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**Development of a tool to detect older adults with severe personality disorders for highly specialized care**

Linda Laheij-Rooijakkers, Paul van der Heijden, Arjan C. Videler, Daniel L. Segal, and Sebastian van Alphen

**Abstract**

**Objectives:** Current guidelines recommend highly specialized care for patients with severe personality disorders (PDs). However, there is little knowledge about how to detect older patients with severe PDs. The aim of the current study was to develop an age-specific tool to detect older adults with severe PDs for highly specialized mental health care.

**Design:** In a Delphi study, a tool to detect adults with severe PDs for highly specialized mental health care was adjusted for older adults based on expert opinion. Subsequently, the psychometric properties of the age-specific tool were evaluated.

**Setting:** The psychometric part of the study was performed in two Dutch highly specialized centers for PDs in older adults.

**Participants:** Patients (N = 90) from two highly specialized centers on PDs in older adults were enrolled.

**Measurements:** The age-specific tool was evaluated using clinical judgment as the gold standard.

**Results:** The Delphi study resulted in an age-specific tool, consisting of seven items to detect older adults with severe PDs for highly specialized mental health care. Psychometric properties of this tool were evaluated. Receiver operating curve analysis showed that the questionnaire was characterized by sufficient diagnostic accuracy. Internal consistency of the tool was sufficient and inter-rater reliability was moderate.

**Conclusions:** An age-specific tool to detect older adults with severe PDs was developed based on expert opinion. Psychometric properties were evaluated showing sufficient diagnostic accuracy. The tool may preliminarily be used in mental health care to detect older adults with severe PDs to refer them to highly specialized care in an early phase.

**Key words:** personality disorder, aging, screening

**Introduction**

Personality disorders (PDs) are defined by enduring maladaptive patterns of inner experiences, behavior, cognition, and emotions that start in early adolescence and lead to long-term difficulties in self- and interpersonal functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Despite suggestions that some features of PDs mellow with age, the prevalence of PDs in older adults is high. Studies show prevalence rates of 3–13% in the general population, 5–33% in outpatient mental health care settings, and 7–80% in inpatient mental health care (van Alphen et al., 2015). Given the aging of the population, the number of older adults with PDs will increase in the near future.

PDs are chronic and complex disorders. First, PDs are associated with a poorer quality of life (Soeteman et al., 2008). Second, symptoms of PDs predict worse physical functioning (Cruitt and Oltmanns, 2018) and a significantly greater use of both general and mental health care (Soeteman et al., 2008b; Powers et al., 2014). PDs often occur together with other psychiatric disorders and lead to a worse outcome of treatment for these other comorbid disorders (Newton-Howes et al., 2014). Third, compared to several other types of mental disorders, like depressive disorders and anxiety disorders, the economic burden of PDs is large (Soeteman et al., 2008a; Goorden et al., 2017).
A recent literature review and meta-analysis on the effect of psychotherapies for adults with borderline PD showed that several psychotherapies are effective (Cristea et al., 2017). However, most studies were conducted in adults between the ages of 25 and 40, and effects remain modest and unstable at follow-up (Videler et al., 2019). Research on the effectiveness of psychotherapies for older adults with PDs is exceptionally scarce, as it can be a challenge to accurately identify and diagnose PDs among older adults, which are precursors to effective interventions (Segal et al., 2006; van Alphen et al., 2015). That being said, psychotherapies for PDs can be organized in three levels: treatment aimed at personality change; adaption focused treatment; and supportive-structuring treatment (van Alphen et al., 2012). For two psychotherapies aimed at personality change, namely Dialectical Behavior Therapy and Schema Focused Therapy, some evidence of effectiveness for older adults with PDs has been published (Lynch et al., 2007; Kindynis et al., 2013; Videler et al., 2014, Videler et al., 2018). With respect to adaption focused treatment (e.g. couples therapy or interpersonal therapy) and supportive-structuring treatment (e.g. mediation therapy or supportive interventions) in older adults with PDs, no evidence has been published to date. Current guidelines advise highly specialized care for patients with severe PDs. In the Netherlands, this care is provided by specialized centers. These centers offer assessment and treatment for patients with rare or severe mental disorders that cannot be provided in regular mental health care. They also offer consultation for other mental health care professionals and provide patients the possibility for a second opinion. Furthermore, these centers concentrate on clinical research, innovation, and (inter)national education in their field of expertise. Their highly specialized treatment consists of psychotherapies aimed at personality change and supportive-structuring treatment for patients with severe PDs. Other psychotherapies, such as adaption focused treatment and supportive-structuring treatment for patients with milder PDs, are provided in regular mental health care.

A notable challenge is that it is currently unclear how to identify patients with severe PDs. In DSM-5, Section II, there is no severity index for PDs (Hopwood et al., 2011). Even though there are screening instruments for detecting PDs in older adults (van Alphen et al., 2006), there are to date no instruments to screen the severity of PDs in older adults. Given the scarcity of research on detecting patients with severe PDs, referral to highly specialized care in clinical practice is often based on previous ineffective regular treatments. Patients with severe PDs therefore often receive ineffective treatment for a long period of time (Zanarini et al., 2012). Recently, a tool has been developed to detect adults with PDs for highly specialized care (Goorden et al., 2017). This tool can help to prevent patients who can benefit sufficiently from regular mental health care, from unnecessarily receiving highly specialized care. But more importantly, the tool can help to detect patients for whom we can predict – based on current scientific evidence – that they will not benefit sufficiently from regular mental health care. In this way, it can prevent those patients from undergoing lengthy and inefficient treatments. This tool could also be used as a severity measure for PDs.

The tool for adults with PDs consists of seven criteria that were based on literature reviews and expert opinion (Goorden et al., 2017). These seven criteria include severe negative affect with maladaptive coping; severe destructive behavior to oneself or others; multiple comorbid clinical syndromes; severe social and societal dysfunction (GAF ≤ 50 according to DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000)); severe chronic traumatization in childhood; difficulties in developing a psychotherapeutic relationship; and evidence-based treatment in specialized care was not successful. If a patient meets four or more of these criteria, and the patient is motivated and able to conform to treatment conditions for intensive psychotherapy, then the patient should be referred to highly specialized care. Using clinical judgment as the gold standard, both sensitivity (0.78) and specificity (0.69) of the new tool were high. Internal consistency (Cronbach’s α = 0.69) was sufficient (Goorden et al., 2017).

PDs are characterized by heterotypical continuity (Mroczek et al., 1999), which implies that whereas underlying personality features stay the same throughout the lifespan, the way in which these features are expressed might change with aging. Because of these age-specific aspects of PDs and their known geriatric variants, it cannot be assumed that measurement instruments, including this tool for adults with PDs, are suitable for older adults (Rossi et al., 2014). Because of somatic and cognitive comorbidity in older adults, as well as high rates of polypharmacy, both the manifestation and interventions can differ when compared to younger adults with PDs (van Alphen et al., 2012; van Alphen et al., 2015). As such, the aim of the current study was to develop a tool to detect older adults with severe PDs for highly specialized mental health care. In the first part of this study, the screening instrument for adults was tested and adjusted for older adults based on expert opinions. The second part of this study was a psychometric evaluation of the age-specific tool.
Method

Study design

In our development and validation of the age-specific screening tool, we followed the method used by Goorden et al. (2017) to develop the screening instrument for adults with PDs. This method consists of two phases. In the first phase, clinical experts develop consensus-based items to detect patients with severe PDs for highly specialized care based on expert opinion and literature review. Given the heterotypical continuity of PDs, the recently developed tool for adults with PDs (Goorden et al., 2017) was used as the starting point in the current study. The Delphi method (Linstone and Turoff, 1975; Powell, 2003) was used to gain expert consensus. In the second phase, the age-specific screening tool is studied for its psychometric properties.

Delphi study

The Delphi technique is “a series of sequential questionnaires or “rounds,” interspersed by controlled feedback, that seek to gain the most reliable consensus of opinion of a group of experts” (Powell, 2003, p. 376). This technique is useful in situations where individuals’ opinions must be combined in order to address a lack of agreement or an incomplete state of knowledge (Delbeccq et al., 1975; Powell, 2003). In a classic Delphi survey, the information is gained through several rounds of questionnaires that are sent to a preselected expert panel. There is no contact between experts to ensure objectivity. However, in the present study, a real-time or group Delphi was chosen in which a meeting was organized with several iterative rounds following the Delphi technique. To limit the negative effects of the group meeting on the objectivity of the Delphi, seating arrangement as well as the first responder in each round was selected at random by one of the researchers. By this random selection, a disproportional influence of more dominant experts expressing their opinion first was avoided.

Chairman: To obtain meaningful information from a group meeting, a skilled and objective chairman capable of leading a structured discussion and monitoring the Delphi technique is essential (Finke et al., 1991; Legra et al., 2017). Therefore, a chairman was invited with experience as a chairman, who is also an expert in clinical practice and research in personality pathology in adolescents and is familiar with the distinction between regular and highly specialized mental health care.

Procedure: Prior to the formal Delphi meeting, there were two meetings between two of the authors (LL-R, SvA) and the chairman (PvdH) to discuss the structure of the meeting. The meeting started with a short presentation concerning the background of the study. After that, eight statements were presented to the experts to discuss (see Table 1). Each statement was introduced if consensus was reached on the previous statement or if discussion on the previous statement was ended due to lack of consensus in the previously arranged time for each statement. Each statement was presented on a PowerPoint slide and briefly explained by the chairman before the discussion started. When no new information was generated by the panel, the chairman summarized. Based on this summary, the discussion was resumed. This procedure was repeated until consensus was reached or no new points of view were expressed. Consensus was reached if two-thirds of the expert agreed on the statement in an open vote. The meeting was recorded on film for analysis afterwards.

The information from the Delphi meeting was used to compile an age-specific tool. Based on expert consensus, items from the tool for adults were deleted or adjusted, and a new, age-specific tool to detect patients with severe PDs for highly specialized care was constructed.

Prior to the start of the validation study, a pilot study was conducted to ensure that the age-specific tool was usable for clinicians.

Psychometric study

The age-specific tool was filled out during the intake phase by two clinicians. In accordance with the standard procedure, each patient was seen by two clinicians during the intake phase. Often these clinicians had a different professional background, for example, a psychiatrist and a psychologist. Both clinicians evaluated each patient independently. After completing the intake, both clinicians filled out the tool, including one extra question concerning whether or not they thought that the patient needed highly specialized care. The clinicians based their answer to this question upon their clinical impressions. After completing the intake phase in a multidisciplinary meeting, colleagues of the clinicians also decided, based on the information gathered during the intake phase, whether or not the patient was in need of highly specialized care. The colleagues were at that time unaware of the clinicians’ judgment concerning the need of highly specialized care. The consensus judgment of the multidisciplinary team whether or not the patient was qualified as highly specialized, was used as the gold standard to determine a cut-off score for the tool.

Participants

Delphi study

For the Delphi study, 12 experts were approached to participate, and nine of them participated in the study. Reasons for not participating were other
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORIGINAL ITEM</th>
<th>EXPERT OPINION</th>
<th>CONSENSUS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Severe negative affect with maladaptive coping</td>
<td>Since severe negative affect and maladaptive coping are important characteristics the item does not differentiate between specialized and highly specialized, it needs an extra marker for severity. Affect can also be variable, instead of a constant negative affect.</td>
<td>Very severe, prolonged, variable negative affect with maladaptive coping.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Severe destructive behavior to oneself or others</td>
<td>Destructive behavior is expressed differently among older adults, as there is less acting out and externalizing behavior. Destructive behavior in older adults can show in avoiding/refusing help, dependence of benzodiazepines, very poor self-care, somatic neglect.</td>
<td>Severe, chronical destructive behavior to oneself and/or others (also, for example, poor self-care, somatic neglect).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Multiple comorbid disorders on axis I and/or axis II due to severe psychiatric problems</td>
<td>Axis I and axis II are no longer used in DSM-5 and should therefore be omitted. Older adults with severe PDs also often have an elaborate psychiatric history with a lot of diagnoses and/or changing diagnoses.</td>
<td>Multiple symptomatology reflected in a broad spectrum of symptoms and/or comorbid disorders, now and/or in the past.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Severe social and societal dysfunction, GAF ( \leq 50 )</td>
<td>GAF is no longer used in DSM-5 and should therefore be omitted. The influence of comorbid somatic or cognitive disorders. In the older adult population, interpersonal functioning is a more important differentiating characteristic since societal functioning diminishes with, for example, retirement.</td>
<td>Severe dysfunction in multiple areas of life, including interpersonal functioning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Severe chronic traumatization in childhood</td>
<td>Chronicity of the traumatization is more important in predicting the need of highly specialized care than the age at which the traumatization occurred. Affective neglect is as important in causing severe PDs as traumatization.</td>
<td>Persisting consequences of traumatization or affective neglect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Difficulties in developing a therapeutic relationship</td>
<td>In older adults with severe PDs often the family or caretakers are the ones who seek help, mediation therapy is an important aspect of highly specialized care. The difficulties in developing relationships are not limited to the therapeutic relationship, and they also occur in other relationships with caretakers. The difficulties in developing relationships should be sustainable.</td>
<td>Sustainable problems in therapeutic- or caretaker relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Treatment in specialized care was not successful</td>
<td>Treatment in specialized care can be successful but not sufficient, and this should also be a reason to refer to highly specialized care.</td>
<td>Treatment in specialize care was not sufficient, and there are questions about treatment perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Possibility and motivation to conform to minimal treatment conditions for psychotherapy in intensive (day)care</td>
<td>Item does not differentiate between specialized and highly specialized care. Useful in selecting patients for psychotherapy, in older adults with very complex PDs often family or caretakers are the ones who seek help, and mediation therapy is an important aspect of highly specialized care. Creating possibility and/or motivation to conform to minimal treatment conditions is highly specialized care.</td>
<td>Item is omitted.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
obligations on the date of the meeting and illness. All experts were selected from the Dutch and Belgian expert panel on personality disorders in older adults (EPO). This expert panel consists of psychologists, psychiatrists, geriatricians, and psychiatric nurses working in mental health care and/or nursing homes, and who developed an expertise in the topic of PDs in older adults (by either education or scientific research). All Dutch members with a minimum of 10 years membership of EPO were included. The Belgian experts were excluded since there are no highly specialized centers for PDs in older adults in the Belgian Mental Health Care system.

Psychometric study
In the psychometric study, two highly specialized centers for PDs in older adults in the Netherlands participated (Mondriaan, clinical center of excellence for PDs in older adults and PersonaCura, clinical center of excellence of PDs and autism spectrum disorders in older adults of GGz Breburg). These centers offer both (regular) specialized treatment and highly specialized treatment. New referrals to their outpatient center for PDs between January 2017 and May 2018 were evaluated. Overall, a total of 90 patients were evaluated.

Results
Delphi study
The expert panel reached consensus that in clinical practice a tool is a meaningful contribution to detecting older adults with severe PDs for highly specialized care, but only if the tool is suitable for older adults. The previously developed tool for adults was not considered to be suitable for older adults. The results of the Delphi for each of the items of the tool are presented in Table 1. Expert consensus was reached for all items, resulting in seven new items for an age-specific tool.

Psychometric study
Demographics
The characteristics of patients in the regular care and highly specialized care group are shown in Table 2.

There were no significant differences between the demographic characteristics of the patients in both groups.

Among all of the checklists, there were only 12 missing values (1%), and these were distributed evenly over the items of the tool. Before conducting further analysis, missing values were replaced by the answer “no.” It was argued that the clinician, based on the information gathered in the intake, was not convinced that the patient met the item and had therefore left it open.

Statistical analysis
In the psychometric study, criterion validity of the new measure was assessed. Therefore, the sensitivity and the specificity of the tool were evaluated. Sensitivity is defined as the ability of the tool to accurately detect patients with severe PDs for highly specialized care; specificity is the ability of the tool to accurately detect patients without severe PDs and not in need of highly specialized care. Sensitivity (true positive rate) and 1 – specificity (true negative rate) were plotted in a receiver operating curve (ROC), and the area under the curve (AUC) was calculated.

Internal consistency was assessed by calculation of Cronbach’s alpha. Inter-rater reliability was assessed by calculation of the Kappa coefficient. All statistical analyses were performed with SPSS Statistics 19.
the possible total numbers of positively scored items. Since one of the important goals of the tool is case finding, that is detecting those patients who are in need of highly specialized treatment, sensitivity is considered more important than specificity, although we tried to maximize both. Therefore, a cut-off score of 4 was chosen.

### Discussion

The aim of this study was to develop an age-specific tool to detect older adults with severe PDs for highly specialized care. Based on expert opinion following the Delphi method, the recently developed tool for adults with PDs (Goorden et al., 2017) was adjusted for age-specific characteristics in older adults. As expected, items in the current tool were generally similar to those in the tool for adults. However, several important age-specific adjustments were made. First, for several items, adjustments and complements were made in order to highlight the specific way in which PDs can be expressed in older adults. For example, compared to younger adults, comorbidity in older adults more often is not only limited to mood, anxiety, substance abuse, and somatic symptom disorders but also expressed in cognitive and somatic comorbidity (Kennedy et al., 2016). Also, some characteristics of PDs are expressed differently in older adults. For example, self-destructive behavior is often expressed in a less overt or obvious manner among older adults (for instance, in somatic neglect rather than in direct self-mutilation). Second, the original tool for adults has a distinct focus on the patient being able and motivated to be in an intensive, specialized psychotherapeutic treatment. In old age psychiatry, often family or caretakers are the ones who seek help and are able to participate in the treatment instead of the patient. The experts mentioned that besides specialized psychotherapeutic treatment, treatment of patients that are not (yet) committed or unable to undergo psychotherapeutic treatment is a form of highly specialized care.

In the second part of the study, the psychometric properties of the age-specific tool were evaluated. Internal consistency of the tool was sufficient and the diagnostic accuracy of the tool was good. These results are similar to those found for the tool for adults with PDs (Goorden et al., 2017). The overall inter-rater reliability of the current tool was moderate. The inter-rater reliability for the separate items of the tool varied from slight to substantial. In the development of the tool for adults, inter-rater reliability was not investigated. As such, it is not evident whether this inter-rater reliability is specific for the current tool. In the current sample, inter-rater reliability is the highest for the items with respect to self-destructive behavior and persisting consequences of traumatization. The inter-rater reliability was the poorest for the items on severe dysfunction in multiple areas of life and in sustainable problems in therapeutic or caretaker relationships. Possibly, the inter-rater reliability is related to the objectivity and concreteness of the items, and this is similar to what was found in the DSM-5 Field Trials (Regier et al., 2013). Whether or not a patient was a victim of abuse is more objective and concrete than the severity of dysfunction on multiple areas in life.

### Strengths and limitations

This study is the first study with respect to age-specific tools to detect patients for highly specialized care. Furthermore, it is the first study assessing inter-rater reliability for tools to detect patients for specific types of care. However, this study also has several limitations. First, the level of evidence from studies using consensus methods is somewhat limited (Ackley et al., 2008). However, consensus methods, such as the Delphi method, have become increasingly more common in research on topics about which empirical data are very sparse. Second,
in the current study, a group Delphi was used. An important limitation of a group Delphi is that the group meeting may negatively affect the objectivity of the Delphi. The face-to-face contact poses several risks, such as dominant individuals in the group, social pressure, and mutual influence. To reduce these effects, the chairman was selected carefully to be as skilled for this Delphi as possible. Furthermore, seating of the experts was predetermined to minimize the effect of preexisting subgroups, and the order in which the experts responded to each statement was chosen randomly to minimize the effect of any dominant expert and mutual influence.

Another limitation related to the Delphi study concerns the subjectivity of some of the items. Several items were formulated in terms of severe problems with respect to a certain area. Given that the tool was developed to detect older adults with severe personality problems, this in a way is a circular argument. Future studies should continue to evaluate the objectivity of the items and perhaps revise them as necessary. A limitation specifically of the psychometric study is that clinical judgment was used as a reference, although no better gold standards are available. Indeed, because a gold standard to detect severe PDs does not currently exist, clinical judgment can be seen as a LEAD standard (Spitzer, 1983) being used as the best alternative currently available. Since there are no other validated assessments tools that can be used to measure the same construct, the concurrent validity of the tool was not assessed. A final limitation of the psychometric study concerns the representativeness of the sample. All patients included in the study were referred to a highly specialized center for PDs in older adults by their general physician or another mental health care professional. These patients are not representative for the general population of older adults with PDs, and therefore, it is unlikely that the psychometric properties as determined in this study also apply to the general population.

Clinical implications

The tool, as developed and evaluated in the present study, can be used by clinicians that work in both regular and highly specialized mental health care to identify older adults with severe PDs in need of highly specialized care in an early phase, preferably after completing the intake. This may likely improve the efficacy of the treatment by preventing patients from unnecessarily receiving ineffective treatment for a longer period of time.

The tool specifically does not help in determining whether or not someone who receives highly specialized care still needs this highly specialized care. Many of the items in the tool refer to behavior or pathology in the patient’s history. Even though this is helpful in detecting patients in need of highly specialized care, it can also logically be determined that even after successful treatment in highly specialized care these items on the tool do not change. Finally, the tool does not help to determine which level of treatment (supportive-structuring, adaptation-focussed, or aimed at personality change) in the highly specialized care is the best level for each patient. These are ripe topics for further study.

Increasing our knowledge about criteria of highly specialized care and criteria for different levels of treatment would greatly improve the efficacy of treatment for this important population of older adults with PDs.

Conclusion

In this study, we developed an age-specific tool to detect older adults with severe PDs for highly specialized care. The current tool can be used by...
clinicians working in regular and highly specialized mental health care settings to detect patients for highly specialized care in an early phase. Future research should focus on improving the inter-rater reliability by trying to improve the objectivity of the items and on further evaluating criterion validity. Also, it would be useful to assess the factor structure of the tool. Furthermore, it should focus on identifying which forms of treatment for older adults with PDs are currently considered to be highly specialized and how we can detect patients that will likely benefit from these specific forms of treatment.

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