THE ALVOR ADVANCED STUDY INSTITUTE

ROBERT D. HARE

Department of Psychology

University of British Columbia

Vancouver, Canada.

INTRODUCTION

This book is based on a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Advanced Study Institute (ASI) on psychopathy held in Alvor, Portugal from November 27 to December 7, 1995. Like the first ASI on psychopathy, organized by Daisy Schalling and me and held in Les Arcs, France in September, 1995 (Hare & Schalling, 1978), the Alvor meeting followed the format recommended by NATO for an ASI, described as high level teaching seminar in which "lecturers" and "students" meet in a relatively secluded location for an extended period of intensive instruction, discussion, and debate on a specific topic of international interest. However, the two ASIs differed dramatically in content and mood.

Les Arcs, 1975

As I've indicated elsewhere (Hare, 1996a), the participants at Les Arcs — psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, anthropologists, and criminologists — operated from a variety of conceptual frameworks and agendas, including some that seemed more ideological or political than scientific, and others that were concerned more with general theories of personality, or with criminality and social deviance, than with psychopathy. The result was a considerable amount of armchair speculation and uninformed debate, but few productive discussions about the nature of psychopathy. In some respects the Les Arcs ASI was like an invitational tennis tournament in which half the participants played ping pong or squash, but who either thought they were playing tennis or argued that it didn't really matter because everyone was hitting balls.

In an attempt to get everyone to agree on which game we were playing, or at least to use the same ball, one psychiatrist said that our difficulty in defining psychopathy was reminiscent of the parable of several blind men who each defined an elephant on the basis of the parts they happened to feel with their hands. A prominent psychologist replied that psychopathy was a "white elephant that ought to be dumped into (nearby) Lake Annecy." Another psychologist, during a heated debate, stated that my invitation for him to attend the ASI arrived at the "last minute," indicating that I must be impulsive and lacking in planning ability, and he suggested — perhaps facetiously — that I could be a psychopath. The rest of the participants considered this unlikely, given that I apparently had not misappropriated the grant provided by NATO, but conscientiously was using it to pay for their travel and living expenses.

D.J. Cooke et al. (eds.), Psychopathy: Theory, Research and Implications for Society, 1–11.
In any case, the whole experience was very frustrating and, I thought, unproductive. However, with time the real value of the Les Arcs ASI became apparent. As envisaged by the Scientific Affairs Division of NATO, one of the purposes of an ASI is the fostering of international debate, cooperation, and collaboration on the topic of interest. In this respect, the Les Arcs meeting certainly was a success (see Hare & Schalling, 1978). For example, a major issue at the conference had been the lack of a generally acceptable operational definition for psychopathy. How do we study a construct if we can't agree on procedures for its measurement? Within five years several new methods for the assessment of psychopathy had emerged. One was represented by the diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder listed in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Although I can't claim that the Les Arcs ASI was responsible for the use of these criteria, it is noteworthy that one of our lecturers was Lee Robins, a key figure in their formulation (Robins, 1978). It seems likely that her views on the need for objective diagnostic criteria for psychopathy at least were reinforced by her experiences at Les Arcs. My own experiences at the meeting motivated me and my students to develop a system for operationalizing the traditional features of psychopathy. The result was a 22-item research scale (Hare, 1980), the precursor of the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL) and its revision, the PCL-R (Hare, 1991).

Alvor, 1995

The Alvor ASI was much different from the previous one. Not only had the academic and clinical climates for psychopathy changed dramatically in the 20 years since Les Arcs, there now was a sizable number of international researchers and clinicians actively engaged in the study of the construct and its implications for society. The Organizing Committee (David Cooke, Adelle Forth, Joseph Newman) and I had little difficulty in putting together a stellar group of some 85 knowledgeable participants from 15 countries. As the contents of this volume attest, the presentations provided the participants with a wealth of information on current theory and research on psychopathy. In addition to the formal lectures and meetings, all of which were accompanied by lively interactions between speaker and audience, many of the participants presented their own research in paper and poster sessions. Abstracts of the presentations (35 in all) recently were published by the British Psychological Society (Cooke, Forth, Newman, & Hare, 1996).

A considerable amount of time was spent in informal discussions and in the establishment of new scientific and personal contacts, many of which will have a continuing impact on international research on psychopathy in particular, and personality disorders in general. Informal work groups were established to apply theory and research on psychopathy to practical issues, including the selection and training of law enforcement personnel, the training of hostage negotiators, and the establishment of educational programs for policy and decision makers, judges, lawyers, and parole, probation, and correctional personnel. The sense of common purpose that developed in Alvor was reflected in the "reunion" of 22 of the participants at the International Congress on the Disorders of Personality held in Vancouver in June, 1997.