

Comorbid psychiatric disorders in people with ASD and intellectual disability: Development and first validation of a new screening checklist

Introduction

Individuals with autism spectrum disorders and intellectual disability (ASD+ID) are assumed to have high vulnerability for developing psychiatric disorders. However, reliable instruments or criteria for identifying those who may be in need of psychiatric services are limited. The Psychopathology in Autism Checklist (PAC) is a new carer completed screening checklist designed for this purpose.

The Psychopathology in Autism Checklist (PAC)

The following obstacles increase the complexities of identifying mental health disorders in this population, and these are taken into consideration in the development of the PAC:

- Differentiation between symptoms related to autism and to psychiatric disorders
- The individuals' reduced capacity for introspection and problems communicating their personal state
- Idiosyncratic or atypical psychiatric symptoms

The PAC addresses four major psychiatric disorders; psychosis, depression, anxiety disorders, and Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and comprise five subscales. All 42 items are based on ICD-10 and DSM-IV criteria and are conceptually analyzed. 30 items representing symptoms evaluated as specific to one of the four major psychiatric disorders and not related to autism. Twelve items assessed as indicators of general adjustment problems are also included, e.g. sleep disturbances, self-harm, irritability, passivity, and restlessness.

Validation study

The first validation study of the PAC was performed in a sample of 35 adults with ASD+ ID. The scores of participants with co-occurring psychiatric disorders (i.e. psychosis, depression, anxiety disorder, or OCD) were compared with the scores of participants without psychiatric disorders, i.e. the autism only group. All disorders were identified prior to the scoring.

Results

All psychiatric subgroups obtained significantly higher average scores on all subscales than the autism-only group.

The psychometric properties, i.e. internal consistency computed by Cronbach's α and inter-rater agreement computed by Cohen's Kappa were also acceptable (psychosis $\alpha = .89$ and $k = .51$, depression $\alpha = .85$ and $k = .67$, anxiety disorder $\alpha = .78$ and $k = .58$, OCD $\alpha = .88$ and $k = .53$, general adjustment problems $\alpha = .88$ and $k = .66$).

Figure 1: The psychosis subscale scores

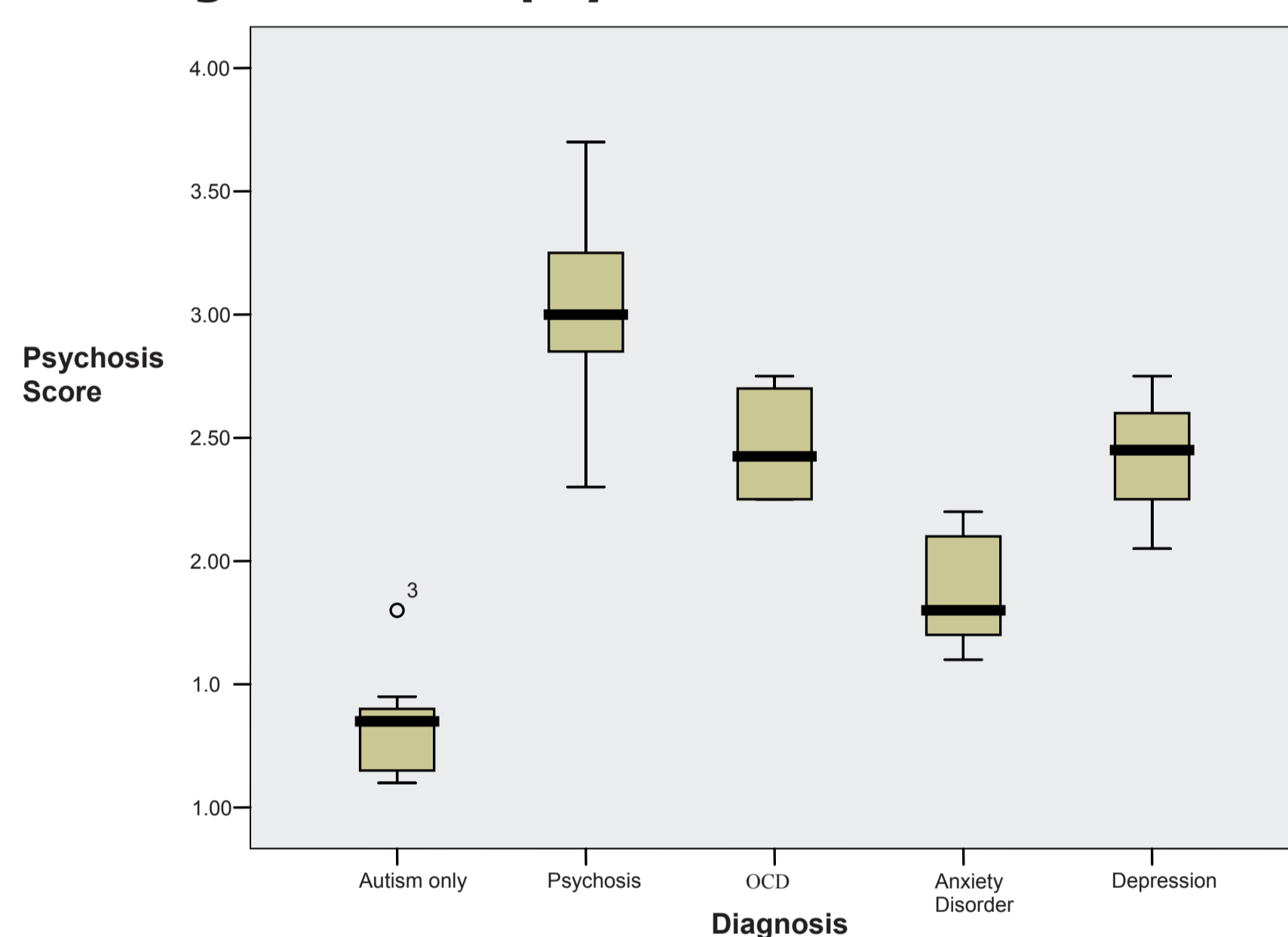


Figure 2: The depression subscale scores

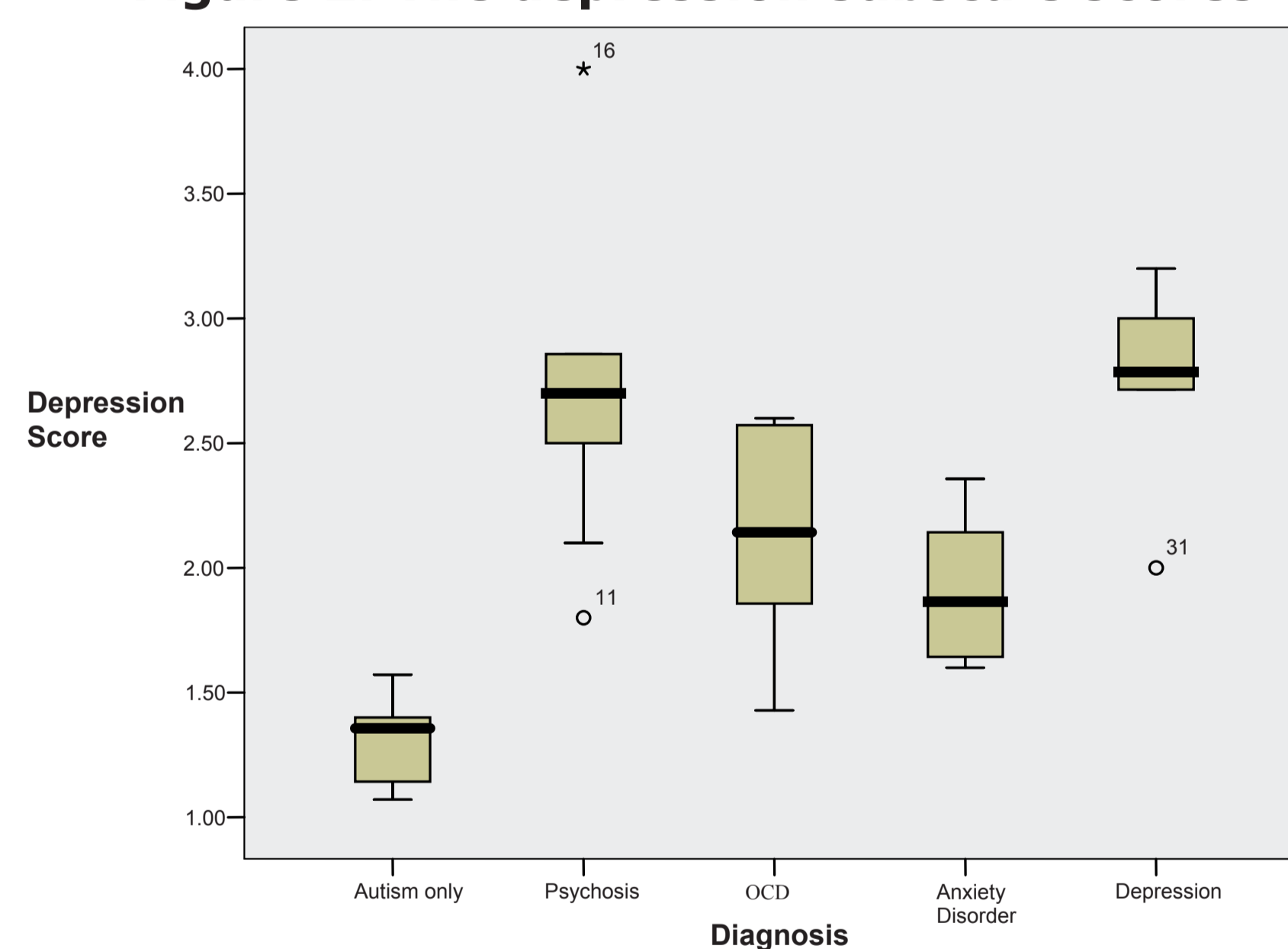


Figure 3: The anxiety disorder subscale

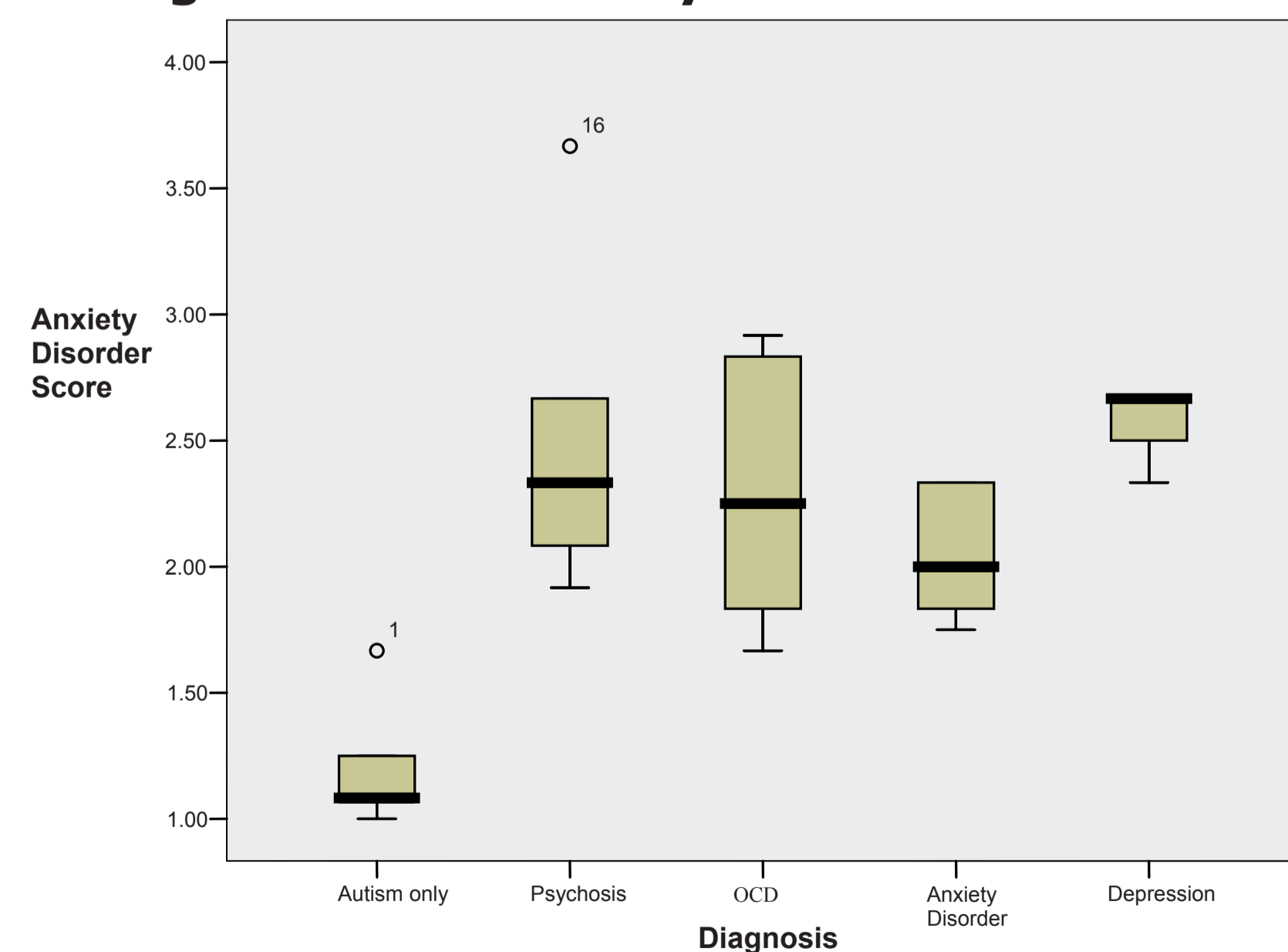


Figure 4: The OCD subscale scores

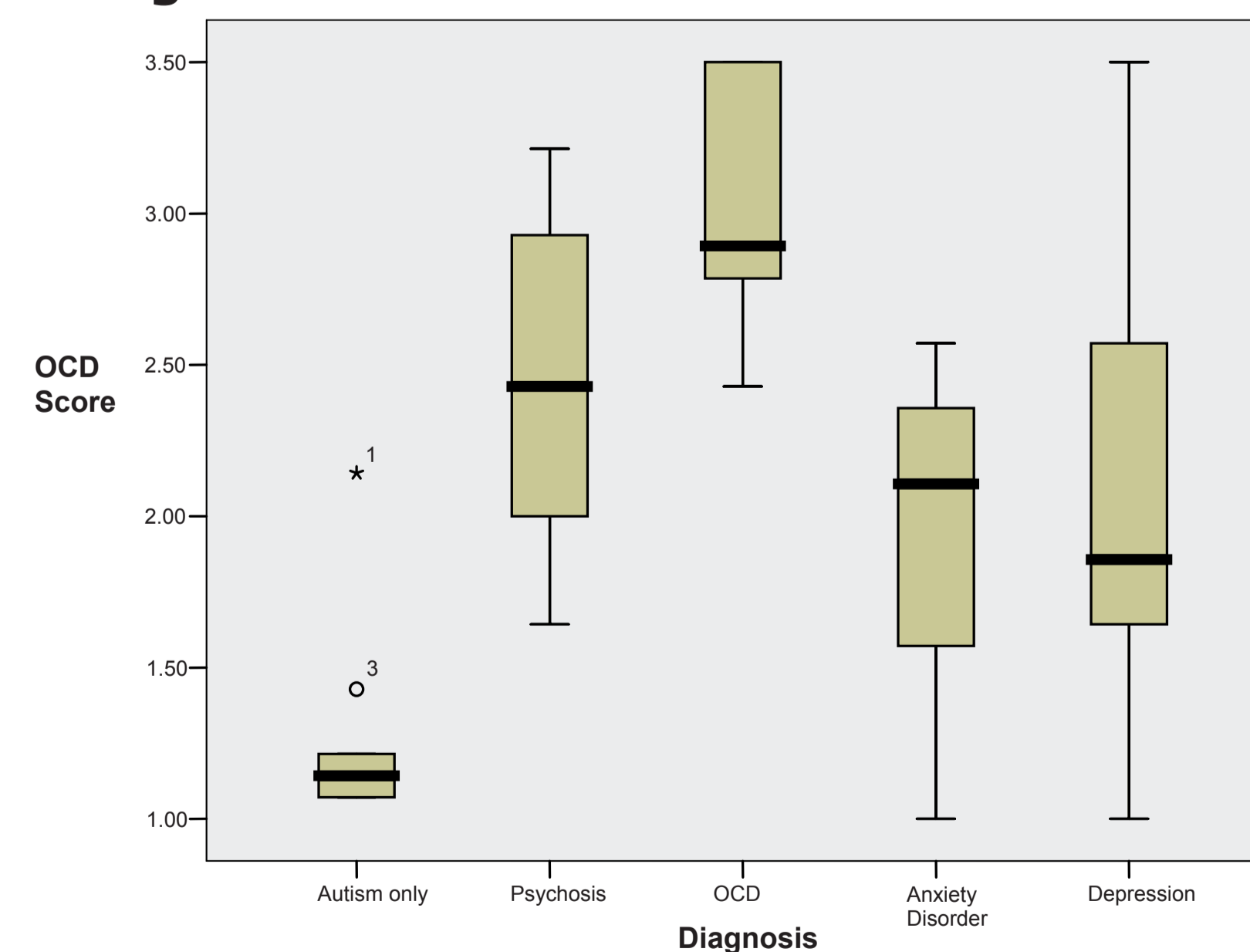
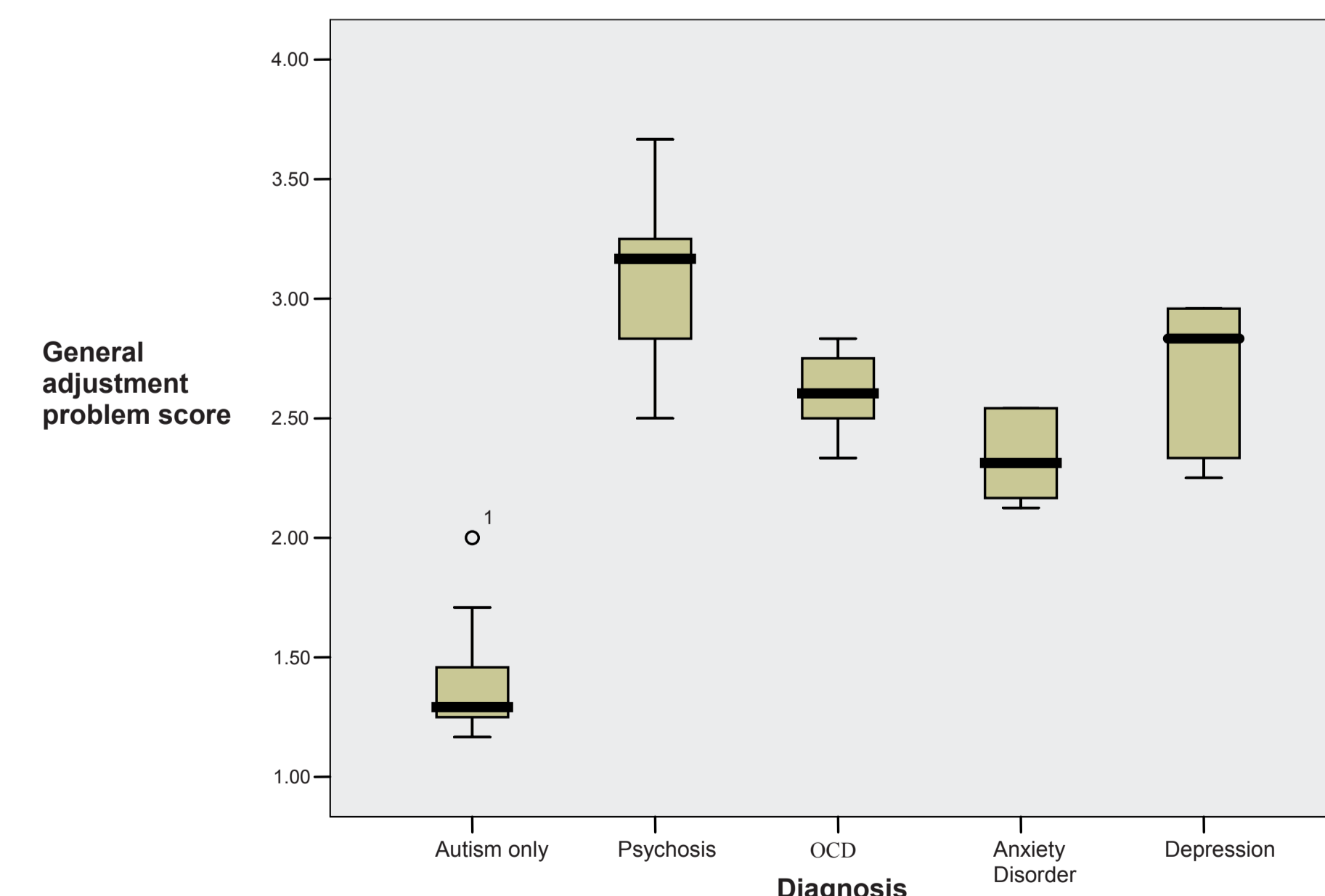


Figure 5: The general adjustment problem subscale



N = 35, The rating scale 1 - 4 (1 = no problem; 2 = minor problem; 3 = moderate problem; 4 = severe problem).

The box plots (Figure 1 - 5) shows the median, interquartile range, outliers, and extreme cases of scores of the psychiatric subgroups and the autism only group on the five subscales. Each box shows the median, quartiles, and extreme values within each subgroup and case numbers are used to label outliers and extremes.

Conclusions

The Psychopathology in Autism Checklist (PAC) discriminates between adults with autism spectrum disorders and intellectual disability (ASD+ID) with and without psychiatric disorders. To some degree, the PAC also discriminates between individuals diagnosed with different psychiatric disorders, especially psychosis and Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

The PAC may contribute to the identification of people with ASD+ID who are at risk of mental health problems and thereby increasing their access to specialized mental health services. The PAC is, however, not a diagnostic instrument, and an accurate diagnostic evaluation requires additional information from informants with thorough knowledge about the individual and the individual's changes in behaviour and mood over time.

References

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- Helverschou, S.B., Bakken, T.L., & Martinsen, H. (2009). The Psychopathology in Autism Checklist (PAC): a pilot study. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 3, 179–195.

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