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The sexual psychopath

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There is no single label or attribute that accurately or adequately brands all sexually violent offenders. For example, it is unreasonable to equate the crime(s) of serial child molester William James Vahey with adult rapist Brock Turner or sexual sadist Jeffrey Dahmer. Perpetrators of sexual violence are the “snowflakes”, if you will, of criminal behaviour; each adaptation of personal traits, techniques, modus operandi, and victim preferences produces a distinctive offender. For those who escalate sexual violence to sexual homicide, there is substantial variety in their psychological and behavioural features (Beauregard & Martineau, 2012). Regardless, there is a continued effort to seek empirically supported typologies for sexual homicide (Beauregard & Proulx, 2002; Beauregard & Proulx, 2007; Keppel & Walter, 1999; Kerr & Beech, 2015; Kocsis, 1999; Meloy, 2000; Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988) to be applied to prevention and treatment. While motivations are germane to our understanding of criminal behaviour (e.g. Kerr & Beech, 2015), exploring personality may prove advantageous to our understanding of sexually aggressive crimes. In this chapter, we examine a modern category of violent sexual offender. We refer to this class of offenders as the sexual psychopath, an offender who is an overtly social “chameleon” and who masks an unemotional, impulsive, and sensation-seeking core.

Psychopathy is a multifaceted personality disorder that has much to contribute to our understanding of sexual violence. Although psychopathy is now viewed as a continuum of negative traits, in practice psychopaths are “diagnosed” with a minimum score of 30/40 points on the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL–R; Hare, 2003) that measures the test taker on his or her lifestyle, habits, and affect. The final tally is comprised of a Factor 1 score of affective deficits (e.g. superficial charm, pathological lying) and a Factor 2 score pertaining to lifestyle and antisocial tendencies (Hare et al., 1990; Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989). The general population varies on a continuum of the aforementioned traits, but only about 1 per cent is clinically diagnosable (Hare, 2006). While psychopathy is found in an astounding 15–25 per cent of federally incarcerated males (Porter, Birt, & Boer, 2001; Porter et al., 2000), most psychopaths can present as high-functioning, successful members of society outside of the criminal justice system (e.g. Bernie Madoff; Babiak & Hare, 2006). They are socially adept, with an eye for vulnerability (Book, Costello, & Camilleri, 2013; Wheeler, Book, & Costello, 2009) and are not only charismatic, but are also masters of manipulation and persuasion (Hare, 2006). Psychopaths are notorious for a cold and callous disposition, as often demonstrated by destructive behaviour,
criminal or otherwise. For example, psychopaths are not suited to be conventional romantic partners. Rather, they are short-term, parasitic sexual partners who seek brief and frequent mating opportunities, often by means of coercion (Harris, Rice, Hilton, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 2007; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Lalumière & Quinsey, 1996), and sometimes violence (Camp, Skeem, Barchard, Lilienfeld, & Poythress, 2013).

Who is the sexual psychopath?

The term sexual psychopath (as opposed to the legal term), as defined by Porter, Campbell, Woodworth, and Birt (2002), describes a sub-category of sexual offenders whose actions and incentives are characteristic of their dark personality. Although sexual violence and psychopathy have been independently researched, the existence of a sexual psychopath is well supported by historic relations between psychopathic traits and sexual crime. For example, high levels of psychopathic traits have been found in adult rapists and especially those with diverse child and adult victims (e.g. Porter et al., 2000). Further, psychopathic murderers are more likely than non-psychopathic murderers to sexually assault their victim prior to, during, or following the act of murder, and perpetrate greater gratuitous and sadistic violence (often overkill; Porter & Woodworth, 2007). It thus appears that there is a lack of inhibition within the psychopathic offender that allows him or her to push the boundaries of homicidal violence. However, while higher levels of psychopathic traits have been noted in sexual murderers (e.g. Firestone, Bradford, Greenberg, & Larose, 1998; Hill, Habermann, Berner, & Briken, 2007; Porter, Campbell, Birt, & Woodworth, 2003) not all sexual homicide offenders are psychopathic, and not all psychopaths are perpetrators of sexual homicide. In Porter, Woodworth, Earle, Drugge, and Boer’s (2003) sample of Canadian sexual homicide offenders, less than half (47.4 per cent) were classified as psychopathic.

To illustrate the behavioural characteristics of a sexual psychopath, we present the case of Mr C—a designated Dangerous Offender (DO) and diagnosed psychopath serving time in a Canadian penitentiary. His criminal behaviours reflected reckless tendencies, a callous lack of empathy, and a need for constant stimulation. For example, when he would become “bored” with one particular type of victim (e.g. adult women) he would seek a different group to target (e.g. children or adolescent girls) or would seek alternative and brutal means of perpetrating sexual violence (e.g. bestiality). He demonstrated sexual aggressiveness in not only his delinquencies but also his interactions with other inmates and staff during the period of his incarceration. This case in point demonstrates who we understand to be a dangerous and persistent breed of offender. Through this chapter, we will explore in detail the aforementioned facets of the sexual psychopath: emotional underpinnings, motives, and the future of treatment and research surrounding such an individual.

Affective deficits

Emotions—or lack thereof—are instrumental in understanding the psychopath’s motives for perpetrating sexual violence. Contrary to popular belief, psychopaths likely experience emotions to a subdued degree rather than lacking emotions altogether (Cleckley, 1976). For example, research has found that feelings of anger preceded nearly one quarter of sexual assaults by psychopathic offenders (Brown & Forth, 1997). However, psychopaths are not typically motivated by emotion or reacting to provocation but are more likely to approach their crimes dispassionately (Woodworth & Porter, 2002). Affective deficits suggest that psychopaths do not have the emotional inhibitions (e.g. remorse) that would otherwise inhibit destructive behaviour (Casey,
Rogers, Burns, & Yiend, 2013; Del Gaizo & Falkenbach, 2008). This theory is better known as the violence inhibition mechanism, which Blair (1995) explains as a violence suppressor apparently lacking in those with psychopathic tendencies.

Psychopaths demonstrate only slight reactions to disturbing stimuli; specifically, they exhibit minimal fear or startle responses (Herpers et al., 2014; Justus & Finn, 2007; Patrick, Bradley, & Lang, 1993). For example, they exhibit a reduced blink rate when confronted with distressing photographs in comparison to non-psychopaths (Patrick et al., 1993). This lack of startle response is thought to be a consequence of Factor 1 traits, such as a shallow affect or lack of empathy (Patrick et al., 1993; Vanman, Mejia, Dawson, Schell, & Raine, 2003). Further, individuals high in psychopathic traits have been found to have a reduced sensitivity to both morally and sexually disgusting stimuli (Tybur, Lieberman, & Griskevicius, 2009). This may clarify why a majority of psychopathic rapists were found to report neutral or positive feelings in the 24 hours before their offence (Brown & Forth, 1997). In a real-world circumstance, psychopaths are not deterred from their crime by adverse emotions conveyed by themselves, or the victim for that matter.

Psychopaths are incapable of fully understanding others’ feelings (Blair, 1995; Brook & Kosson, 2013). As such, they have often been recognized as having no conscience, or perhaps more specifically, lacking empathy (Hare, 1999). This is likely related to their struggle to identify others’ emotional facial expressions (Brook, Brieman, & Kosson, 2013; Hastings, Tangney, & Stuewig, 2008; Kosson, Suchy, Mayer, & Libby, 2002), with a considerable deficit in detecting fear (Brook et al., 2013; Montagne et al., 2005). Not only does this mean that a psychopath cannot identify an emotion with which to empathize, but also that a psychopath is unlikely to recognize an expression of fear on a target’s face and to subsequently cease an assault. As a consequence of such characteristic lack of compassion, psychopaths are known to perpetrate unnecessary gratuitous violence (e.g. Porter, Woodworth et al., 2003; Kirsch & Becker, 2007) and have a tendency for instrumental aggression in particular (Cornell et al., 1996; Patrick & Zempolich, 1998; Woodworth & Porter, 2002).

**Impulsivity**

Given the characteristic impulsivity of psychopaths, one may expect a certain level of reactivity in their violent crimes—and there is in fact literature to support that sexual psychopaths are opportunistic offenders (Brown & Forth, 1997). By this definition, these offenders act spontaneously when afforded the chance. However, a larger body of research has indicated that violent psychopathic offenders are more likely to act instrumentally, since they organize their crimes in pursuit of a particular goal (Cornell et al., 1996; Laurell, Belfrage, & Hellstrom, 2014; Porter & Woodworth, 2006; Woodworth & Porter, 2002). For example, Laurell et al. (2014) noted that 90 per cent of their sample of violent psychopathic offenders had committed an instrumental crime, compared to 68 per cent of their non-psychopathic counterparts. Further, Porter and Woodworth (2007) found that although psychopaths’ crimes were considered primarily instrumental, they tended to exaggerate the reactive nature of the crime when recalling the offence. In other words, they were more likely to claim that they committed the crime in response to an unanticipated provocation. On the other hand, Blais, Solodukhin, and Forth (2014) propose that psychopaths are no more likely to commit an instrumental crime than non-psychopaths. To reconcile the contradictory findings, Porter, Demetrioff, and ten Brinke (2010) proposed that psychopaths have “selective impulsivity” by which they selfishly afford more consideration prior to crimes with more severe repercussions. As such, a psychopath would be more likely to premeditate a crime such as sexual homicide, for which the consequences are punitive following
the violent, fatal act. Further analysis of this group will aid our understanding of instrumentality versus reactivity in psychopaths’ sexually violent crimes.

**Thrill seeking**

In contrast to non-psychopathic sexual offenders, the sexual psychopath will purposefully seek variety and spontaneity in his or her offences to satisfy cravings for excitement (Porter et al., 2010), stemming from an evident need for stimulation and sensation (Hare, 2006). For a psychopathic offender, one means of maximizing the thrill of his or her crimes is through choosing diverse victims, as demonstrated by offender Mr C. For example, research indicates that offenders who offend against both children and adults (mixed molesters/rapists) are not only more likely to be psychopathic, but also score higher on the PCL–R (Brown, Dargis, Mattern, Tsousi, & Newman, 2015; Porter et al., 2000; Skovran, Huss, & Scalora, 2010). Sexual offenders obtain elevated PCL–R test scores (Woodworth et al., 2013), with particular spikes on Factor 1 noted among mixed offenders (Brown et al., 2015; Porter et al., 2000). Mixed molesters/rapists are also at a greater risk for violent recidivism (Rice & Harris, 1997), and are more likely to offend earlier in life than individuals who were classified as a single offender type (Woodworth et al., 2013). In a study of Canadian sexual offenders, the highest PCL–R scores were found in offenders with diverse sexual offences towards both adults and children (Woodworth et al., 2013). This suggests that offenders with psychopathic traits have a need for excessive stimulation, and subsequently vary their targets to satiate this need.

**The young and the restless**

Callous and unemotional traits have been identified in children as young as 3 years (Willoughby, Waschbusch, Moore, & Propper, 2011) and appear to often persist over long periods of time (McMahon, Witkiewitz, & Kotler, 2010). There is reason to believe that the thrill-seeking behaviours of adult sexual psychopaths may not “appear out of the blue” but are predicted by analogous behaviour at an early age. Research has demonstrated that a substantial number of adolescent sexual offenders perpetrate against a diverse selection of victims (Aylwin et al., 2000; Wieckowski, Hartsoe, Mayer, & Shortz, 1998), and that mixed adolescent offenders are at a higher risk of recidivism than those with exclusive victim types (Parks & Bard, 2006). Not unlike its adult counterpart, youth psychopathy has been found to be indicative of a higher risk for violent and non-violent recidivism (Edens, Campbell, & Weir, 2007), with a greater risk among sexual offenders in particular (Gretton, McBride, Hare, O’Shaughnessy, & Kumka, 2001; Parks & Bard, 2006). While its study is vital to the development of preventative strategies, the relationship between juvenile sexual offenders and psychopathy is contentious. For example, neither Boonmann et al. (2015) nor Morrell and Burton (2014) found a meaningful difference between sexual and non-sexual juvenile offenders’ self-report psychopathy scores; in other words, there was no evidence to suggest sexual offenders had more psychopathic traits. However, earlier work has determined that up to 24 per cent of adolescent offenders scored within the range of diagnosis of the Psychopathy Checklist—Youth Version (Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003; Långström & Grann, 2000, 2002; Långström & Lindblad, 2000). Given that 15–20 per cent of reported sexual assaults are perpetrated by youth under the age of 18 (Puzzanchera, 2009), further empirical work is needed to establish if psychopathic traits can be applied to distinguish sexual and non-sexual juvenile offenders.
Psychopathy and sadistic violence

Porter et al. (2010) suggest that as psychopaths so actively seek stimulation it is probable that violent and/or sexual crimes (e.g. sexual homicide) become a means of satisfaction. In support of this theory, psychopaths have been shown to be more violent (Porter et al., 2001), more sexually violent (Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997), and more sadistically violent (Porter, Woodworth et al., 2003) than non-psychopaths. Sadistic violence in particular may quench the thirsty thrill seeker (Baumeister & Campbell, 1999) and, unlikely by coincidence, is prevalent in perpetrators of sexual homicide (Kreuger, 2010). Sexual sadism is categorized as a paraphilic disorder in which intense sexual arousal is gained from the pain and suffering of another (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Sadism has been positively correlated with psychopathy, a dangerous mix given that both independently predict the likelihood of sexually violent offences (Robertson & Knight, 2014). Specifically, sexual sadism has been found to be significantly related to interpersonal, antisocial, and impulsive factors of psychopathy (Robertson & Knight, 2014), which likely contributes to the dangerousness of this type of offender. For example, Mokros, Osterheider, Hucker, and Nitschke (2011) found that emotional deficits and behavioural disinhibition best predicted the likelihood of sadistic crimes in their forensic sample. Those who score high on the PCL–R and who have deviant sexual fantasies are at a far greater risk of engaging in violent, deviant behaviour (Williams, Cooper, Howell, Yuille, & Paulhus, 2009). Further, individuals who score on the upper end of the PCL–R are more likely to have sadistic paraphilia than individuals who have moderate or low scores (Woodworth et al., 2013). Notably, a psychopath is not guaranteed to be a sadist and vice versa, due to the autonomy of these natures. However, when both are present, there appears to be an increased risk of the perpetration of sexual homicide. Research has yet to determine, however, what particular traits of sadism and psychopathy oxidize to increase the likelihood of sexual homicide.

Theoretical perspectives and explanations

Evolutionarily speaking, short-term mating strategies are a hasty, albeit effective, manner of passing on one’s genes. Evidence suggests that a psychopath’s coercive sexual behaviour serves an adaptive purpose pertinent to survival. For example, psychopaths have been found to have not only significantly more sexual partners (Jonason et al., 2009) but also single incidents of sexual intercourse (one-night stands), and are significantly less likely to inquire about contraception (Seto, Khattar, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 1997). By engaging in such risky sexual behaviour (Crawford & Salmon, 2002) psychopaths have secured viable means by which to reproduce. In theory, this would suggest that psychopaths use sex to increase their chance of producing offspring, although their methods of securing a partner can be deceptive and violent (Glenn & Raine, 2009). This perspective however, seems to lack a well-rounded explanation for sexual homicide at the hands of a psychopath.

In addition, researchers have recently applied technology to gain a better understanding of the neurobiological basis of deviant psychopathic behaviour (e.g. Glenn & Raine, 2009). Shortfalls in both the structure and functioning areas of the brain associated with emotional processing suggest that there may be a biological underpinning to the psychopath’s moral deficits (Blair, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2006; Morgan & Lilienfield, 2000; Soderstrom, Tullberg, Wikkelsö, Ekholm, & Forsman, 2000). For example, the prefrontal cortex of psychopaths contains less grey matter volume than non-psychopaths, indicating that their area of the brain responsible for moral decision-making may be deficient (Yang, Raine, Colletti, Toga, & Narr, 2009; Yang et al., 2005). Moreover, two areas that are part of a greater circuit critical for decision-making
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the orbitofrontal cortex and amygdala have been shown to be associated with psychopathic traits. The orbitofrontal cortex, located in the prefrontal cortex region of the brain, is key to emotional processing and cost-reward considerations (Marsh et al., 2011). Yang, Raine, Colletti, Toga, and Narr (2010) found that unsuccessful psychopaths—those who are held responsible for criminal behaviour—had considerably less grey matter volume and cortical thickness in their orbitofrontal cortex than a comparison sample of successful psychopaths. Further, psychopathic individuals have been found to struggle with tasks that require functioning of the orbitofrontal region (Lapierre, Braun, & Hodgins, 1995). Deficits in this brain area may help explain poor decision-making (Mitchell, Colledge, Leonard, & Blair, 2002), reactive aggression (Blair, 2010), and the absence of a startle response (Patrick et al., 1993).

In addition, neuroimaging studies (Kiehl et al., 2001; Tiihonen et al., 2000) have highlighted the particular importance of the amygdala—a small region of the brain associated with fear conditioning (Davis, 1992), social perception and behaviour (Adolphs & Spezio, 2006), and emotional processing (Bechara, Damasio, & Damasio, 2003). Rilling et al. (2007) noted that individuals high in psychopathic traits demonstrated weak amygdala activation when receiving an aversive outcome in a Prisoner’s Dilemma Game. This task challenges a player to behave altruistically or selfishly in conjunction with another player, such that the combined choices of the players result in either reward or punishment for one or both. The researchers found that individuals high in psychopathic traits behaved more selfishly and less cooperatively, yet did not learn from a lack of success with this strategy. This, in combination with other research (e.g. Blair, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2006; von Borries et al., 2010), suggests that poor amygdala functioning impedes psychopaths from learning through aversive conditioning. This holds implications for the ability of treatment—and particularly, penance—to deter a sexual psychopath from reoffending. Specifically, a psychopath may be biologically incapable of learning from mistakes. In addition, deficits in this region help explain troubles recognizing facial expressions of others, particularly fear (Adolphs, Tranel, Damasio, & Damasio, 1995). While neuroimaging studies must continue to advance in order to further our understanding of the biological underpinnings of the psychopathic mind, the existence of a physiological explanation may make treatment all the more difficult.

Recidivism and treatment

The makings of a sexual psychopath give cause for concern as to their dangerousness in society: disinhibition, victim diversity, a tendency for violence and a substantially higher likelihood of reoffending. Understanding the chance, rate, and type of re-offence has practical implications for designating appropriate treatment and sentencing. Thus far, PCL–R scores have been successful predictors of recidivism (Barbaree, 2005; Hemphill, Hare, & Wong, 1998; Hildebrand, de Ruiter, & de Vogel, 2004). Specifically, psychopathic sexual offenders have been found to be more likely to reoffend non-sexually and violently (Hemphill et al., 1998; Hildebrand et al., 2004; Olver & Wong, 2009) rather than sexually. However, Olver and Wong (2009) noted that the chance of sexual recidivism increased when psychopathy was accompanied with sexual deviance. Regardless, psychopathic sexual offenders recidivate more frequently and faster than non-psychopathic offenders (Serin, Mailloux, & Malcolm, 2001), yet are released on parole 2.5 times earlier (Porter, ten Brinke, & Wilson, 2009). This can be explained by their characteristic impulsivity, in conjunction with an ability to charm and deceive.

To date, treating the sexual psychopath has proved rather ineffective, or at the very least inconsistent. For example, psychopathic sexual offenders who engaged “successfully” in treatment programs were found to seriously reoffend rapidly—within an average of 32 months from
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release (Seto & Barbaree, 1999); the higher the PCL–R score, the higher the likelihood to re-offend (Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1991; Seto & Barbaree, 1999). It does seem rather incongruous that some treatment attempts should influence psychopaths for the worse. However, programs designed to target the emotional deficits of a psychopath (e.g. empathy deficits) may be simply giving the individual the social tools he or she needs to identify and lure prospective victims. This would explain why active programme participants, as reported by Seto and Barbaree (1999), were four times more likely to recidivate than other offenders. Such findings, however, are not consistently reported. For example, Langton, Barbaree, Harkins, and Peacock (2006) found that sexual offenders high in psychopathic traits who excluded themselves from treatment were the first to sexually reoffend. These findings preceded similar conclusions drawn by Olver and Wong (2009), who, in addition to noting increased violent offending by those with elevated PCL–R scores, found that psychopathic offenders who remained in treatment exhibited reduced recidivism rates. It is a practical challenge to apply treatment designed for non-psychopathic offenders to those with psychopathic traits, particularly considering the psychopath’s general resistance to treatment (Hare, 2006). It is possible that there is no treatment that is specialized enough.

In balancing the likelihood of recidivism with the safety of the general public, the next step appears to be to minimize the negative impact of the sexual psychopath. Our understanding of this offender has elicited a multi-faceted prototype for which there is a paramount need for concern and research. At this point, in practice it will likely come down to risk management by means of dangerous offender (DO) designations, incarceration, and better education for frontline workers and legal factions on how to deal with this type of violent sexual offender.

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