

A Possible Environmental Pattern to Develop Psychopathy: Re-Examining Cleckley

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Abstract: Although there have been significant advances in the knowledge and understanding of psychopathy, its etiology remains unclear. Hare noted that there are no substantial differences in background between psychopaths and general criminals and further posits that parenting is probably not essential. Cleckley reported that he could not recognize any specific regular patterns in environmental factors that always seemed to produce psychopathy. However, he also noted that many traumatic events and conflicting situations seem to have significantly influenced the development of psychopaths. This paper systematically reexamines the profiles of the 16 patients in Cleckley's *The Mask of Sanity* to determine whether there is indeed no regular environmental pattern associated with psychopathy.

Keywords: etiology of psychopath, development of psychopath, childhood environment, family background, environmental factors, pattern, *The Mask of Sanity*, Cleckley

1. Introduction

Cleckley first identified psychopathy as a personality disorder in *The Mask of Sanity* in 1941 by describing actions and intentions of specific patients from his clinical practice [1]. In this book, Cleckley defined psychopaths as individuals possessing attributes including impulsivity, superficial charm, aggressiveness, and persistent antisocial behavior with no evidence of remorse. Based on Cleckley's descriptions, Hare developed the Psychopathy Check List (PCL), and later the Psychopathy Check List-Revised (PCL-R), providing a way to quantify the degree of psychopathic traits [2]. The PCL-R consists of two factors with four sub-facets. Factor 1 is divided into the Interpersonal Facet (glibness, grandiosity, pathological

lying, and manipulativeness) and the Affective Facet (lack of empathy and remorse, shallow emotion, and failure to accept responsibility). Factor 2 is divided into the Lifestyle Facet (need for stimulation, parasitic lifestyle, impulsivity, and lack of realistic goal) and the Antisocial Facet (early behavior problems, poor behavior control, juvenile delinquency, revocation of conditional release, and criminal versatility). Promiscuity and Many short-term marital relationships, which do not belong to the four facets, are also identified as other potential traits [3]. The most significant difference between Cleckley and Hare is the expanded weight of antisocial behaviors, which were added to the personality traits that Cleckley originally advocated. In PCL-R, Hare also eliminated Cleckley's requirements

that psychopaths be free of delusions or anxiety, that they frequently consume alcohol, and that suicide threats rarely be carried out [2].

Although it still remains one of the most controversial disorders in psychopathology [4], it is generally believed that there are two types of psychopaths. *Primary psychopaths* are caused by genetic factors and *secondary psychopaths* are caused by environmental factors. Primary psychopaths are born with an innate predisposition that makes them difficult to socialize. Secondary psychopaths are born without any predispositions but develop psychopathy through bad parenting [5], [6]. The two classifications are considered to show the same phenotypic outcome through different pathways [7]-[9]. There are also two types of primary motivational systems. The *behavioral activation system* (BAS) indicates sensitivity to rewards, and the *behavioral inhibition system* (BIS) indicates sensitivity to punishments [7], [10], [11]. Primary psychopathy is caused by weak BIS. Because of low fear, they seek sensation and are more risk-prone; weak emotions are acted out through even weaker restraints [12]. Secondary psychopathy is caused by overactive BAS, which overwhelms normal BIS and readily reacts to stressful situations [6]. In general, this classification is empirically supported (Blackburn). Although relatively unknown, Murphy and Vess also propose four possible subtypes of psychopathy, based on their clinical observations at Atascadero State Hospital. *The narcissistic type* shows characteristics such as grandiosity and entitlement together with callous disregard for the feelings of others [13]. *The borderline type* shows tendencies of affective instability and self-destruction. *The sadistic type* is linked to typical cases of serial killers. *The antisocial type* is parasitic and in need of constant stimulation, unable to refrain from his impulses.

However, the etiology of psychopathy is still unclear and needs clarification. While emphasizing that this mental disorder is concealed under the mask that psychopaths wear, Cleckley could not recognize any specific regular pattern in

environmental factors that seemed to produce psychopathy without fail [14], [5]. Hare also pointed out that there are no substantial differences in backgrounds between psychopaths and general criminals [15]. Hare further posited that parenting is probably not essential and that in many cases there was nothing wrong with the parenting. Hare stated that the origins of psychopathy remain murky but its diagnosis is accurate, implicating the reliability of his PCL-R as an indicator [15, p. 178]. On the other hand, Mealey maintained that the degree of psychopathic subjects' dependency on genetic and environmental factors is a continuum and that psychopathy in general is caused by an interaction between the subject's biological predisposition and their environment [16]. Glaser and Ruti agreed that genes determine the effective environment because it is natural to seek experiences compatible with innate proclivities, and individuals' interactions indirectly influence the brain [17], [18]. Lykken and Granic et al. also supported this stance, stating that psychopaths are not born bad but rather difficult, and that the coercive cycle created by parents causes the disorder. Here we see clear discrepancies in regard to the etiology of psychopathy [6], [19]. Cleckley says:

Many traumatic events and conflictual situations seem to have significantly influenced the development of the psychopaths discussed in this volume. But no regular or convincing pattern of cause and effect was discovered to establish scientifically a definite explanatory formula [14, p. 505].

Here Cleckley seems to indicate that further attempts should be made to investigate the details of psychopaths' environmental backgrounds more carefully and systematically.

2. Methodology

To determine whether there is a regular environmental pattern associated with psychopathy or not, this research project involved a thorough re-examination of the 16 patients who were profiled in Cleckley's book, *The Mask of Sanity*. To analyze data for this purpose, the qualitative

content analysis method was adopted. Data analysis was also conducted in an inductive manner since there no convincing premises were available at this point [20]-[22]. First, we re-read each of the first eight cases carefully, underlining all outstanding features pertaining to their developments of psychopathy. Information was condensed by deleting all unnecessary words and paraphrased into short forms. These short forms were transcribed on a coded sheet and common categories were generated. Next, these

categories were checked against the rest of the eight cases and revised, when necessary, to assure inter-coder consistency. Finally, the patient's names, actual descriptions of outstanding features in the text, and page numbers were listed under the generated categories.

3. Results

The results of the data analysis are shown below:

Table 1. Outstanding Features of 16 Cases of Cleckley's Psychopath Patients

Early Years

Signs of the Subject being an Unnaturally Good Child

Pierre	So many sweet, attentive little things/unusually loving and demonstrative/seems to want to be with us so much (p. 120)
Walter	Not only normal but also a particularly desirable friend/generally looked to as a leader/entirely free from the popular tendency to bully (p. 173)

Signs of Parents' Superior Qualities

Joe	Joe's father was a prominent man in one of the largest cities in Alabama/high ambitions were maintained for his son/mother wished him to live according to puritanical ideals of life (p. 191)
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Signs of Pressure from Successful Siblings

Jack	The oldest brother was vice-president of a local bank, another brother was successful in business, a married sister in good circumstances, and another sister unmarried but financially independent and prominent in club work, all strove to help him (p. 157)
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The Breakout of the Symptoms

Signs of Anger and Frustration

Roberta	They've made some mistakes with me, but I've made a lot myself (p. 71)
Chester	"I can't see why they don't let me alone. I don't bother anybody. Why can't I go about my business like any other man?" Toward his family he was sullen and carping, his reactions those of petty irritation. He complained constantly that his father meddled with him and at times ascribed all his troubles to this interference (p. 164)/drank to vomit and defecated at the funeral (p. 166)
Walter	He became dissatisfied, carping, and always spoke as if the world were to blame for each difficulty that he made for himself and for others (p. 174)
Tom	Sometimes shot at a Negro's chickens, set fire to a rural privy around the outskirts of town, threw rocks at squirrels in a park (p. 91)

- Pierre [Father refused to let him use the family automobile] as if an arbitrary and vicious injustice had been done him, showing what looked like quiet indignation...for no fault provoked and deeply wronged (p. 120)
- Frank Drowned goats/drank to excess and often behaved in a rowdy and threatening manner (p. 124)
- Jack Drank to forget (p. 155)
- Joe Drank to great and foolish excess in periodic sprees (p. 185)

Signs of Shallow Emotion, No True Interests, and Nomadic Lifestyle

- Pierre Almost entirely escaped the shyness and unpleasant self-consciousness that trouble so many boys in their teens (p. 113)
- Roberta Repeatedly made off with small articles from the dime store, the drug store, and from her own home/never seemed sly or crafty (p. 70)
- Chester Roamed about the town or countryside, often sleeping in the woods and fields (p. 164)
- Milt His mother finally began to feel that the meaning of her words did not touch him/repeated the same deed after magnificent verbal apologies/parents' first worry was his apparent failure to take anything seriously/unable to realize his responsibility for damage/specific indifference to basic stimuli accepted by the ordinary person (p. 201)
- Pierre No really close friends (p. 121)/"I am crazy about my mother... I love Mrs. Blank a great deal more than I do Mother" (p. 119)
- Jack Bought things of little use/borrowed heavily from old friends, now and then forged or defrauded/had a confident, reassuring manner and easy way with people (p. 156)
- Walter Began to lose interest in his studies/a quick and limitless facility at lying/purposeless truancy from school (p. 174)
- Joe Ignored serious duties and matters on which his own welfare depended/constantly made excuses and was full of high-sounding promises (p. 191)

Signs of Parents' Unnatural, Distant Acts

- Walter The father, thinking [Walter] might learn something to his profit, allowed him to stay away, supplying him with sums of money from time to time (p. 175)
- Joe His father was able to cover most of his deficiencies and keep him in an appearance of success (p. 191)
- Anna Avoided rubbing it in by moralizing reiteration / sent her at once to a fine boarding school in a distant state / refusal to stir what is now past and unmodifiable (p. 142)
- Tom His family and legal authorities were in hope that if some psychiatric disorder could be discovered in him he might escape a jail sentence for stealing (p. 91)
- Roberta [Parents] talked it over with pastor, the superintendent of the school, and all her teachers (p. 70)
- Jack His relatives with less income were called upon frequently to pay him out of debt, to exert influence on his employers, and occasionally to get him out of jail (p. 156)

4. Discussion

From the reexamination of Cleckley's 16 cases, at least one common basic pattern seems to surface [14]. Their parents were more interested in success or fame, and the rest of the siblings followed the rules and achieved a certain level of success. There are also signs that their parents were unnaturally distant and tended to avoid directly facing or communicating with the subjects. Under such pressure for success without emotional support, the subjects seemed to try their best to live up to their parents' expectations during childhood. However, when they hit puberty, roused by their natural urges, they could no longer keep themselves in the unnatural mold of their parents' expectations. Accumulated anger and frustration for having been raised without human touch drove them into uncontrolled states, sometimes even crossing the law. Nonetheless, their parents' distant attitude stayed the same, and the subjects remained loose cannons even after they reached adulthood.

After describing each case of his 16 patients in detail, Cleckley mentioned certain parental backgrounds that often recurred, with enough frequency to attain significance [14, p. 479]. For such examples, he listed "[f]rankly broken homes, overt parental spoiling, harshness discernible by neighbors..., plain models for deceit or for counterreactions to hypocritical pseudomorality" [14, p. 483]. At a glance there does not seem to be any clear commonality among these backgrounds. It is likely that under these conditions without true emotional exchanges or support, the children could not check or realize who they were. These are typical cases of emotional neglect. In general, individuals who have suffered from emotional neglect are known to become insecure and highly dependent [23, 24]. This seems to explain why his patients initially acted as unnaturally good children. Not having a solid self, they were always anxious about what their parents thought of them, and thus wanted to be with their parents more than usual. Cleckley himself explained that for many years, his patients were so responsive to the fear of disappointing their parents and to

the goal of pleasing them that there was no overt measure necessary to keep them in the parents' "excessive passive demands"[14, p. 477] to be both childish and feminine. Cleckley pointed out that some people may be fair, kind, and genial, but may unknowingly lack the simple warmth and true intimacy that are essential for biologic soundness. In particular, those who show superior qualities in their activities feel little need for attachment and see such a need in others [14, p. 470]. Cleckley calls this a *mechanization of human relationships* [14, p. 472]. Upon becoming parents, these people are unable to derive enjoyment from the children as they are, and only work for attainment of goodness and obedience without knowing what to do with their children. These children are only shown parental coldness, obsessiveness, and "mechanical" attention to material needs from the beginning [14, p. 474]. Thus they cannot help but to withdraw into *shallowness* [14, p. 303]. Cleckley stated that in several of his cases, unhappy home situations were found, in which husband and wife avoided their fulfilment in each other out of deep frustration, which was perfectly guarded in privacy. He suggested that these parents are more than ordinarily sociable, informal, and fun-loving while they are with their friends or in social situations to compensate for what lacks in their family life. However, in such an environment of hollowness, their child's emotional needs are severely sacrificed. This could explain why Hare suggested that parenting was probably not essential and that there was nothing wrong with the parenting [15, p. 178]. Family dysfunction may have been perfectly disguised to a third party. Cleckley suggested that although environmental factors contributing to the development of psychopathy are often superficially so disguised as to appear of an opposite nature, if we can obtain sufficient information about the early years of psychopaths, we are likely to discover distorted information and traumatic events in the lives of most well-adjusted people [14, p. 505–506]. He emphasized that ostensibly trivial environmental events could become major subjective influences once their cumulative effects in sequence are

considered [14, p. 475], reiterating that the accident of timing may be crucial. Cleckley stated that not only congenital factors but also very early and very severe interactions with one's milieu could lead to molecular and sub molecular changes, which become fixed and irreversible [14, pp. 475–476]. For such examples, he mentions traumatic experiences as early as six or eight months up to the age of three years [14, pp. 478–479].

If the child's basic needs for comfort, affection and nurturing aren't met, and loving, caring, stable attachments with others are not established, the child may develop a rare but serious condition called *reactive attachment disorder*, in which an infant or young child doesn't establish healthy attachments with parents or caregivers [25]. Very early childhood experiences may change children's neurobiology [17], [26], [27]. It is known that five-sixths of human brains grow postnatally, and this growth lasts well into the second postnatal year [28]. If early experiences that are expected do not occur at a particular time, synaptic connections are pruned [17]. Although Hare argued that the failure to bond due to lack of attachment is the result and not the cause of psychopathy [15, p. 172], this research suggests that if a subject is placed under certain circumstances during the postnatal period, they could develop a brain abnormality very similar to the innate predisposition. This situation could also be the cause of their lack of attachment. In spite of Hare's argument that there did not seem to be differences in backgrounds between psychopaths and general criminals [15, p. 174], there is a possibility that the general criminals were somehow protected from significant damages during their postnatal years even though they appeared to have similar backgrounds. Therefore, emotional neglect, which is caused by mechanistic family traits during the postnatal period, combined with subtle psychological pressure or control later to enforce obedience and success might influence the development of psychopathy.

As one possible background difference between psychopaths and general criminals, it is conceivable that the above mentioned emotional neglect was not as homogenous

as to cause psychopathy due to occasional human touches by the parents when they were unusually in a good mood. It is also possible that, if the subject is not confined in a family without emotional communications, they could avoid developing psychopathy. Kiyotaka Katsuta and Miyoko Sumida were two Japanese serial murderers, both of whom attempted suicide. Katsuta was unsuccessful in his attempt, which was based upon feelings of guilt for killing 22 people. Sumida was successful in her attempt, which was based upon sadness at no longer being able to see her adoptive son after her incarceration for killing eight people [29]-[31]. These incidents clearly indicate that the serial killers did not lack guilt and anxiety, which are typical characteristics of psychopaths [32]. Katsuta, who was highly neglected throughout his early childhood into his low teens while his parents were both working, could go out freely to play with his peers [29], [30]. Conversely, Sumida's house was a hangout for ruffians, and she was passed between her relatives during her early childhood [31]. As a result, they both had opportunities to interact with people outside their families. However, most of Cleckley's 16 patients did not appear to have any close friends. They were raised "untouched," confined in a house where human communications fell off during postnatal years, leading them to develop psychopathy, which could not be influenced by later human contact [25], [27], [17].

All the meaningless rowdy acts, which sometimes seemed self-destructive, could have been the signs of their unconscious rebellious feelings against the betrayal and the inconsistent, hypocritical family life, which continuously placed them under an unnatural amount of force without providing normal human affection, all while looking deceptively perfect to the outside world.

This paper suggests the importance of renewed attention to the details and depth of the very early family backgrounds of psychopathic subjects, similar to the treatment of genetic and typological research. Possible environmental effects on the development of psychopathy, which Cleckley made long ago, have not been adequately examined. As Cleckley

pointed out that if parents of one subject had possessed certain bad qualities or had punished her severely, she might have revolved actively and not have withdrawn from everything [14, pp. 502-503], their family backgrounds are very often not discernibly abusive. If we could clarify such subtle environmental patterns that lead children to psychopathy at high rates in combination with their innate predispositions, it could be of a great help detecting families that have a high potential risk.

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