

CHAPTER I

The Elusive Definition of Psychopathy

Popular culture descriptions of psychopathy appeal to a wide audience. Journalist and filmmaker Jon Ronson's TED Talk on psychopathy has 24 million views as of January 2025 (TED, 2012, August 12). I often show this TED Talk to students to illustrate what popular culture gets wrong about psychopathy. In his review written in *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, Dr. Peter Tyrer (2012) described Ronson's book, which formed the basis of the TED Talk, as trivializing and stigmatizing psychopathy "in the search for cheap laughs and better sales" (p. 167). Several subject-matter experts who were interviewed for the book indicated that Ronson used exaggerated or fictional accounts of their interviews (Society for the Scientific Study of Psychopathy, 2012).

Why is such an inaccurate source on psychopathy so widely viewed? Learning about psychopathy through mediums like TED Talks, True Crime podcasts, and YouTube tutorial videos is appealing because academic writing tends to be inaccessible. Academic reference books and peer-reviewed papers on psychopathy are literally inaccessible because many are behind expensive paywalls. These sources are also figuratively inaccessible because their use of jargon and technical language makes them difficult to understand. Readers who are new to psychopathy research often need to refer to multiple other sources to gain the background knowledge necessary to understand a single paper. It is also easy to come across two different papers with contradictory views on psychopathy. Although it is not problematic to have different perspectives on psychopathy, readers too often are left in the dark as to why these contradictory perspectives exist and whether one is more accurate than the other.

The fact that interested audiences are so often left in the dark with respect to the academic literature on psychopathy is disappointing because of how prominent the concept has become in criminal legal system decision-making. Dr. John Monahan, a pioneer in forensic psychology and risk assessment, noted on the cover of *The Handbook of Psychopathy*

that psychopathy is “the most important forensic concept of the early 21st century” (Monahan, 2006). Part of the importance of psychopathy is based on its association with offending. The strength of this association resembles the impact of a wide range of proven interventions, such as the relationships between tutoring and academic achievement, reduced class sizes and academic achievement, and heart surgery and reductions in mortality (Hart, 1998). In North America, the criminal behaviour of people with psychopathy traits contributes to billions of dollars in financial costs (Gatner et al., 2023). Whether rightly or wrongly, psychopathy has a major impact on decisions in the criminal legal system. To evaluate whether this influence is appropriate first requires an understanding of how psychopathy is defined.

Chapter Goals

Those interested in learning about psychopathy often face two unenviable options. The first is to read expensive, technical, inaccessible, and at times contradictory academic literature. The second option is to access popular culture sources that are often misinformed about the academic literature on psychopathy and, whether purposefully or by mistake, give an inaccurate description of what subject-matter experts mean when discussing psychopathy. My goal in writing this book is to make psychopathy research accessible without sacrificing the accuracy of the content. Readers will not receive a watered-down version of the science behind psychopathy. When technical language is unavoidable, I use case studies that illustrate complex concepts.

Making psychopathy research accessible begins with establishing a shared understanding of the construct. This chapter focuses on a very basic yet important question: What is psychopathy? Answering this question can be challenging because there is no universal definition. Thus, to have a comprehensive understanding of different perspectives, this chapter traces 200 years of discussions on psychopathy and explains how and why different definitions have emerged. A clear understanding of psychopathy is important because, in practice, the stakes associated with misattributing a person’s behaviour to psychopathy are high. The criminal legal system regularly assesses psychopathy to make decisions about a person’s future, including their freedom. Psychopathy has important real-world implications.

Due to its association with offending, psychopathy is regularly assessed to assist with decisions about sentence length, probation conditions,

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candidacy for treatment programs, parole decisions, jury deliberations, and, in some jurisdictions, the death penalty. To be clear, I am not advocating that psychopathy *should* play a role in all of these decisions. My point is that, whether right or wrong, the criminal legal system uses information about psychopathy to make decisions with far-reaching consequences. At a minimum, clear-sighted decision-making requires an understanding of what psychopathy is (and what it is not). I begin with a discussion of why definitions of psychopathy matter.

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Researchers studying cancer are often interested in whether and to what extent cancer contributes to early mortality. However, fibromyalgia, anemia, pleurisy, and other illnesses have signs and symptoms that overlap with cancer and also increase the risk of mortality. The American Cancer Society (2025) has therefore taken care to develop clear definitions of various cancers. Clearly defining cancer allows doctors and clinicians to distinguish cancer from other diseases, which in turn allows researchers to have a shared understanding of cancer and make more precise conclusions about the specific contribution of cancer to mortality.

It is difficult to make precise conclusions about the contribution of psychopathy to offending if a shared understanding of psychopathy is lacking. There are major differences between how psychopathy is described in the literature produced by subject-matter experts¹ and how it is described in popular culture. Even within the academic literature, there are some key differences in how psychopathy is defined. As mentioned by Dr. Robert Hare, the lead developer of the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL), even more troubling is the fact that subject-matter experts do not bother to provide their definition of psychopathy before describing the relationship between psychopathy and negative outcomes like violent crime (Hare, 2022).

The goal of this book, and this chapter in particular, is to help reduce confusion about the meaning of psychopathy. As a starting point, here is how I define psychopathy:

¹ By subject-matter experts, I am referring to those who publish peer-reviewed papers on psychopathy or who are responsible for assessing psychopathy as part of clinical practice (e.g., forensic psychologists).

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- Psychopathy is a multidimensional syndrome, which means that it consists of the convergence of observable and subjective traits from different personality domains (Monroe & Anderson, 2015).
- The personality traits that comprise psychopathy mainly come from interpersonal, affective, and behavioural domains of functioning.
- Core interpersonal traits are those that describe people as, for example, self-centred, entitled, and manipulative.
- Core affective traits are those that describe people as, for example, detached, callous-unemotional, and unempathic.
- Core behavioural traits are those that describe people as, for example, having poor behavioural control, a lack of reliability, and a tendency to be sensation seeking.
- These core traits are found in both youth and adults, but the expression of these traits may differ across developmental stages. This concept is referred to as heterotypic continuity.
- Psychopathy is maladaptive, meaning that the personality traits cause functional impairment in day-to-day life (e.g., negative relationships with others).
- Psychopathy is dimensional (e.g., a sliding scale representing the degree of psychopathy traits) rather than categorical (e.g., a clear demarcation between psychopath and nonpsychopath).
- The personality traits that define psychopathy tend to be relatively stable over time and across different social contexts.
- Stability in one time period (or context) does not guarantee stability in another time period (or context).
- Involvement in criminal behaviour is not a psychopathy trait.

Other descriptions of psychopathy also exist, and at least some subject-matter experts will disagree in whole or in part with how I have described psychopathy (see Debate #2 in Chapter 2). In Chapter 4, I review whether the traits I identified as core to psychopathy hold up to empirical analysis. It is not necessary for readers to adopt my definition as their own. However, providing this working definition of psychopathy is critical for developing a shared understanding of what I mean when I use the term throughout the book. In the following subsection, I explain why a shared understanding is important.

Using Definitions to Develop a Shared Understanding of Psychopathy

In the first half of the twentieth century, Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein designed his “Beetle in a Box” thought experiment to

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illustrate the importance of definitions (see Wittgenstein, 1993). Wittgenstein described a scenario with a group of people, each having their own private box that contains a “beetle.” Each person is only aware of what a “beetle” is by inspecting their own box. Nobody in the group can see inside the box of the other group members. The box could contain anything, including the same thing, something different, or even nothing at all. The term “beetle” simply represents whatever happens to be in a particular box at a particular time. Each person can freely discuss the characteristics of their beetle, but it is impossible to verify what is actually inside another person’s box. The purpose of Wittgenstein’s experiment is to illustrate that the meaning of a word can be understood by how it is used. It does not matter if each person has a different “beetle” in their box as long as each person can communicate what this beetle means to them. Similarly, it does not necessarily matter if subject-matter experts define “psychopathy” differently as long as each communicates what psychopathy means to them. Words earn their meaning through communities where there are shared rules about how to use language. These shared rules and public descriptions mean that even in the absence of a formal definition, a word like psychopathy can still have meaning, and correct and incorrect usages of the word can be identified.

Wittgenstein wanted to illustrate how people may experience pain (i.e., “the beetle”) in vastly different ways. Being open and publicly describing one’s pain helps create a shared understanding. At issue in the academic literature is the tendency for definitions and descriptions of psychopathy to be private. The private nature of psychopathy definitions has contributed to a lack of shared language. The lack of a shared language occurs even among practitioners responsible for assessing psychopathy (Shiple & Arrigo, 2001). The lack of a shared language for psychopathy is especially true when comparing academic and public communities.

By Wittgenstein’s definition, subject-matter expert definitions of psychopathy are not public. The academic literature on psychopathy is quite literally private, given that much of this literature is published in journals behind expensive paywalls. It is critical for subject-matter experts to be more public with their research on psychopathy, given how impactful expert opinions can be in changing public perceptions and attitudes (Pornpitakpan, 2004). The academic literature on psychopathy is also figuratively private because it uses inaccessible jargon and other dense language that is confusing to most readers, especially those who are looking to introduce themselves to psychopathy research. The private nature of academic research on psychopathy is unfortunate because there is a clear

public interest in the topic. This is not a new issue; Cleckley (1976), one of the key figures in contributing to contemporary descriptions of psychopathy, noted that a major barrier to effectively addressing psychopathy traits was the general public's lack of knowledge (p. 31).

Despite public interest, only 15 percent of laypeople report learning about psychopathy through academic sources (Ostapchuk, 2018). This is unfortunate given that experimental research shows that exposing laypersons to clear descriptions of psychopathy can help debunk myths that create stigma about psychopathy as a mental health disorder (Ostapchuk, 2018). People are far more likely to report that their understanding of psychopathy is based on intuition or popular culture sources. Journalist and filmmaker Jon Ronson's TED Talk on psychopathy has over 24 million views on YouTube. Ronson's description of psychopathy is accessible and, to some, entertaining (TED, 2012, August 12). Although I take issue with Ronson's depiction of the academic literature on psychopathy, he at least satisfies Wittgenstein's emphasis on making his definition of psychopathy public. I can point out the aspects of Ronson's depiction of psychopathy that I disagree with. The academic literature's failure to publicly express its views on psychopathy means that audiences are unable to identify instances in which Ronson's description of psychopathy conflicts with academic descriptions of psychopathy. As will become clearer in Chapter 2, Ronson's description of psychopathy is, at best, an inaccurate representation of the academic literature. At worst, Ronson's TED Talk is disingenuous storytelling. Subject-matter experts must accept responsibility here. Audiences who are new to the concept of psychopathy cannot be expected to identify incorrect descriptions of academic definitions of psychopathy. Such an expectation is especially unreasonable when academic descriptions of psychopathy remain both literally and figuratively private.

To reiterate, making academic research on psychopathy more public and less private and more accessible and less inaccurate does not require the development of a universally agreed-upon definition of psychopathy. In fact, universal definitions of a phenomenon can be problematic. As Wittgenstein noted, absolute or fixed definitions give the impression that "some thing" is "one thing." Psychopathy is polysemous; it refers to different ideas both within and outside of academic and clinical settings. Moreover, descriptions of psychopathy evolve over time. If good science is self-correcting, then revisiting descriptions and revising measures of psychopathy in light of new information should be encouraged (Skeem & Cooke, 2010). Subject-matter experts can be more public about their work by writing for *The Conversation* and other outlets designed to communicate scientific research. TEDx Talks,

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media interviews, and using social media are a few examples of how to improve knowledge mobilization.

Academic Pessimism Regarding Psychopathy

The failure of subject-matter experts to communicate the meaning of psychopathy has also led to skepticism in some academic circles regarding the existence or meaningfulness of psychopathy and the methodological rigor of psychopathy research (Maruna, 2025). Subject-matter experts too often have made flippant claims about psychopathy, including that it factors into all crime (DeLisi, 2016) and that it is untreatable (Harris & Rice, 2017). Such claims have been glommed onto by other academics who do not read the psychopathy literature more fully or seemingly ignore other psychopathy research if it does not fit their desired narrative. In this case, the desired narrative is to depict psychopathy research as biased and lacking in rigour. For example, some writers have overlooked a substantial body of recent research showing that psychopathy traits can change over time (e.g., Hawes et al., 2014; McCuish & Lussier, 2021) and instead concluded that mainstream psychopathy research denies the possibility of change among people with psychopathy traits (American Society of Criminology, 2024; Larsen, 2025; Maruna, 2025).

If the meaning of psychopathy cannot be communicated clearly, why should anyone believe that it exists? Edwin Sutherland, whose training was in sociology and who became one of the pioneers of criminology, rightfully criticized psychiatrists for discussing psychopathy without addressing how to measure the construct in a reliable way (Sutherland, 1949). Similarly, given the lack of reliable and valid measures Tennenbaum (1977) questioned the value of constructs like psychopathy to the study of criminal behaviour. From Sutherland's perspective, the definition of psychopathy seemed to vary from one psychiatrist to the next and was, in effect, used as a multipurpose tool that allowed a person's difficult behaviour to suddenly be understood and explained. In effect, resembling Wittgenstein's beetle in a box experiment, each psychiatrist was confined to looking inside their own psychopathy box without considering how others described psychopathy.

Sutherland and Tennenbaum's criticisms had a lasting impact on sociologists' and criminologists' perspectives on psychopathy.² For example, at

² The issue is not that Sutherland and Tennenbaum were wrong about the lack of reliable measures of psychopathy. The issue is that psychologists eventually addressed these criticisms, a fact that seems to be overlooked by commentators some who adopt a narrow reading of the psychopathy literature.

the 2023 American Society of Criminology Conference in Philadelphia Pennsylvania, the largest criminology conference in the world, then-President Dr. Shadd Maruna delivered his Presidential Address to conference attendees (see American Society of Criminology, 2024³). As part of this address, Dr. Maruna posited that psychopathy was essentially a disorder “invented in the 1990s in academia” by a group of Canadians on the fringes of forensic psychology who brought this “bizarre idea” into mainstream psychology. Dr. Maruna’s framing of psychopathy as a Canadian idea that exists on the fringes of psychology contrasts with the fact that there are dozens of translations of psychopathy measures that are used throughout the world (Hoff et al., 2014). As illustrated in the following sections, at odds with Maruna’s claim that psychopathy was “invented in the 1990s in academia” (American Society of Criminology, 2024) is the fact that descriptions of psychopathy date back thousands of years.

Early Descriptions of Psychopathy

Descriptions of psychopathy traits emerged centuries before the term “psychopathy” entered the daily language of forensic psychologists. For example, Theophrastus (371–287 BCE), a student of Aristotle, described the “unscrupulous man” as manipulative and unrepentant. Yildirim (2015) provides an excellent historical tracing of psychopathy’s conceptual origins. Psychopathy traits have been described in Shakespeare plays (e.g., Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*). The idea of psychopathy traits is not just a Western phenomenon. The Yoruba people in Nigeria use the term “Arana Kan” to describe someone who is malicious, bullheaded, and defies others. The term “kulangeta” is used by Yupik-speaking Inuit Peoples to describe people who persistently lie, steal, cheat, and know that what they are doing is wrong but simply do not bother to change (see Kiehl, 2015). The term “psychopathy” may have been “invented” by researchers, but that does not make the traits that underscore the psychopathy construct any less real.

French psychologist Philippe Pinel (1745–1826) is credited with providing one of the first formal attempts to describe psychopathy. Pinel used the term *manie sans délire* to describe people whose problem behaviour (*manie*) occurred without (*sans*) the presence of delusions (*délire*). Pinel used this term to describe people who were aware that they were engaging

³ The Presidential Address is available on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=VR9cJMgstb8) and discussions of psychopathy, including the idea that it was “invented,” begin around 26:45.

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in harmful behaviour but simply did not care. This contrasted with much of the prior work in psychiatry that aimed to identify disorders in which people were either entirely unaware of their behaviour or unaware that their behaviour was wrong or causing harm. American psychiatrist Benjamin Rush (1812) suggested that because people were aware of, but ultimately morally unconcerned by, their own behaviour, it was of religious and legal importance to have psychiatry assist in the treatment of psychopathy (see Millon et al., 1998). Psychiatrists like Pinel and Rush viewed people with psychopathy traits as morally ambiguous (e.g., lacking remorse). Pinel and Rush believed that people were born with these traits and, in the absence of intervention, would remain indifferent regarding the impact of their behaviour.

British psychiatrist J. C. Prichard had a much different perspective than Pinel and Rush. He believed that people with psychopathy traits enjoyed harmful behaviour and therefore described the psychopath as morally deplorable. Whereas Pinel and Rush called for medical intervention rather than incarceration, Prichard called for severe social and legal punishment (see Toch, 1998). This description of Prichard's perspective is not intended as an endorsement. Rather, it illustrates the type of unsubstantiated claim about psychopathy from certain psychiatrists that Sutherland later criticized.

German scholar Julius Koch (1892) was perhaps the first to use the term psychopathy (“psychopathische”). He used this term to describe the “suffering soul.” Critical to informing contemporary definitions of psychopathy was Koch's emphasis that psychopathy traits were stable over the life-course and consistent across social situations. Ultimately, descriptions of psychopathy traits by Koch, Prichard, Rush, and Pinel received criticism for being overly broad. Under these descriptions, essentially any deviation from reason or morality was viewed as an indicator of psychopathy (Ellard, 1988).

The path from Pinel to contemporary descriptions of psychopathy that inform twenty-first century research hardly followed a straight line. Whereas psychiatrists like Pinel and Koch emphasized personality dimensions of psychopathy, psychiatrists of the early twentieth century tended to use the construct of psychopathy as an amorphous placeholder for classifying abnormal behaviour, especially sexual offences (Lussier et al., 2021; Veal & Ogloff, 2022). In contrast to twenty-first century research, which often uses psychopathy to understand criminal behaviour, twentieth-century research tended to use atypical criminal behaviours to describe psychopathy. In this earlier era, it was not the personality traits of the

patient that led to a psychopathy diagnosis, but rather the nature of the behaviour that was perpetrated. In the early twentieth century, certain psychiatrists and political figures used this view of psychopathy to justify eugenics, including the forced sterilization of patients treated for psychopathy (Rafter, 1997). German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1904) described people with psychopathy traits as “morally depraved” and “savages.” He felt that the answer to psychopathy was social condemnation, ostracism, and long-term incarceration (see Arrigo & Shipley, 2001; Toch, 1998). The tendency for the True Crime genre of the twenty-first century to describe psychopathy in the same way that it was described during the eugenics movement of the twentieth century is a major reason for my pushback against popular culture’s representation of the academic literature on psychopathy.⁴

By the mid-twentieth century, perspectives on psychopathy shifted away from punishment and condemnation and back toward a focus on treatment. Although this may sound like a progressive approach, treatment strategies of this era were far from humane (see Chapter 2). Although there was more of a focus on treatment, psychiatrists continued to get things backward by focusing on the crime committed to make a diagnosis of psychopathy. For example, Sexual Psychopath Laws were created in the mid-twentieth century to give courts the power to label a person a psychopath if their offence was of a sexual nature (Karpman, 1948). Koch’s emphasis that psychopathy was defined by personality traits was not reflected in these laws. Similarly, Pinel’s emphasis on how people with psychopathy traits were aware of their behaviour was forgotten and replaced with the view that the sexual psychopath had little or no control over their behaviour (Roth, 1952).

Psychiatrists tended to ascribe the psychopathy label to people whose behaviour did not fit within social convention. Sociologists were especially critical of psychiatry’s tendency to pathologize any sign of perceived dysfunction, including homosexuality, hysteria, divorce, and both over- or under-participation in social affairs (Becker, 1963). Psychiatrists were often concerned with less severe forms of social deviancy because cases of extreme violence or perversion were thought to be preceded by these less serious behaviours. Unfortunately, psychiatrists overlooked an obvious but critical question. Specifically, how often do people involved in minor forms of perceived social deviancy go on to perpetrate acts of extreme

⁴ For example, the True Crime television show *Signs of a Psychopath* retrospectively examines people involved in heinous crimes and, based solely on the nature of those crimes, makes assumptions that the perpetrator must therefore be a psychopath.