



CHAPTER 6

Still Psychopathic After All These Years

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“His mouth is full of curses and lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue. He lies in wait near the villages; from ambush he murders the innocent, watching in secret for his victims. He lies in wait like a lion in cover; he lies in wait to catch the helpless; he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net. His victims are crushed, they collapse; they fall under his strength.”

—**Psalms** 10:7–9 (cited in 46)

“Humans have long been concerned by or fascinated with the concept of evil and the people thought to personify evil. Say the word psychopath and most people can easily conjure up an image of someone they believe to embody the word.”

—**James Blair, Derek Mitchell, and Karina Blair** (1, p. 1)

With a clinical and criminological history that spans more than two centuries, psychopathy is among the most popular, controversial, and empirically evaluated constructs in the behavioral sciences. Robert Hare (28),

arguably the most accomplished psychopathy researcher, noted that even those opposed to the very idea of psychopathy cannot ignore its potent explanatory and predictive power—if not as a formal construct, then as a static risk factor.

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Indeed, some researchers have found evidence indicating that psychopaths constitute a taxon, meaning a natural, discrete class of persons among the criminal population (33, 57). This chapter argues that psychopathy is the purest, most parsimonious, and, frankly, best explanation of serious antisocial and violent behavior. More than any other theory of crime, the construct of psychopathy brilliantly forges the connection between the individual-level traits of the actor and his or her antisocial behavior.

Psychopathy is a clinical construct usually referred to as a personality disorder defined by a constellation of interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and behavioral characteristics that are manifested in wide-ranging antisocial behaviors. The characteristics of psychopathy read like a blueprint for violence. Psychopaths are impulsive, grandiose, emotionally cold, manipulative, callous, arrogant, dominant, irresponsible, short-tempered persons who tend to violate social norms and victimize others without guilt or anxiety. In short, they are human predators without conscience.

At the heart of psychopathy is the complete unfeeling for other people, evidenced by callous-unemotional traits, remorselessness, and the absence of empathy. These individuals do not experience the feelings that naturally inhibit the acting out of violent impulses, and their emotional deficiency is closely related to general under-arousal and the need for sensation seeking (37). Because of this vacancy in the moral connection to other people, psychopaths are qualitatively distinct from other offender groups. But psychopaths go beyond that qualitative distinction: They are quantitatively worse than other offenders. A study by David Simourd and Robert Hoge (56) speaks to the virulence of the personality disorder even among a sample of dangerous criminals. Simourd and Hoge examined the case histories of 321 felons who were incarcerated for violent crimes. Among this sample, 36 inmates were psychopaths and 285 were not. Compared to non-psychopaths, psychopaths had more previous, total, violent, noncompliant, and different types of criminal convictions; more arrests; greater criminal

sentiments and pride in antisocial behavior; and, almost without exception, greater needs in terms of supervision.

What is the prevalence of psychopathy in the general population? It is difficult to know because population-based studies have not been carried out; however, studies in correctional facilities have shown that approximately 25% of persons with antisocial personality disorder—a psychiatric disorder closely associated with psychopathy—meet the criteria for psychopathy (34). Given that psychiatric epidemiological studies of antisocial personality disorder indicate approximately 4% of the adult population possesses this disorder, we can infer an estimate of roughly 1% of the total population having psychopathy (27).

If someone is interested in understanding criminal violence, psychopathy is a good place to start. This chapter briefly highlights empirical issues pertaining to criminological theory, career criminality and recidivism, murder and sexual offending, and institutional violence as they relate to psychopathy. While these concepts are informed by many academic disciplines and encompass an array of topical areas, psychopathy is central to each.

► Criminological Theory

One of the most popular and widely studied theories of crime is the general theory of crime advanced by Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi (23), which asserts that low self-control is the chief variable that predicts crime and analogous behaviors. The profile of persons with low self-control is well known; however, consider the following description of criminal offenders:

[O]ver-evaluation of immediate goals as opposed to remote or deferred ones; unconcern over the rights and privileges of others when recognizing them would interfere with personal satisfaction in any way; impulsive behavior, or apparent incongruity between the strength of

the stimulus and the magnitude of the behavioral response; inability to form deep or persistent attachment to other persons . . . poor judgment and planning in attaining defined goals . . . almost complete lack of dependability of and willingness to assume responsibility; and, finally, emotional poverty (24).

While this reads like a description of an offender with low self-control, it is actually a profile of psychopathic offenders published in 1948. Indeed, the core characteristics in Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime (e.g., hot tempered, impulsive, action oriented, unempathetic, unable to delay gratification) could be construed as a softened abbreviation of psychopathy. In this way, the most talked-about, controversial, and cited theory in mainstream criminology borrows much of its empirical heft from the construct of psychopathy (64).

Psychopathy has proved useful in the integration of previously disparate literatures. For instance, Donald Lynam has shown that a small cadre of children with hyperactivity, impulsivity, attention problems (e.g., ADHD), and conduct disorder are afflicted with a virulent strain of psychopathology best described as "fledgling psychopathy." Lynam's work has strengthened developmental psychology, psychopathology, and criminology by illustrating the "worst of the worst" in terms of violent and antisocial behavior and explaining how it unfolds over the life span (44, 45). For instance, in one of the earliest studies of adolescent psychopathy, Adelle Forth and her colleagues (21) found that psychopathic youths had criminal histories marked by more previous violent offending and institutional violence. Even as adolescents, psychopathic offenders are more likely than non-psychopathic youths to receive a swift juvenile court referral, commit a violent offense upon release, and engage in both instrumental ("cold-blooded") and reactive ("hot blooded") forms of aggression (3, 43, 59).

Other authors, such as Michael Vaughn and David Farrington, suggest that psychopathy

could be a useful construct for organizing the study of serious, violent antisocial behavior among children and adolescents (18, 61). For instance, three notable longitudinal studies—the Denver Youth Survey, Pittsburgh Youth Study (PYS), and Rochester Youth Development Study—revealed that between 14% and 17% of the youths in these samples were habitual offenders who accounted for 75% to 82% of the incidence of criminal violence. These adolescents in Denver, Pittsburgh, and Rochester tended to be "multiple-problem youths" who experienced an assortment of antisocial risk factors, such as mental health problems, alcoholism and substance abuse histories, and sustained criminal involvement. Within this violent group, a small minority of youths were the most frequent, severe, aggressive, and temporally stable delinquent offenders. These youths, all of whom were males, were reared in broken homes by parents who themselves had numerous mental health and parenting problems. These boys were also notable for their impulsivity, emotional and moral insouciance, and total lack of guilt regarding their commission of crime. In other words, these studies indicate that the most violent young offenders in the United States display many of the characteristics of psychopathy (42).

Even those who are critical of the notion of using psychopathy as a general theory of crime recognize how parsimoniously and accurately it describes crime and violence (63). For the more extreme forms of crime, psychopathy is an intuitive heuristic for understanding behavior; however, it seems too severe when attempting to explain mundane forms of crime. For instance, it might seem foolish to suggest that behaviors such as shoplifting, forgery, and drunk driving are the expression of psychopathy, because they are more common and often committed by seemingly "normal" persons. However, the very nature of minor crimes such as stealing and drunk driving reveals something about offenders—namely, those who are willing to take from others, satisfy their desires at the possible expense of others, and flagrantly violate law and morality. To borrow

from Gottfredson and Hirschi, all crimes are acts of force and fraud against others in the pursuit of self-interest. This perspective is not unlike that advocated by psychopathy.

► Career Criminality and Recidivism

It is well established that a minority of criminals perpetrate the majority of crimes in a population. Career criminals begin their antisocial careers early, commit greater and more varied crimes, and are the most violent (7). Various scholars have empirically explored the links between psychopathy and assorted dimensions of career criminality, especially recidivism and non-compliance with criminal justice sanctions. For example, Grant Harris and his colleagues (31) examined the recidivism rates of 169 male offenders released from a psychiatric facility and followed up one year later. Nearly 80% of psychopathic offenders committed a new violent offense. Moreover, psychopathy was the strongest predictor of recidivism. In fact, its effects were *stronger than the combined effects of 16 background, demographic, and criminal history variables* (31). In the PYS, boys who presented with psychopathic traits were between 480% and 630% more likely to be multiple-problem offenders. These most frequent, severe, aggressive, and stable delinquents were prone to externalizing disorders, but remained seemingly immune from internalizing disorders, such as anxiety (42).

Recently, David Farrington (19) explored etiological predictors of psychopathy using data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, a 40-year prospective longitudinal survey of the criminal careers and social histories of 411 London males. Using the Psychopathy Checklist Revised Screening Version (PCL-R:SV), Farrington compared the offending careers of the top 11% of the sample who scored 10 or higher on the PCL-R:SV (deemed the most psychopathic) to the remaining members of the panel. The

most psychopathic group totaled significantly more convictions, had greater involvement in the criminal justice system, and presented with more criteria for antisocial personality disorder diagnosis. Nearly half of these men were chronic offenders. In his analysis of this sample, Farrington (19) discovered that an assortment of background factors was predictive of psychopathy at age 48. The strongest predictors (with corresponding odds ratios) were uninvolved father (6.5), physical neglect (5.9), convicted father (5.1), low family income (4.6), and convicted mother (4.5).

With respect to persistence, frequency, and severity, male psychopaths are believed to constitute the most violent population of human aggressors known (32, p. 406). When Mary Ann Campbell and her colleagues (4) studied 226 incarcerated adolescent offenders, they found that approximately 9% of the sample exhibited high levels of psychopathic traits; however, this small selection of youths had the most violent and versatile criminal histories. Richard Rogers and his colleagues' (55) analysis of 448 prisoners revealed that, as children, psychopathic inmates forced others into sexual activity, were physically cruel to others, used weapons in fights, deliberately destroyed property, committed arson, and were cruel to animals, among other crimes. In the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, children with psychopathic personalities were significantly more likely to be chronic offenders, and these traits had predictive power in regard to criminal behavior decades later (17). Importantly, high scores on psychopathy measures have also been correlated with early-onset for violent offending (20).

Michael Vaughn and Matt DeLisi (60) explored the relationship between psychopathic personality traits and career criminality within a large sample of more than 700 incarcerated adolescents. Youths who presented with psychopathic characteristics were approximately 300% to 400% more likely than offenders without psychopathic traits to be classified as career criminals. Subsequently, these researchers found that psychopathy measures were moderately

able (between 70% and 73% of the time) to correctly classify career criminal membership. When higher threshold specifications were used, the classification accuracy improved to an impressive 88%, with many of the highly relevant characteristics relating to impulsivity, callousness, fearlessness, and narcissism.

Interestingly, some of the interest in psychopathy centers on the notion that psychopaths' behavior is in some way innate. A recent analysis of 626 twin pairs indicated that nearly 50% of the variation in fearless dominance (i.e., resiliency to internalizing disorders) and impulsive anti-sociality (i.e., liability to externalizing deviance) was attributable to genes (2). Put another way, the constellation of negative personality traits imbued in psychopathy have been there since the beginning of the psychopath's life.

Which feature of psychopathy among adolescents is particularly worrisome? Recent research suggests that callous-unemotional traits may be the pathway that leads to severe and persistent aggression in youth. For instance, in a sample of 169 adolescents, Dustin Pardini (52) found that low empathy was mediated by a nonconcern for the consequences of punishment. If social learning and behavior conditioning principles have little effect on restraining behaviors, then these youth are relatively "free" to do as they please. Similarly, in a sample of 376 boys and 344 girls, Darrick Jolliffe and David Farrington (39) found that these same low empathy traits were associated with increased frequency of bullying behavior overall, and violent bullying among the boys. It appears that the hallmark feature of primary psychopathy—lack of conscience—may be recognizable among children and adolescents.

Several meta-analyses have indicated that psychopathy is the indispensable predictor of violent recidivism among children, adolescents, and especially adults (12, 16, 38). For instance, among a sample of incarcerated U.S. adolescents, psychopathic youths were found to have higher rates of instrumental violence, violence where the victim required medical attention, assaults with deadly weapons, and both self-reports and criminal records of violence (49). Among

Canadian detained adolescents, psychopathic youths were more likely to offend after release from custody, committed more nonviolent and violent crimes, and recidivated more quickly than other offenders (5). As recidivists, psychopaths are quicker, more productive, and more severe once released back to the community.

► Murder and Sexual Offending

The violence perpetrated by psychopaths is more instrumental, dispassionate, and predatory than that of other offenders. As such, psychopathy is an important risk factor for homicide and sexual offending. Much of this relationship derives from the ease with which psychopaths can inflict violence. A study published in *Nature* found that psychopathic murderers have diminished negative reactions to violence compared to non-psychopaths and other violent offenders, almost as if violence is a facile, unexceptional event to these individuals (25).

For serial murder and single sexual homicides, psychopathy is a basic personality characteristic of the offender (22, 51). For instance, Theodore Millon and Roger Davis (47) suggest that many murderers could be characterized as malevolent psychopaths, which is a particularly negative subtype of offender characterized as belligerent, mordant, rancorous, vicious, brutal, callous, and vengeful. What does psychopathic malevolence look like? Park Dietz and his colleagues (10) conducted a descriptive study of 30 sexually sadistic criminals. All of these men intentionally tortured their victims for purposes of their own sexual arousal. Their crimes often involved careful planning, the selection of strangers as victims, approaching the victim under a pretext, participation of a partner, beating victims, restraining victims and holding them captive, sexual bondage, anal rape, forced fellatio, vaginal rape, foreign object penetration, telling victims to speak particular words in a degrading manner, murder or serial

killings (most often by strangulation), concealing victims' corpses, recording offenses, and keeping personal items belonging to victims. These are some call signs of psychopathy, albeit coupled with sexual sadism.

A study of 125 murderers found that more than 93% of homicides committed by psychopaths were "cold-blooded," in that they were instrumental, completely premeditated, and not preceded by an explosive emotional interaction, such as an argument. When Stephen Porter and his colleagues (54) compared sexual homicides committed by psychopathic and non-psychopathic offenders in Canadian prisons, they found that nearly 85% of psychopathic murderers engaged in some degree of sadistic behavior during the course of their crimes. Moreover, homicides committed by psychopaths involved significantly greater levels of gratuitous and sadistic violence. Citing a study conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Robert Hare (29) noted that more than half of the law enforcement officers killed on duty were murdered by offenders whose personality profile matched that of the psychopath.

Paul Mullen (48) reviewed data suggesting that mass killers were isolated individuals who had rarely established themselves in effective adult roles. Persons who committed massacres were usually men roughly 40 years old, who had been bullied or isolated as children, demonstrated an affinity or preoccupation with weaponry and violence, and showed psychopathic-like personalities marked by rigid or obsessive beliefs, delusional suspiciousness, narcissism, and grandiose ideas that they had been persecuted.

When Wade Myers (50) examined the psychiatric history, criminal history, and family background of 16 juvenile sexual homicide offenders, he discovered a laundry list of severe risk factors, many of them related to psychopathy. The most prevalent of these traits were an impaired capacity to feel guilt, neuropsychiatric vulnerabilities, serious school problems, child abuse victimization and family dysfunction, history of interpersonal violence, prior arrests, sadistic fantasy, psychopathic personality, and

personality disorder diagnosis. Nearly 90% had elevated psychopathy scores.

Matt DeLisi (6) interviewed 500 adult offenders with a minimum of 30 prior arrests. The sample included 42 murderers, 80 rapists, and 38 kidnappers. All of these offender groups showed versatility, as evidenced by multiple arrests for assorted violent and property crimes, recurrent imprisonments, and criminal careers that averaged roughly 25 years. During the interviews, the most violent offenders, especially the rapists, demonstrated prototypical psychopathic traits, such as pathological lying, irresponsibility, malevolent egocentricity, pronounced anger, and little regard for their victims.

Psychopathy figures prominently in the personality profile of sexually offending groups. Roy Hazelwood, the renowned FBI profiler, and Janet Warren developed profiles of serial sexual offenders based on actual cases. They described impulsive serial sexual offenders as persons motivated by a sense of entitlement and the perception that anything (or anyone) is there for the taking—in other words, classic psychopathic symptoms (35). Based on data from 329 Canadian prisoners, Stephen Porter and his colleagues (53) found that a substantial number of offenders who commit various types of sexual crimes are psychopaths. Specifically, 64% of the inmates with convictions for rape and child molestation, 36% of rapists, 11% of intrafamilial child molesters, and 6% of extrafamilial child molesters were psychopaths.

Psychopathy also escalates the risk posed by adolescent sex offenders. Heather Gretton and her colleagues (26) studied 220 adolescent males in an outpatient sex offender treatment program to assess linkages between psychopathy and recidivism. Youths with high psychopathy scores on the Psychopathy Checklist Revised Youth Version (PCL-R:YV) posed multiple threats to public safety. Notably, they were more likely than other offenders to escape from custody, violate probation, and commit violent and nonviolent crimes after release. Moreover, some highly psychopathic youths exhibited deviant sexual arousal as measured by phallometric tests.

Although the relationship between psychopathy and sexual offending is multifaceted, it is undeniable that psychopathy figures prominently in this linkage. When Raymond Knight and Jean-Pierre Guay (40) summarized 50 years of research on the topic, they arrived at three general conclusions. First, psychopaths are significantly more likely than non-psychopathic criminals to rape and are over-represented in clinical samples of sexual offenders. Additionally, psychopathic traits predict rapacious behavior among noncriminal samples. Second, psychopaths constitute a small subgroup of rapists who are extraordinarily violent and recidivistic. Third, the underlying processes that contribute to psychopathy are similar to those associated with sexually coercive behavior. In other words, psychopathy is inextricably linked to the most heinous forms of violent criminal behavior.

► Institutional Violence

Psychopathy is a strong predictor of whether an inmate will continue to misbehave while incarcerated, especially among those offenders convicted of committing the most physically aggressive types of offenses (14). In fact, psychopathic inmates tend to be the most aggressive and difficult-to-manage inmates (11). Glenn Walters (62) conducted a meta-analysis of 41 studies and found a moderate correlation between psychopathy and institutional adjustment ($r = .27$). The studies encompassed adults and juveniles, offenders from four countries, various follow-up periods, and inmates from prisons, forensic hospitals, and psychiatric facilities. Upon release, psychopaths were significantly likely to commit general, violent, and sexual recidivism. Robert Hare and his colleagues (30) found that psychopathic inmates accumulated more incident reports for violating prison rules, were more likely to assault staff, and were more likely to assault other inmates. Nearly one in two psychopaths (with scores greater than 30 on the PCL-R) had assaulted another inmate.

Similarly, Sarah Spain and her colleagues (58) found that psychopathic adolescents accumulated more total, violent, verbal, and administrative violations while in custody and also had significantly worse treatment outcomes. In other words, psychopathic youths took much longer to complete or achieve minimal success in treatment. Among a sample of adjudicated adolescents, Daniel Murrie and his colleagues (49) found that the risk of prison violence increased 10% for each point above the mean PCL-R score. In addition, Mairead Dolan and Charlotte Rennie found that youth psychopathy scores were predictive of assault on others in a secure facility (13).

A link between psychopathy and institutional violence has also been found among mentally disordered offenders. Kirk Heilbrun and his colleagues (36) administered the PCL-R to 218 clients following their admission to an inpatient forensic hospital. Significant correlations between the PCL-R total scores and both nonphysical and physical aggression during the first two months of hospitalization were observed. The PCL-R total scores were also significantly correlated with post-discharge arrests for violent offenses. Psychopathic inpatients were responsible for significantly more aggressive incidents during the first two months of hospitalization. Moreover, psychopathy was significantly correlated with frequency of seclusion or restraint, suggesting that for mentally disordered offenders, psychopathy may serve as a risk factor for institutional aggression.

That psychopathic offenders have poorer adjustment to correctional supervision likely justifies the most punitive forms of criminal sanction. For example, in a sample of 450 sexually violent offenders in Florida, Jill Levenson and John Morin (41) found that for each point above the mean score on the PCL-R, offenders were 49% more likely to be civilly committed or selected for involuntary confinement after serving a prison sentence. Inmates who met the standard cut-off score of 30 were 490% more likely to be selected for civil commitment. In conjunction with diagnosed paraphilias,

psychopathy correctly predicted commitment recommendations in 90% of cases.

In the public mind, psychopaths are deserving of the death penalty perhaps because they bear the label “psychopath.” John Edens and his colleagues (15) presented vignettes of a 16-year-old murderer, described as having classic psychopathic symptoms, to research respondents. These respondents were 130% more likely to recommend that youths should be sentenced to death if they had psychopathic traits. Moreover, respondents indicated that such youths should not receive treatment in prison.

► Conclusion

Criminal offenders are a heterogeneous group, with diverse characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, criminality, criminal history, offense type, risk and protective factors, and personality. Anyone who has worked with criminal offenders in a correctional setting can rather quickly identify recurrent characteristics of serious offenders, however. When considering the most violent types of offenders, for instance—those with convictions for murder, rape, kidnapping, and armed robbery—several thoughts come to mind.

First, virtually all of the most violent offenders are male; predatory violent behavior is simply less prevalent among women. The majority of incarcerated violent offenders have an adverse, often abusive childhood, and most are raised in poverty. These demographic and social correlates are not the only commonalities among violent criminals. Interpersonally, one is immediately struck by their global irresponsibility and basic refusal to handle the important obligations of adult social roles, such as maintaining relationships, maintaining employment, and maintaining sobriety. Incarcerated violent offenders tend to be mean-spirited and insensitive, exceedingly manipulative, and utterly narcissistic. On their rap sheets are found multiple arrests for various crimes committed at high rates across their life

spans. A synergy between the violent criminals’ personality traits, lifestyle, and observed behavior dovetails so exquisitely that it is as if their criminality is wrapped up in a box—and that box is psychopathy.

Psychopathy is an efficient and protean way to understand and explain crime, because the traits that constitute psychopathy correspond to the elemental characteristics of crime itself: a self-serving, uncaring violation of another person. Recent advances in criminological theory, such as the self-control construct in the general theory of crime, are essentially shorthand for psychopathy. For the extremes of criminal behavior, psychopathy is the sine qua non criminological explanation, and one with a long and recurrent history. While other explanatory constructs are also important, it is clear that psychopathic traits are important to understand not only murder, but also serial murder, sadistic murder, and sexually violent murder. In essence, the construct and theory of psychopathy is inescapable (8, 9). It is clear, concise, internally consistent, and, perhaps most importantly, plausible. It efficiently conveys how criminal atrocities can flow from people who, because of their lack of empathy, selfish desires, and deficient conscience, impose a heavy toll on society as a whole.

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