

Hannibal Lecter – Merit or Misinformation? Discussion of Psychopathy  
and Homicide in the Criminal Justice System

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Psychopathy has been a widely discussed topic throughout movies and pop culture, especially in recent years, which portray psychopathy through the lens of a vindictive, cruel, and charismatic protagonist. Examples that come to mind may be well-known television media such as *Dexter*, *Hannibal*, or *American Psycho* (Berryessa & Goodspeed, 2019). Audiences' interests are piqued when watching a character so strangely and perplexingly emotionally detached, often committing a heinous crime that goes overlooked due to their sharp ability to hide their crime by tricking others into believing a superficial but charming front. Psychopathic individuals are often unrealistically idolized and idealized as endearing super-villains consumers feel themselves rooting for (Keesler & DeMatteo, 2017). Within the criminal justice system, individuals that score high on psychopathy are not always superhuman criminals with distinguished intelligence, able to evade all detection by the law. It is imperative to study the realistic components of crimes perpetrated by psychopathic offenders to discern between fiction and reality. Psychopathy has been related to violence and criminal tendencies, specifically homicide. Within the corrections system, psychopathy also operates differently during and after incarceration than fellow offenders scoring low on psychopathic tendencies. In order to define the association between psychopathic traits and the perpetration of homicide, it is important to discuss models and theories of psychopathy as a concept alongside the motivations and characteristics of psychopath-perpetrated homicide.

Psychopathy is a deviant personality type first characterized by Robert Hare as remorseless, antisocial, interpersonally manipulative, and impulsive (Hare, 1980). Hare's Two Factor Model of psychopathy was the first attempt at operationalizing psychopathy, separating it into two distinct factors (Hart, Hare, & Harpur, 1992), which split into four facets. Factor 1 consists of the Interpersonal-Affective aspects of psychopathy, the first facet of interpersonal

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behavior referring to how individuals with psychopathic traits are charming yet deceitful in their social and interpersonal relationships. The second facet of Factor 1 alludes to the general affect, or emotional state, of psychopathic individuals, which may be described as callous; unemotional; and incapable of expressing remorse, empathy, or guilt. Factor 2 is referred to as the Lifestyle-Antisocial factor, which references a psychopath's impulsive and uninhibited lifestyle free of constraint, self-control, and antisocial behaviors that deviate from the norm. Hare's conceptualization of psychopathy has been measured by the popularly used and most recent Hare's Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, consisting of a semi-structured interview containing 22 items administered by professional psychologists that allow predetermined questions and open answers that might be unprompted. Further models of psychopathy, such as Cooke and Mitchie's Three Factor Model of psychopathy, have attempted to split Hare's original first factor of psychopathy (Interpersonal-Affective) into two components (Cooke & Mitchie, 2001). Cooke and Mitchie delineate psychopaths' outward behavior towards others into their Factor 1, which they termed Arrogant and Deceitful Interpersonal Style, while differentiating their inner unemotional experience into a separate Factor 2, which they coined Deficient Affective Experience. For Hare's original second factor, which described the observable external behavioral patterns of psychopaths, Cooke and Mitchie removed the antisocial aspect. They mainly emphasized the psychopathic lack of restraint over their actions. Cooke and Mitchie's Factor 3 examined Irresponsible and Impulsive Behavioral Style. Other psychologists have strived to look at psychopathy through other lenses as well. Various other scales measuring psychopathy include the Psychopathic Personality Inventory, Self-Report Psychopathy Scale, and the Triarchic Model of Psychopathy. The Psychopathic Personality Inventory splits psychopathy into two factors: Factor 1 examines the Fearless-Dominance side of psychopathy (a

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facet of psychopathy associated with grandiosity, confidence, and assertiveness), and Factor 2 assesses Impulsive-Antisociality (the side of psychopathy conducive to risk-taking and antagonistic behavior) (Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003). The Self-Report Psychopathy Scale is similar to these past methods of measurement in that it looks at erratic lifestyle (marked by random and unpredictable actions), callous affect (insensitivity to other's feelings), and interpersonal manipulation and duplicity (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). However, the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale considers criminal tendencies, which is not measured by any other scales. It considers general antisocial behavior rather than crime itself, as crime is only specific to those caught by the criminal justice system. Lastly, the Triarchic Model of Psychopathy divides psychopathy into three parts: Boldness, Meanness, and Disinhibition (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009). Boldness refers to the self-assurance commonly associated with psychopathy, meanness to the hostile lack of regard for others, and disinhibition to the uncontrolled conduct that psychopaths experience. In psychological settings, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders does not recognize psychopathy as a psychological disorder but rather lumps it underneath the umbrella of antisocial personality disorder, which is characterized by blatant disregard for the rights of others in the form of harm (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, to be qualified for antisocial personality disorder at age 18 (the minimum age for diagnosis), an individual must have shown a diagnosis of conduct disorder by age 15 which consists of unruly behavior falling under the categories of aggression to humans or animals, property destruction, theft, or general rule violation (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In the criminal justice system, we see a distinction between individuals with antisocial personality disorder and those with psychopathy. While all psychopaths qualify for a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder, not all antisocial

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individuals are considered psychopaths. This is because while antisocial personality disorder accentuates antisocial and criminal behavior, psychopathy includes these behaviors and an additional component of a lack of remorse for others. Therefore, this calls for the delineation between antisocial personality disorder and psychopathy to be a necessary delineation.

Psychopathy and antisocial personality disorder's distinction can be seen within the legal system, especially in criminal offenses. Psychopathy has been linked to crime and general aggression in community and forensic settings. To elaborate, psychopathy is connected to physical violence in criminal offending (Cunha, Braga, & Gonçalves, 2021). Psychopathic aggression pertains to physical and relational aggression within interpersonal relationships, such as manipulating the other person's feelings or spreading rumors (Coyne, Nelson, Graham-Kevan, Keister, & Grant, 2010; Knight, Dahlen, Bullock-Yowell, & Madson, 2018). Psychopaths are more likely to be incarcerated (Kiehl & Hoffman, 2011). Once within a prison, those with psychopathy may be known with more notoriety than other typical antisocial offenders. This is due to the research supporting that individuals with psychopathic traits commit more violent and non-violent crimes as well as a wider variety of violent crimes than their non-psychopathic offender peers (Fox & DeLisi, 2019; Kosson, Smith, & Newman, 1990; Porter, Birt, & Boer, 2001). Not only do individuals high in psychopathic traits begin participating and engaging in antisocial behavior at a younger age (Frick, 2009), but these criminal activities remain persistent for a longer amount of time until middle adulthood (Piquero et al., 2012; Porter, Birt, & Boer, 2001). Even when criminal activity naturally decreases with declining age, emotional features of psychopathy remain stable, such as self-centeredness and low care for others (Harpur & Hare, 1994). Within correctional facilities and similar institutions, offenders with higher psychopathic measure scores may have poorer trajectories of adjustment to life in prison. They may incite

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greater violence (Edens, Buffington, & Tomicic, 2000) and break more prison rules and regulations (Pinheiro, Gonçalves, & Cunha, 2021). Finally, psychopathic individuals are more likely to be released earlier than non-psychopathic convicts due to their charisma and charm, which allow them to use their manipulative tendencies to win over others into believing that they have been rehabilitated (Häkkinen-Nyholm & Hare, 2009). Once psychopathic offenders are released from prison, they are more likely to re-offend or recidivate, especially in a physically aggressive way (Kiehl & Hoffman, 2011). When these offenders are placed into treatment facilities to rehabilitate their empathy and decrease violent tendencies, these reforms rarely are effective (Kiehl & Hoffman, 2011). They may allow them to con others more (Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1994). Psychopaths, in sum, can be characterized as aggressive and malicious individuals that are linked to a greater crime rate, especially higher commitment and quantities of violent crime. Within prisons, psychopathic offenders might be less subservient and compliant. Psychopaths are impervious to rehabilitation attempts and may be apt at manipulating legal system authorities to their advantage, which results in more opportunities to commit more (often violent) crimes following departure from prison.

Perhaps aligning with the connection between psychopathy and violence, the media has depicted psychopaths as cold-blooded killers in television and literature. However, it is important to acknowledge the true research behind psychopathic traits and homicide, one of the most discussed crimes in contemporary fiction. Studies show that rates of homicide committed by psychopathic offenders are significantly greater than rates of homicide committed by non-psychopathic offenders (Fox & DeLisi, 2019). Differences interestingly arise in psychopathic homicide when looking at other factors, such as intention or the kind of homicide committed. While psychopaths were more likely to kill for another reason outside the murder itself, such as

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money, they were more likely to describe the murder as the result of provocation. In other words, psychopaths were reported by others to have murdered a particular goal (Sohn & Raine, 2021). However, when asked about the crime themselves, they are more likely to say that the victim caused them to react in a homicidal way and place blame on the victim (Porter & Woodworth, 2007). This makes sense when considering the psychopath as an antisocial and callous individual who looks at homicide merely as a calculated means to gain something rather than non-psychopathic individuals who are more likely to kill someone out of anger. The nature of a psychopathic homicide also varies from a homicide committed by a non-psychopath or someone scoring low on measures of psychopathy. Homicides with high psychopathy perpetrators have more violent features, such as sexual assault. In studies inspecting sexual homicides, most perpetrators also had higher ranges of psychopathic attributes in psychopathy assessments (Porter, Woodworth, Earle, Drugge, & Boer, 2003). This aligns with the idea that psychopaths are opportunistic, meaning they are eager for as many opportunities as they can to seek sensation from their experiences, from further harming their victim through sexual attacks. Incorporating sexual assault into a homicide could gratify their need for adrenaline and excitement that they cannot receive from the supposedly mundane interactions of daily life. Psychopaths were more likely to find pleasure in the distress of their victims while committing the homicide, evident in the excessive violence displayed, which may be indicative of sadism (Fox & DeLisi, 2019). Specifically, according to Robert Hare's conceptualization of psychopathy, individuals scoring higher on Factor 1 of psychopathy or individuals who are devoid of conventional emotional experience are more likely to display these sadistic tendencies (Darjee, 2019). The increased sadistic overkill seen in homicides committed by offenders high on psychopathy can be traced back to the lack of care and emotional perspective-taking that they have for other human beings.

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Even descriptions of homicidal behavior differed amongst individuals with psychopathic tendencies. They were more likely to rationalize their behavior, psychologically separate themselves from the moment of the homicide by speaking primarily in the past, express hesitation and confusion when talking about the emotional state of their victims, and speak with less emotionality overall when recounting the incident to another person (Hancock, Woodworth, & Porter, 2010). Psychopaths were also more likely to be vaguer when describing the homicide they had committed compared to other non-psychopathic offenders (Porter & Woodworth, 2007). Individuals who rate themselves higher on Hare's Factor 1 of low empathy and social coercion are more likely to commit homicides with another individual, killing more than one individual, finishing a homicide, and attempting to hide their crime as well (Darjee, 2019). Perhaps psychopathic perpetrators that are especially conniving may be more likely to be able to manipulate another person into helping them with their crime while at the same time feeling less guilty or disturbed about killing more people. This reduced guilt allows them to carry out the homicide without hesitation. On the other hand, high Factor 2 scores are associated with not thinking ahead when committing a homicide in addition to alcohol or drug use and committing other crimes (Darjee, 2019). This remains consistent with the impulsivity, lack of planning, and antisocial tendencies involved with the second factor of psychopathy. Findings suggest, thus far, that psychopaths commit higher frequencies of more brutal homicides while simultaneously enjoying the pain of their victims. However, when confronted, they attempt to excuse their behavior more than other offenders, possibly because they genuinely believe they did not do anything wrong. Traits like callousness and decreased remorse facilitate the completion of homicide. At the same time, the inability to control behavior and antisocial tendencies make someone more likely to be spontaneous while killing and engaging in other criminal behavior.



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As with many correlational relationships, the relationship between psychopathy and crime is not linear. Some other factors are affecting the tie between these callous and antisocial individuals and their propensity to offend. While psychopathy has a prominent genetic component, social and environmental factors play a role in affecting criminality. Being acquainted with likely deviant and delinquent friends may encourage an individual predisposed to psychopathic tendencies to engage in crime and to be the victim of a crime themselves in the past (Lee & Kim, 2020). Social networks can often affect affiliation and activity, and individuals already predisposed toward psychopathic risk factors such as reduced remorse may find it easier to participate in antisocial deviance. This may create a pathway for more severe crimes in future criminal careers. Ethnicity interacted with socioeconomic status in psychopathic crime in that when finishing their sentences, White individuals high in psychopathy were more likely to re-commit crime if they were low in socioeconomic status (Walsh & Kosson, 2006). Being less affluent may reduce resources for an individual, which could lead individuals to pursue these resources via unconventional means like crime. Ethnicity may play an active part in racial discrimination and opportunities a person can access. White individuals high on psychopathy may feel more empowered than people of color to commit crimes to gain materials to which they feel entitled. Psychopathy is by no means a solid determinant for crime commission, as the experiences within an individual's life help shape their social or antisocial choices.

Correspondence between psychopathy and aggressive tendencies may be startling and call for further elaboration. Multiple theories have sought to explain this relationship of individuals with high psychopathic tendencies engaging in harm to others. Widely accepted theories include the Affective Theory of Psychopathy, the Response Modulation Deficit Theory, the Violence Inhibition Mechanism Theory, and the Amygdala Dysfunction Theory. The more

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acknowledged theory of psychopathy in modern media is the Affective Theory of Psychopathy, which posits that psychopaths have a deficit in certain emotions, which does not allow them to share in normal or regular empathy (Patrick, 2007). This theory says that psychopaths do not feel emotion in the same way that non-psychopathic individuals do and, thus, are more likely to hurt others because they do not share the standard emotional capacity. The discussion of which emotions these are varies, producing mixed results in emotion research, whether psychopaths are less able to feel negative and unpleasant emotions, positive and pleasant emotions, all emotions, or just emotions relating to fear. The Response Modulation Deficit Theory frames psychopathy not as an affective or emotional defect but as an attention defect (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2015). Response modulation is a process in which typical responses are changed or modulated depending on the rewards and consequences it provides for the individual. If one is engaging in a behavior that yields more poor outcomes than rewards, they may switch to another behavior that would give more pleasant stimuli. However, proponents of the Response Modulation Deficit Theory argue that this ability in psychopaths is less intact. Therefore they are less able to change their behavior once they have already decided on a main course of action. For example, when psychopaths are focused on a criminal behavior that will result in benefits, such as aggressing against a work rival to gain a promotion, they are less attentive to potentially adverse consequences, such as hurting another person in the process or being arrested for the crime. Because of their inattention, they are less likely to modulate or change their response to the less dominant response, which in this case would be refraining from the crime. The Violence Inhibition Mechanism Theory also revolves around emotion but pertains to psychopaths' inability to recognize negative emotions in others, such as cues of distress, sadness, or fear (Blair, 1995). Indications of distress in a victim would normally compel non-psychopathic perpetrators to

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inhibit or halt violence. Supporters of the Violence Inhibition Mechanism Theory propose that because psychopaths have greater difficulty recognizing when a potential victim is distressed, they do not have the motivation to stop committing violence. A similar and related theory is the Amygdala Dysfunction Theory which confronts psychopathy as a malfunction of the amygdala, a part of the brain responsible for recognizing and experiencing fear and empathy (Blair, 2013), regulating aggressive tendencies and poor decision-making. This contributes to the Violence Inhibition Mechanism Theory, as this amygdala dysfunction may fuel the emotion recognition deficit in psychopathy and the ability to react to fearful stimuli. Reduced fear in psychopaths may inspire them to commit more heinous crimes from which the general public would be deterred.

In examining psychopathy and crime, we see patterns that psychopaths are consistent and pervasive in criminal behavior compared to other general offenders. Accepted models of psychopathy conceive psychopaths to be uncaring, scheming, deviant individuals that lack conscientiousness. Psychopathic criminals are versatile, chronic, and destructive lawbreakers, surpassing non-psychopathic counterparts in both violent and non-violent criminal offenses on a lifetime trajectory. Crimes associated with high psychopathy scores have been researched to have especially more vicious and intentionally cruel aspects, corroborating the nature of psychopathy being described as an emotionally devoid personality that seeks out stimulation and arousal whenever possible. When specifically studying the homicidal tendencies of psychopaths, it can be seen that psychopaths may murder for a particular gain, calculate and plan ahead when committing homicide, and are more likely determined to get a secondary objective out of the murder other than the kill itself, perhaps thrill. Homicides committed by psychopathic killers are instrumental and ruthless, yet the psychopath may more frequently defend and frame the actions

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as reasonable when recounting the homicide. Differences in crime and homicide commission may be linked to a combination of problems with emotion sensation and processing, attention, or other functions of the brain that regulate and inhibit behavior. The relationship between psychopathy and crime is reasonably affected by their social networks and demographic variables.

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