

Ray Kim

Jessica Ngo

Section A

23 Mar. 2022

The Stigmatization of Psychopathy

"Psychopath," is a term we all know well, or so we think. When our society mentions the word "psychopath," we tend to lean towards the people characterized as violent or having manipulative tendencies. The stigmas around these types of people are from media portrayals, which regularly associate the term with negative implications. The excessive negative characterizations of psychopaths have led individuals to misinterpret and stigmatize people with this condition. The general public misunderstands psychopathy, and although there are cases in which people do show violent tendencies, most people diagnosed with psychopathy are far from what our society portrays them to be. Not everyone diagnosed with psychopathy is ruthless or prone to violence.

Craig Neumann, a professor of Clinical Psychology who focuses on researching psychopathic personality traits, defines psychopathy as a personality style that is "interpersonally deceptive, affectively cold, behaviorally reckless, and often overtly antisocial." However, he notes that psychopathy is a scale and that "It's not that you're either a psychopath or not. In the same way, someone can have

severe depression, but it's also possible for someone to have mild or moderate depression." (Heaney). This year's most recent studies have also acknowledged that psychopathy has varying degrees and types for this condition, meaning that there is more to it than what is portrayed in the media (DeAngelis).

In the Media, people would see psychopathic characters as criminals rather than non-vicious individuals. However, some characters who act in more non-violent ways are overlooked by others. Scott McGreal, a researcher in psychology, argues that the "media portrayals of psychopaths have not only included characters with highly negative antisocial traits (e.g., the Joker, Hannibal Lecter) but those with more positive traits such as James Bond and Dr. Gregory House." The Joker and Hanibal Lecter are film characters who are depicted as serial killers with psychopathic tendencies like violence and unemotional behavior. In contrast, film characters like James Bond and Dr. Gregory House, who lacks brutality and violence, are characters that people don't usually associate with the word "psychopath". The example of James Bond and Dr. Gergory House tells us that there is more to psychopathy than what we all think we know and that not all psychopaths are fierce and harmful (McGreal).

People might argue that it is justified to be wary of individuals diagnosed with psychopathy. For example, on *Quora*, an online question and answer website, one of the forums asked other individuals about their thoughts on psychopathy and

if people should be afraid of them. Some of the responses like “you do need to be wary of them. They can destroy your life,” and “Yes, you should be afraid of psychopaths” provide others with doubts and concerns over psychopathic individuals.

Although their fears are reasonable, it is crucial to see that there is a spectrum within psychopathy. Like with any other disorder, people can possess a few or most psychopathic characteristics, and having violent outbursts can be excluded. To see the psychopathic tendencies that the media portrays would be if a person were to reach a score of 30 or higher in a PCL-R, a tool used for diagnostic processes (Heaney).

A PCL-R, or the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, is used to rate people’s psychopath or antisocial patterns. A PCL-R score of 27 and more is considered high, while 17 and below are considered low (Esposito). Ted Bundy, an American serial killer during the 1970s, scored a 39 on the PCL-R test, leading him into the standard for clinical psychopathy (Psychology Today). Neumann claims that "the max score on the PCL-R is a 40, but to reach 30 is really going to be up there, but the point I'm trying to make here is that even people who are 25, 26, they don't quite reach the diagnostic threshold." Although it is reasonable to be cautious, meeting a psychopathic person who emulates similar characteristics to those we see in the media, such as the Joker and Ted Bundy, is pretty slim (Heaney).

Another reason for the stigmatization of psychopaths is due to how the general public comprehends these terms. People have a particular understanding of what a psychopath is. In most cases, it is understood as someone aggressive, especially now, with true-crime stories becoming more mainstream. What most people don't realize, according to Tal Ben-Yaacov and Joseph Glicksohn, a researcher in the Department of Criminology, most studies on psychopaths come from criminals in prison or in forensic hospitals. So stories that the public see will be about individuals who have committed crimes instead of a person living a mundane life like everyone else (Heaney).

It is important to note that around 1.2% of U.S. adult men and 0.7% of U.S. adult women have clinically substantial levels of psychopathic traits. Those numbers increase in prison up to 15% to 25% (Burton, B., & Saleh, F. M.) Although the numbers look daunting, it is essential to acknowledge that it is common for the public to have some degree of psychopathic tendencies. *PsychopathyIs*, an organization dedicated to raising awareness of psychopathy, records that "as much as 30% of the population displays some degree of reduced empathy, risk-taking, and overly high self-regard." meaning that there are a lot of people in our society who display a form of psychopathy, but would not be formally diagnosed as one by the public (DeAngelis).

Katie Heaney, someone diagnosed with psychopathy, stated that people associate the term psychopath with serial killers and that this thought is incorrect. She explains how most people believe psychopaths can harm others due to their lack of empathy, and she rejects those ideas with her own experience, claiming that having no emotional reactions doesn't equate to causing pain on others. Her statement included, "I may not care, I may not have an emotional reaction to someone's pain, but that doesn't mean that I'm going out of my way to cause pain. It just means that I don't have that emotional response." (Heaney).

Another person who was diagnosed with psychopathy published a personal story on *PsychopathyIs*. They proclaim, "I am not a murderer or a criminal. I have never skulked behind prison walls; I prefer mine to be covered in ivy. I am an accomplished attorney. I donate 10 percent of my income to charity and teach Sunday school for the Mormon Church. I have close circle of family and friends whom I love and who very much loves me." (PsychopathyIs, 2021). As per the two personal stories, both individuals live a mundane life just like any other. As both remark, just because they display psychopathic symptoms, it does not equate them to having violent urges, nor do they exhibit criminal records due to their disorder.

We all have an idea of what a psychopath is; however, what we know is from media portrayals. In most cases, society only knows the negative implications of

psychopathy due to the rise in true-crime stories, making the stigmatizations of psychopaths more apparent. Due to the misconceptions, people diagnosed with psychopathy are often avoided or feared, when they shouldn't be. Not everyone diagnosed with psychopathy is prone to be violent, just like any other disorder. Although the media does show one side to psychopathy, this does not undermine the fact that there are more non-violent people under the psychopathy spectrum than we realize. The persistent stigmatization of those with this symptom should be stopped because many people diagnosed with psychopathy live everyday lives just like anyone else and do not get aggressive outbursts as we assume.

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[Author credentials]: Tori DeAngelis has 30 years of experience as a journalist and editor and has written countless articles on psychology, health, medicine, and culture. He had many publications in the American Psychological Association's monthly magazine, *Psychology Today*, *The New York Times*, and had award-winning articles.

[Audience/type of information]: The article is found on the American Psychological Association website, where people interested in new psychological findings can read it freely at any given time.

[Purpose / Bias / Point of View]: The article discusses the new findings for the different spectrums within psychopathy and information on psychopathy as a whole. This essay is mostly on studies, so no biases are present from the author's perspective.

[Currency of the Source]: This source is very recent since it was published on March 1, 2022, which discusses new information and findings on psychopathy.

[Relevance to Paper]: This source has more recent studies on psychopathy and its variety. The article includes data, the effects, possible treatments, and more studies, which helps me gain more information that is not present in other articles for my paper.

McGreal, Scott. "Are Psychopaths Unfairly Stigmatized?", *Psychology Today*, 20 Sept. 2018,

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/unique-everybody-else/201809/are-psychopaths-unfairly-stigmatized>. Accessed 15 March 2022.

[Author credentials]: Scott McGreal is a researcher in psychology and has studied many different psychological instances. His work has also been published and verified to *Psychology Today*.

[Audience/type of information]: This article can be found on Psychology Today, a website meant to inform the audience of different mental disorders and psychological factors. The primary audience is those who are interested in psychology or want to learn more about a mental disorder.

[Purpose / Bias / Point of View]: This article looks into the author's perspective and his take on how society views psychopaths with the information that he had gathered. He then concludes with his thoughts on the subject matter.

[Currency of the Source]: This article was published in 2018, a relatively recent topic that can still be discussed today for people diagnosed within the spectrum of psychopathy in this period.

[Relevance to Paper]: This source has information on the research done on psychopathy, its stigmatization, and the negative portrayals of psychopaths, which would aid me in my paper.