

PSYCHOLOGY AND CRIMINOLOGY: A CHECKLIST OF PSYCHOPATHY INDICATORS

*Note: this is NOT Robert Hare's Psychopathy Checklist** (See this [other page](#) if you want to see Hare's PCL-R items)

"I prefer rogues to imbeciles, because they sometimes take a rest." (Alexandre Dumas)

One of the more fascinating contributions of psychology to criminology is the concept of psychopathy, also called sociopathy (the term preferred by sociologists), criminal personality (a term popularized by Yochelson and Samenow), and APD, or Antisocial Personality Disorder (the clinical DSM-IV disorder). Actually, the APD diagnosis (which predicts symptoms quite reliably) is much more common than the psychopathy diagnosis (which collects causes with more validity). *Not all APDs are psychopaths, but all psychopaths are usually APDs.* Persistent APDs usually wind up in prison, but psychopaths are more than persistent APDs -- psychopaths are believed to be remorseless predators who use any means necessary to achieve their ends and to avoid detection.

Early-to-mid 20th Century criminology was heavily influenced by the psychological determinist position that all criminals were psychopaths. Much of this thinking is now outdated, but the field of *Orthopsychiatry* remains which, since the depression era, has held that all criminal behavior is an expression of mental illness. Karl Menninger (1968) is also a key figure in this regard. On any given day, about 70,000 inmates in the United States are psychotic, and a great number more (at least a quarter million) suffer from mental disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression. Prisons hold three times more people with mental illness than do psychiatric hospitals, and U.S. prisoners have rates of mental illness that are up to four times greater than rates for the general population ([Human Rights Watch](#) figures, 2003).

The following checklist summarizes all if not most of the psychological or psychiatric defects or deformities that psychologists and criminologists thought, at one time, were indicative of psychopathy. These indicators were often the basis for insanity pleas, mitigating circumstances, or just understanding criminals in the early 20th century. Today, much of it is used by the law as aggravating circumstances. *Please note* that this list contains many items which are presently regarded as myths or falsehoods about criminals.

- Freudian slips of the tongue (indicative of mental conflict)
- Guilt feelings (covered up, but wants to be punished for something)
- Uses defense mechanism of projection (blaming others for own faults)
- Uses defense mechanism of displacement (ditching, self-handicapping, settling for 2nd best, being own worst enemy, but feels entitled to something or being 1st)
- Oral fixation (smokes or always has to have something in mouth)
- Oedipus complex (or other love/hate relationship with parents)
- Comes from dysfunctional family or broken home (absent or abusive father)
- Impervious to fear, anxiety, depression, or remorse (unremorseful) Superficially charming, a real cool cat (manipulative and conning)
- Inability to love or express emotions deeply, can't respond to kindness (cold)
- Pathological lying (for no reason at all, can't help self)
- No self-insight (doesn't reflect much upon own personality makeup)
- No self-humor (can't stand to be the butt of jokes or can't laugh at self)
- A fairly high IQ (good grades in school or disparity in achievement) Uses neologisms (makes up strange new words, abbreviations, or sayings)
- Fascination with fire (or death, or purified ways to destroy something)
- Cruelty to animals (or doesn't like animals)
- Lack of probity, courtesy, or doesn't tolerate society's "niceties" or obligations
- Moody, obsessive-compulsive, suffers from one or more phobias

Does not tend to learn from mistakes unless immediate punishment given

- Lack of formal-operational thinking (tends to think in concrete, black-or-white terms)
- Identity conflict (often with delayed adolescence, hasn't grown up in certain ways)
- Preconventional morality (thinks things are wrong only because it might lead to punishment or it's not in his/her best interests right now, failure to understand disparities between own behavior and socially acceptable behavior, often in trouble with law)

A FOCUS ON SELF-HANDICAPPING

One of the more interesting "myths" about psychopathic criminals is the notion that they have fairly high intelligence, yet make stupid mistakes. This notion pervades much of the psychological literature (e.g. Sternberg 2002) and popular culture (see [Dumb Criminal Acts](#)). This notion is sometimes used when a political leader, like a President or world-renowned scientist, jeopardizes their career, good name, and credibility by engaging in some sort of really stupid behavior - like having sex with an intern or underage child, for example. Hence, the "mythology" persists that psychopaths usually rise to power in politics or business with their mental illness undetected until they make some stupid mistake.

The name for this phenomenon -- when people slack off from using their best common sense -- is called SELF-HANDICAPPING, and the origins of this concept have been traced by Berglas (1990). Whether or not it's an attribute of psychopathy is controversial, but mainstream criminology embraces some related ideas in such concepts as displacement (strain theory), least effort (learning theory), and impulsiveness (control theory).

Basically, self-handicapping is the belief that you're so truly smart, that you don't need to exert any effort to prove it. Such a person cares deeply about looking smart, but in order to avoid the appearance of being dumb, they decide to slack off and not try at all. Hence, if anyone judges their performance afterwards, they can always say "I wasn't even trying" and if they do manage to succeed at something without really trying, they can say "Look how good I did without really trying." Many college students do it all the time - give themselves a handicap - by getting drunk the night before a big test, or seeing how good they'll do in a course without buying the textbook, to name a couple examples of self-handicapping. In achievement-oriented contexts like school, business, or politics -- any context that emphasizes intelligence -- there is a tendency for people to be vulnerable to underachievement in this way.

INTERNET RESOURCES

[American Journal of Orthopsychiatry](#)
[An Interview with Karl Menninger](#)
[Crime and the Mentally Ill](#)

PRINTED RESOURCES

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[Syllabus for JUS 301](#)

[Syllabus for JUS 415 \(Forensic Psychology\)](#)

[MegaLinks in Criminal Justice](#)