

# How personality became treatable: The mutual constitution of clinical knowledge and mental health law

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Social Studies of Science

1. **Martyn Pickersgill**

1. Centre for Population Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh, UK

1. Martyn Pickersgill, Centre for Population Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh, Medical School, Teviot Place, Edinburgh EH8 9AG, UK Email: [martyn.pickersgill@ed.ac.uk](mailto:martyn.pickersgill@ed.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

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In recent years, personality disorders – psychiatric constructs understood as enduring dysfunctions of personality – have come into ever-greater focus for British policymakers, mental health professionals and service-users. Disputes have focussed largely on highly controversial attempts by the UK Department of Health to introduce mental health law and policy (now enshrined within the 2007 Mental Health Act of England and Wales). At the same time, clinical framings of personality disorder have dramatically shifted: once regarded as untreatable conditions, severe personality disorders are today thought of by many clinicians to be responsive to psychiatric and psychological intervention. In this article, I chart this transformation by means of a diachronic analysis of debates and institutional shifts pertaining to both attempts to change the law, and understandings of personality disorder. In so doing, I show how mental health policy and practice have mutually constituted one another, such that the aims of clinicians and policymakers have come to be closely aligned. I argue that it is precisely through these reciprocally constitutive processes that the profound reconfiguration of personality disorder from being an obdurate to a plastic condition has occurred; this demonstrates the significance of interactions between law and the health professions in shaping not only the State's management of pathology, but also perceptions of its very nature.