive approach to relationships and interactions. This profile exhibits similarities to a stable, narcissistically fueled engagement with the world, where interpersonal aggression is often instrumentalized—to either attain personal rewards or preserve social status, further underscoring his orientation toward a power-driven, antisocial identity.

The pathway toward ASPD in this case appears delineated, at least partly, in childhood ADHD, a significant predictor of conduct disorder and ASPD (Young & Thome, 2011). His identical view of his present and ideal self may also contribute to treatment resistance, as this core role embodies a stable and permeable structure, leaving minimal motivation for change (Kendall et al., 2009).

Case 2 illustrates an unstable core, shifting between unintegrated psychopathy and empathy fragments. While ASPD typically involves emotional detachment and consistent aggression, this individual's fluctuating self-construal and emotional instability reflect the "stable instability" characteristic of borderline traits (Miletic, 2024). This instability, alongside an inability to integrate conflicting roles, suggests

the profile of unstable secondary psychopathy—a blend of ASPD and BPD traits (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015).

Individuals with this profile often display externalizing symptoms, emotional instability, and chronic anxiety, alongside aggression directed both inward and outward (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). They frequently experience pervasive feelings of rejection, criticism, or humiliation, which may lead to self-medication with alcohol, drugs, or other substances. Our observations align with these patterns. His impulsivity appears driven by emotional dysregulation and internal conflict, leading to outbursts of anger and violence, particularly in response to events that exacerbate his neurotic conflicts.

Research highlights the role of significant environmental insult, such as extreme abuse, neglect, or abandonment, as a condition for secondary psychopathy to develop (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). His father's abandonment during formative years may align with this finding, potentially disrupting his mentalization processes (Protić, 2020). The ASPD-BPD comorbidity complicates the treatment landscape; however, the Case 2 may actually have greater therapeutic potential due to his recognition of emotional conflict and capacity for guilt.

Relying solely on the ASPD category would be insufficient to capture the heterogeneous presentation observed in these cases. High levels of externalizing symptoms (e.g., low self-control) combined with varying degrees of affect regulation highlight how these individuals transcend categorical boundaries between ASPD, NPD, and BPD, potentially positioning them along a continuum between primary and secondary psychopathy.

Limitations and future directions

From the PCP perspective, future research could advance in several key directions. First, the exploration of ASPD outlined in this study would benefit from empirical testing of its proposed hypotheses. Given that PCP's focus is therapeutic intervention, a longitudinal design could be particularly valuable in examining how different psychological profiles within ASPD respond to varied treatment approaches. This would facilitate the development of targeted interventions that cater to the distinct needs of stable versus unstable ASPD presentations. Second, although these two cases highlight the heterogeneity within ASPD, they do not represent the full spectrum of the disorder. Expanding research to encompass a wider range of ASPD presentation (e.g., comorbidities with controlled primary psychopathy or somatoform disorders) would be

essential for understanding the stability and variability of ASPD traits across different life stages and treatment phases.

The individualistic and interpretative nature of PCP, while central to its theoretical framework, poses challenges in research. This approach is based on the principle that data is subject to continuous construction and reconstruction, suggesting that interpretations have a limited lifespan and must be revisited over time. This does not imply complete relativism or the absence of useful guidelines but points to the expiration date of theoretical constructs. Moreover, a noted limitation of PCP is its reliance on the individual's willingness to change, avoiding imposed intervention. This 'credulity limit' in offender populations (Winter, 2009) presents an avenue for further exploration into strategies that extend beyond this inherent constraint.

The current study has generated a significant volume of data using the repertory grid methodology, with PCP providing a robust framework for content and structured analyses. Integrating diagnostic categories, contemporary research, and alternative perspectives such as PCP, enhances the reliability of findings and supports a more comprehensive understanding of ASPD, highlighting the benefits of an integrative research approach.

Appendix: Repertory grids of two case studies

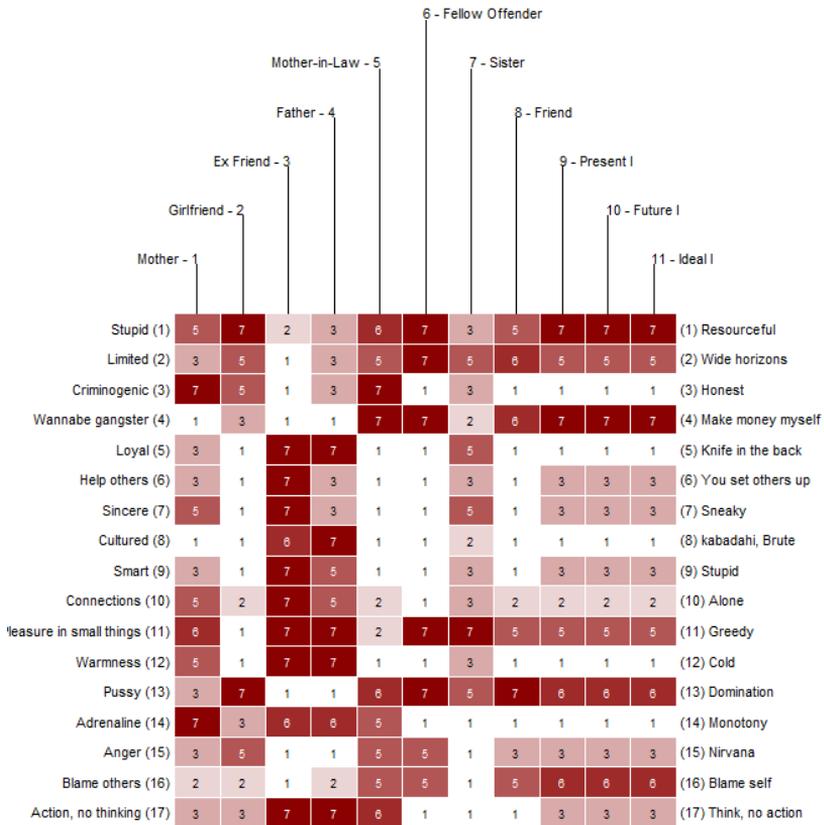


Figure 3. Repertory grid of Case 1.

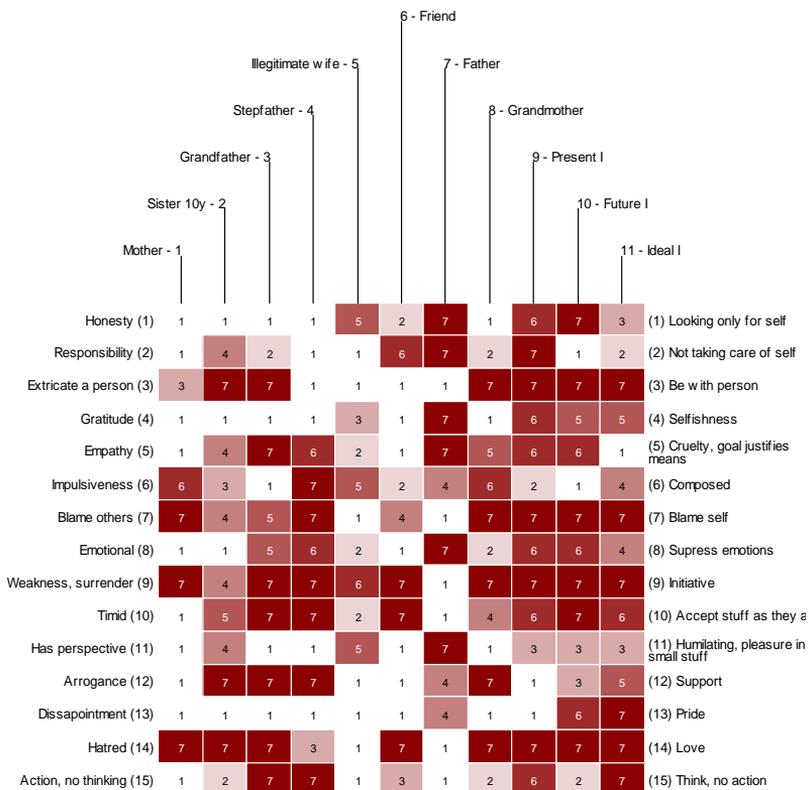


Figure 4. Repertory grid of Case 2.

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