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Portrayal of psychopathy in the movies

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Abstract

According to diagnostic criteria, psychopathy describes chronic immoral and anti-social behaviour, a lack of consciousness and an ability to lie and deceive without feeling guilt or discomfort. It is one of the most studied conditions and its relationship with criminal behaviour is well known. Using psychopathy as a model, the narrative of the human monster fits well in the context of watching films. The most common portrayal of a psychopath in films is that of a callous, calculating and aggressive individual, but such a character tends to only scratch the surface of the problems associated with psychopathy. Using illustrations both old and new, this paper focuses on interpersonal relationships and placing films in the context of further discussion.

Introduction

This paper describes the portrayal of psychopathy in the movies, and gives suggestions for selecting movies that can be useful in teaching students of medicine, psychology, nursing and social work about psychopathy. What are the issues that can be taught, and why?

What is psychopathy?

Psychopathy is a psychological construct that describes chronic immoral and antisocial behaviour, a lack of consciousness, and the ability to lie and deceive without feeling guilt or discomfort (Cleckley, 1982). The term is often used interchangeably with sociopathy, dyssocial and antisocial personality disorder, and shares many features with histrionic and narcissistic personality disorder (Blackburn, 2007). While the different terms are defined and measured in slightly different ways, the concepts are highly correlated, and what is said in this article about psychopathy can generally be said about DSM-IV antisocial personality disorder and ICD-10 dyssocial personality disorder (Hare & Neumann, 2008).

Psychopathy has been the most studied of any personality disorder, and many biological and psychological correlates of psychopathic behaviour are known. Robert Hare has developed the most commonly used measure of psychopathic behaviour, the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) (Hare, 1991). The items of the PCL-R relate to two dimensions, antisocial behaviour and affective disturbance. Affective disturbances include glibness and

superficial charm, a grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying, being cunning and manipulative, lack of remorse, shallowness, callousness and lack of empathy, and irresponsibility. The antisocial lifestyle comprises promiscuous sexuality, need for stimulation and proneness to boredom, a parasitic lifestyle, poor behavioural control, lack of realistic long-term goals, impulsivity, irresponsibility, a history of juvenile delinquency, early behaviour problems, many short-term marital relationships, revocation of conditional release, and criminal versatility.

The PCL-R has been used in numerous scientific studies, especially studies of criminal behaviour, but genetic, developmental, personality, experimental and neurobiological research has also supported the construct of psychopathy, and supported that the core feature of psychopathy is an emotional deficit related to empathy (Hare & Neumann, 2008).

The main research in psychopathy has been in criminal behaviour, at times at the expense of the more interpersonal aspects of psychopathy (Blackburn, 2007).

There is now substantial evidence that psychopathic personality traits, regardless of whether they are assessed by the PCL-R or the DSM-IV criteria, fall on a continuum from absent to severe (Hare & Neumann, 2008). Therefore, not only people working in forensic and correctional settings, but anyone involved in social work, substance abuse treatment and psychiatric treatment is likely to encounter clients and patient with varying degrees of psychopathic traits.

The assessment of dangerousness in a forensic psychiatric evaluation frequently includes a focus on

psychopathic traits. This makes good sense, since psychopathy, and especially the antisocial lifestyle component, is clearly a risk factor for violent recidivism (Walters, 2003).

Psychopathy and the narrative of the human monster

Tales of evil, aggressive, selfish humans give powerful structure to narratives of events. Telling the story of a crime, the emergence of a dictatorship, a failed marriage, or a failed business in terms of a single evil individual gives the storytelling a great line. This is regardless of whether the story is fictional or a story of factual events. I shall call this 'the narrative of the human monster'.

The narrative structure of the human monster contains a social order wherein people live safely. However, a single individual with deviant beliefs and a deviant system of morality plots to change the social order – either for some specific gain, or simply to upset the current order. This single individual may gain followers, or be able to act alone. Recounting World War II as the result of Adolf Hitler's evil is to most people a much more fascinating story than recounting the war as the result of numerous complex processes, including financial crises, the emergence of communism, the ideology of the nation state, and a whole range of random and meaningless events; recounting the drug problems in a city as the result of a single, evil gangster, whose charisma attracts a following of young rootless and confused people is more interesting than considering the many factors that can be involved in a city's drug problems.

The narrative of the human monster invariably does not end up with harmony between the monstrous person and society. The human monster may be exiled or killed, but he is unable to change and live within society.

The human monster narrative contributes to the fascination of psychopathy. Some very disturbed individuals commit spectacular crimes. They have the ability to appear completely normal, yet are capable of the most shockingly deviant behaviours. An example is Ted Bundy (Rule, 2000), a notorious serial killer, who killed and raped numerous young women between 1974 and 1978. Bundy was intelligent and resourceful enough to attain a university degree in psychology, and managed the Seattle office of Nelson Rockefeller's Presidential campaign. Bundy was able to keep up a charming, well functioning façade, while committing hideous crimes that fit the narrative of the human monster perfectly. Bundy became something of a celebrity in his day, and still attracts great interest. Many criminals of the Bundy type are seen as psychopaths, and indeed they appear to satisfy many criteria of psychopathy. They are

highly deceitful, manipulative, and seem to almost completely lack true empathy. It is not unreasonable to think that serial killers who show no sign of remorse cannot live safely in society, and to conclude that others have a right to protect themselves from such persons.

In the following, I shall argue that the human monster narrative is characteristic of many movies about 'psychopaths', but that these may not be very informative to students of human behaviour.

Psychopathy in the movies

Perhaps no type is portrayed more frequently in the movies than a callous, calculated and aggressive person. Thrillers, detective movies, science fiction, historical drama, and even adventure films contain characters who can be said to possess psychopathic characteristics. Searching the Internet gives several hit lists over the most fascinating 'psychopathic' characters in movies. The psychopathic character usually acts as the villain in the movie, introducing the conflict or disturbance in the story that drives the action of the movie. Although no studies have been carried out on this issue, it is possible that a proportion of the general population has an impression of how psychopathic persons are from the movies.

Portraying psychopaths in movies is not a new trend. To name a few films from the last 70 years that can be said to portray psychopathy or antisocial behaviour, *M* by Fritz Lang (von Harbou & Lang, 1931), Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* (Chaplin, 1947), Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (Greene, 1949), Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (Stefano, 1960), Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971), Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (Tally, 1991) and David Fencher's *Se7en* (Walker, 1995). These and many other films portray murderers without any empathy or remorse. Many of these movies also share an interest in the relationship between the psychopath and society and its rules and conventions. In Fritz Lang's *M*, the main character, Hans Beckert, kills young girls (von Harbou & Lang, 1931). But a central message of the film is that members of the criminal underworld are motivated to hunt Beckert to stop the police interest that he has stirred up. Thus, it is not just the sole killer that is a menace to society, but even those who want to 'clean up' society – an analogy of the then dawning fascism. This can be seen as a comment on the human monster narrative: the monster is not one person, but dangerous ideas or politics. Similar points are made in *Monsieur Verdoux*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and numerous other films. These films all comment not only on the psychopathic person, but also on the human monster narrative.

However, the callous, manipulative characters portrayed in movies often lack some important characteristics in the psychopath that are important to teach to students and others. Rather than acting like patients with psychopathic traits, many of them are highly deliberate characters who possess narcissistic and sadistic traits. And while narcissistic personality traits are indeed related to psychopathy, they are not the same thing (Blackburn, 2007).

The typical 'movie psychopath' appears to behave as if they are entitled to do what they do, to wish to control and dominate others, and to see themselves as superior in intelligence to others. Like some very seriously narcissistic people, the typical characters of these movies appear to perform in front of an audience, and have an exquisite sensitivity to the impression they make on others. Like real-life narcissists, they are often vain and envious. Many of these 'psychopathic' characters also appear to be very intelligent, very calculated, and to have a very clear plan of what they are doing. In the following, I shall review the shortcomings of such characters as portrayers of psychopathy – their limitations as portrayers of narcissism go beyond the scope of this paper.

Limitations in common portrayals of psychopathy

When using films to illustrate psychopathic personality, one needs to consider how the character in the film has relevance to the points of psychopathy that clinicians and social workers need to learn.

There are at least three aspects of psychopaths that are not captured by these calculated villains.

The first is that in psychopathy, as described by both Cleckley (1982) and in later accounts of psychopathy (Hare & Neumann, 2008), there is a marked lack of purpose and a high degree of impulsivity. Cleckley strongly emphasized the absence of any clear motivation for psychopaths' deviant and delinquent behaviours, their tendencies to drift around in life, and even quite literally drift around from place to place without a plan. This aspect of psychopathy is also reflected in Hare's model of psychopathy, in particular with regard to the lifestyle dimension of the PCL-R (e.g. parasitic lifestyle, irresponsibility, lacking realistic goals). In contrast, many movie villains clearly have deliberate and very precise plans and motivations, although highly deviant ones.

The second aspect that is usually missing in 'movie villains' is that, in spite of the fact that many of Cleckley's cases were described as intelligent (1982), later studies have failed to find a correlation between psychopathy and intelligence (Hare & Neumann, 2008). Therefore, the unusually high intelligence of

movie villains makes them unsuitable to illustrate real-life psychopathy.

A third limitation is that it is common for movies to show a complete absence of true change in villains with psychopathic traits. This may be seen as a realistic reflection of the persistence of psychopathic traits, especially emotional and interpersonal aspects of psychopathy. However, in reality, many people who have antisocial behaviours and psychopathic traits are able to make changes in their behaviours, or struggle to do so.

Teaching psychopathy through movies

What is the point?

If a teacher of psychiatry decides to use a movie to illustrate psychopathy, he or she needs to have a clear idea about the purpose of the teaching activity, and to consider problematic issues.

First of all, the simple point that people with psychopathic personality traits feel entitled to behave in ways that violate the rights of others and society's rule in general is not likely to be new to students. So simply showing a movie of an exploitative and abusive person is not likely to be sufficient or even very interesting to students.

The question is, what are the messages that you as a teacher wish to convey to your students about psychopaths?

In clinical practice, medical students, nurses, psychologists and social workers are likely to meet patients with any range of psychopathic traits. In prison settings, a substantial number of antisocial inmates are found. Outside of prisons, substance abuse treatment settings are among the settings where a very high degree of antisocial or psychopathic co-morbidity can be expected, as the co-occurrence of antisocial personality disorder and substance use disorders is strongly elevated (Grant et al., 2004). Even among patients with mood and anxiety disorders, rates of antisocial personality disorder are elevated, with the highest co-occurrence in mania and agoraphobia (Grant et al., 2005).

Given that psychopathic traits are likely to lead to homelessness and unemployment, those working with labour market programmes and homeless people are also likely to encounter a substantial number of patients with psychopathic traits.

Below are some examples of points that may carry importance for clinical practice in relation to learning about antisocial personality disorder:

- Understanding the interpersonal dynamics that emerge around antisocial patients. How professional or private relationships with antisocial patients tend to alternate between fascination and

distance. Some antisocial patients can at times be charming and be very successful at manipulating professionals working with them. At other times the patients may act in ways that offend or intimidate those trying to help them.

- Understanding the inner complexity of antisocial patients. The contradictions between fearlessness that is sometimes expressed as recklessness on the one hand, and serious anxiety and insecurity on the other, and the contradictions between perfectionism and over-controlled traits on the one hand, and impulsivity and disinhibition on the other.
- The vacillating goals and strategies of antisocial and psychopathic patients. While some psychopathic patients may have a very consistent life of antisocial behaviour, many do struggle to change continuously or periodically. Such attempts to change may for instance occur after a crisis or be triggered by a romantic relationship. However, often the antisocial strategies are not abandoned, but put to new use, making the pro-social goals of antisocial patients difficult to pursue.
- Learning about self-protection in dealing with antisocial patients. This includes protection against assault and threats, but is not limited to physical security. Equally important is dealing with being manipulated in various ways, being lied to, and experiencing over-involvement as well as distancing oneself from patients.
- Understanding how alcohol and drugs may exacerbate and trigger antisocial behaviour, but at the same time acknowledging that substance use is not a full explanation of antisocial behaviours. This is especially important in relation to patients who have ceased or reduced substance use, and who have a history of antisocial behaviours. Such patients are likely to continue antisocial behaviours at a lower level, putting them at high risk of relapse to substance abuse.

Examples of movies

Space does not allow examples of all of these issues. However, some examples will be given relating to two important issues: the difficulties of change, and interpersonal relations with people with psychopathic traits.

In the following I shall review three examples of movies, and describe how some points may be taken from these movies. The two movies are *Good Will Hunting* by Gus Van Sant (1997), *Monster* by Patty Jenkins (2003) and *The Talented Mister Ripley* by Anthony Minghella (1999). All three films go beyond the narrative of the human monster, and take a genuine interest in persons with psychopathic personality features.

Showing the process and difficulties of change

Antisocial patients sometimes struggle to change their behaviour, yet fail to do so. One movie that illustrates an antisocial patient struggling to change, and all the challenges associated with helping a patient with strong antisocial traits, is *Good Will Hunting* (Sant, 1997). The movie portrays a young man, Hunting, from a working-class background. He was abused as a child, and has a long track record of antisocial behaviours. He is a janitor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but has an unusual gift for mathematics. After a professor discovers Hunting's gifts, the professor attempts to teach him, but Hunting's antisocial behaviours make him a very difficult student. The professor therefore refers Hunting to therapy with a colleague, a psychotherapist. The colleague establishes a good rapport with Hunting, but experiences several setbacks. The film gives a very realistic portrayal of the difficulties of maintaining a therapeutic relationship with an antisocial patient. Several scenes show both the ways in which Hunting's fear of change and his relationships with friends and family pose serious challenges for his change of behaviour, and how his antisocial behaviour is triggered by his anxieties.

Another film that portrays an unsuccessful struggle to change, is the movie *Monster* by Patty Jenkins (2003). The movie is based on the true story of Aileen Wuornos, a female serial killer. Wuornos had a difficult childhood with abuse and substance abuse, growing up with alcoholic grandparents. She became a prostitute by the age of thirteen, and pregnant in the same year. The movie focuses on the nine-month period, during which Wuornos began robbing and murdering her clientele. When we first encounter her, Wuornos is spending her time alternating between drinking in bars and working as a street prostitute. In a bar, she meets and falls in love with a young woman, Tyria Moore. Wuornos is vulnerable, but also aggressive and boasting.

The movie also portrays how Wuornos has a desire to build up a normal relationship with her female spouse, Tyria Moore. In order to normalize her life, Wuornos applies for jobs, but fails to get them because of her entirely unrealistic employment plans and tells several lies during the job interviews. Another factor that causes her to fail is her low tolerance for frustration. Also, while Wuornos appears to have strong feelings for Moore, Wuornos quickly becomes more and more exploitative of Moore, and Wuornos appears more or less unaware of the ways in which she is putting pressure on her partner. Her murders appear to be at least partly motivated by her desire to avoid having sex with men for money, in order to stay faithful

to her partner. Thus, even when trying to change her life around, Wuornos relies on antisocial strategies, ultimately causing her attempts at changing to lead to a very serious escalation of antisocial behaviours.

Thus, *Monster* portrays a woman who displays the full range of antisocial behaviours and empathy deficits. While the Wuornos of the film may be slightly less psychopathic than the real Wuornos (Myers, Gooch, & Meloy, 2005), it does illustrate her antisocial and borderline personality well (Hesse, Schlieuwe, & Thomsen, 2005).

Showing the interpersonal relationships with a psychopathic person

People with psychopathic and similar traits tend to produce adverse emotional reactions in people dealing with them (Thylstrup & Hesse, 2008). They do so because they display aggression, but also because they violate norms surrounding normal interaction. But they are also at times able to form relationships with people.

The Talented Mister Ripley brilliantly illustrates the use of charm and deceit to form relationships, and the range of reactions to the psychopathic person (Minghella, 1999). In the movie, a young New York lavatory attendant, Tom Ripley, borrows a Princeton jacket to play the piano at a garden party in a wealthy estate. When the father of a recent Princeton grad chats Tom up, Tom pretends to know the son. The father offers \$1,000 to go to Italy to convince the son, Dickie, to return home. In Italy, Tom makes contact with the son, Dickie, and Marge, Dickie's fiancée. He pretends to share their interests and soon finds himself soaked in luxury. Tom's talents include lying, impressions and forgery, so when the handsome and confident Dickie tires of Tom, Tom goes to extreme lengths to make Dickie's privileges his own.

He is not only extremely charming, but he is able to connect with Dickie's father, because he meets him at a vulnerable point: the father is worried about his son, and misses him, and as Tom is there at the right time, the father, who is usually not a naïve man, allows himself to be betrayed. Tom shows himself able to seize the moment again and again, but does not have clear long-term plans or ambitions, beyond getting comfort and recognition. And at the same time his lack of empathy stands between him and actually forming relationships with the others, and Marge clearly senses that something is not right about Tom. Marge, who is not vulnerable, is not fooled by Tom's stories and limited charm. And, like many real-world people with psychopathic traits, Tom may make a good first impression, but turns

out to be less interesting to those around him in the long run.

In the movie *Monster* discussed above, we see how Moore is fascinated by antisocial and not very attractive, Wuornos, because Wuornos fulfils needs that she has: she wants to explore her own homosexual desires, she wants to get away from her family, and she needs someone to support her emotionally, as her living as a homosexual cuts her off from literally all of her sources of social support (Jenkins, 2003). But Moore's expectations of reciprocity and mutual respect are not being satisfied. Wuornos falls short of satisfying Moore's needs, because her antisocial strategies are incompatible with a fully satisfying relationship.

Putting movies about antisocial personality disorder into context

The follow-up of such movies is crucial to the learning process. Discussion points must relate to the type of learning points that are the intended curriculum for the teaching activity.

Discussion points could be:

- How does the behaviour of the psychopathic character in the film influence the others in the film? And what motivations, character traits, and situations leave the others vulnerable to the influence of the person?
- What motivates the psychopathic character to try to change? And what impedes the change?
- What does substance use do in the film? How does change in substance use change the behaviour of the psychopathic character? And how does it not?
- What is consistent and what is inconsistent about the motivations and goals of the psychopathic character?
- How is this character similar and different to patients or clients that you meet in actual practice?

Conclusion

Psychopaths in the movies are often portrayed as predatory monsters. If movies are to be used to teach students about psychopathy, the movie should go beyond the monster, and portray issues relating to psychopathy such as relationship issues and the factors that hinder change of antisocial behaviours and the emotional and relationship problems that are related to psychopathy.

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