

### **So, Is Psychopathy Simply a Big Juicy Nothingburger?**

Maibom's paper is not only a refreshing read, but philosophers unfamiliar with the deeper, and more intricate debates in psychopathy research will find her contribution highly informative. The paper does exactly what it promises: it emphasizes the murky complexities we find in psychopathy studies, forcing the reader to "rethink the common wisdom about psychopathy" (p. 63). To be sure, where many philosophers have arguably been too quick to accept the gross simplifications about human dispositions and agency that we find in the classic psychopathy anecdotes, Maibom insists on an alternative narrative, one that deflates the harrowing and gloomy picture of psychopaths as morally blind intraspecies predators (as promoted by, e.g. McCord & McCord 1964; Hare 1993, and so forth).

So, what exactly is it about psychopaths that Maibom invites us to *rethink*?

Generally speaking, Maibom takes issue with the various *categorical* investigations of psychopathy, for instance, that psychopaths are categorically lacking certain psychological dispositions (e.g. empathy) or that psychopaths belong to a categorical class of abnormal psychology (i.e. homogenous disorder). The more specific and weighty argument in Maibom's paper is perhaps her survey of the evidence in empathy-research, which has consistently shown that diagnosed psychopaths are not *lacking* the capacity to empathize, but appear only to have degree-specific differences compared to controls.

The *philosophical* implications of such discoveries, Maibom suggests, may be profound. Where philosophers have often sought to argue that psychopathic psychology might give away answers to thorny philosophical issues (e.g. internalism vs. externalism; moral rationalism vs. sentimentalism), Maibom calls for a more hesitant, but also, a more philosophically interesting approach. Moreover, psychopathy studies appear to suggest that human moral dispositions are much more complex and spectrumized than initially assumed, and for that reason, we should instead take these findings as an invitation to rethink fundamental questions pertaining to moral psychology. Maybe psychopathy research cannot solve old philosophical conundrums after all, but it sure seems to stimulate more multifarious ideas about moral psychology. At least, that was my take-away from reading Maibom's contribution.

In the following, I would like to suggest that Maibom's paper – aside from communicating an encouraging call for better philosophizing – may inspire an equally strong, yet undermining message about the status of psychopathy research. What I would like to suggest is that Maibom's narrative appears to drastically *deflate* the concept of psychopathy. Perhaps the phenomenon we refer to as "psychopaths" or "psychopathic personality" is one big *nothingburger*?

To sketch my point about Maibom's paper, I need to backtrack to where psychopathy research begins, namely, in the psychiatric clinic. The phenomenon in question (i.e. actual so-called psychopaths) are *real* individuals; they are people who, in some way or the other, have ended up

in front of a clinical psychiatrist. The research begins with this mundane happening: a clinician telling him- or herself that there is something “off” about their client. The client is not delusional (i.e. insane), in fact, the client appears to be averagely sound and seemingly normal on most human parameters. However, the client strikes the clinician as thoroughly detached from the moral norms that (presumably) guide *normal* human behavior. This is where the concept of psychopathy is wielded, signifying a group of people in the psychiatric clinic who, to clinicians, appears to be abnormal in terms of moral judgment, orientation, and behavior. This is the psychopathy-paradigm’s *phenomenon!*

Now, when scientifically inquiring about such a phenomenon the null hypothesis that researchers try to reject is that so-called “psychopaths” are normal (compared to controls). Thus, when no significant evidence has been found for rejecting this null hypothesis, it follows that the clinicians – those who have mutually observed and recognized the phenomenon – are all mistaken in terms of assuming that said patients are *abnormal*. Failing to reject the null hypothesis implies that, to the best of our knowledge, there is no psychological difference under the surface of observed, seeming differences in the patient class. That is, while it may be that clinicians are correctly pointing out that there are individuals who deviate from others in their clinic, they are wrong in suggesting that there is something fundamentally *abnormal*, *pathological*, or *disorderly* about these individuals.

Such a discovery should perhaps not surprise us, since humans (including psychologists) make these mistakes all the time. For instance, we might have thought that the *nerds* or the *hippies* in High School belonged to distinct abnormal groups of individuals, but, of course, if we started subjecting these individuals to psychological testing, we would be certain to find no (psychologically) significant evidence for our hypothesis, merely discovering superficial variations of human dispositions, capacities, behavior, interests, etc. All within the spectrumized margins of what is humanly *normal*.

I believe that Maibom’s paper supports an alternative perspective, that is, a story about what happens when we begin to psychologically analyze a phenomenon that has been *wrongfully assumed* to be an instance of abnormality. As Maibom rightfully notices, the differences we find in so-called psychopaths are not strictly speaking unusual: having empathic *blind spots* is actually normal, we all have them. So perhaps it is not farfetched to suggest that when (some) clinical psychologists are flabbergasted and stunned by the seeming lack of empathy in “psychopathic” clients, this clinical astonishment is simply a result of a bias; the clinician thinks a lack of empathy is unusual, when, in fact, it is not. And this bias will then give rise to the plentiful, yet misleading narratives we find in psychopathy research about disordered social predators and their helpless victims (e.g. Hare 1993).

I think most of Maibom’s discussions could have supported such an alternative view, for example, her discussion of diagnosed psychopaths not being a homogenous group, or that cognitive theories of psychopathy are not substantially corroborated by empirical evidence. In addition, Maibom could also have brought up equally deflating findings: (1) that psychopathy assessment tools (e.g. the PCL-R) are only weakly correlated with violence prediction, and that this correlation is *wholly* substantiated by measuring behavior, not personality (for a meta-analysis: Yang, Wong, & Coid 2010); (2) that there is no solid evidence of the *instrumental-*

*violence hypothesis* (for a meta-analysis: Blais, Solodukhin, & Forth 2014); (3) that there is scarce evidence of diagnosed psychopaths having any fundamental problems with moral judgements (for a meta-analysis: Marshall, Watts, & Lilienfeld 2018); and (4) that neurological evidence is largely discrepant, yielding no compelling uniform conclusions (for a meta-analysis: Griffiths & Jalava 2017).

This is not to say that there are no people “out there” committing the horrendous acts we associate with psychopathy. That would be to deny reality. What I am suggesting is that these violent misfits are *normal* human beings. We do not need a scientifically mysterious term for such people, we can just call them *bad*, as in bad people are those who do bad things. Like Forrest Gump says in the 1994 motion picture of the same name, “stupid is as stupid does”.

I am not sure, though, whether Maibom would agree with this conclusion, which will certainly be deemed too controversial for many (forensic) psychologists. Because, for one, it suggests that 99% of all forensic psychology textbooks need to be re-written. Also, while Maibom is nuancing the canonic view of psychopathy, I still read her paper as suggesting that the psychopathy phenomenon is an instance of abnormality, since she frequently invokes terms such as “disorder” and “impairment”.

Nevertheless, Maibom’s paper joins a set of novel contributions that seek to promote alternative philosophical inferences from the psychopathy literature (e.g. Jalava & Griffiths, 2017; Jurjako & Malatesti, 2016). We should welcome and celebrate this development in the paradigm. If Maibom had taken her analysis one step further, and considered the full-fledged deflationary account, as proposed above, she may have been forced to re-think another philosophical inference, namely, the *ethical* one. Surely, the term “psychopathy” is not a neutral medical term; it conveys strong connotations about chronic antisocial behavior and nasty, callous personality traits. It does not take a philosopher to speculate that such a label may have unfortunate stigmatizing effects when it is thrown around in court rooms and parole hearings at the whim of shrewd prosecutors. As science yields evidence seemingly deflating our philosophical and psychological assumptions about psychopathy, we may speculate that thoughtful papers like Maibom’s preempts a debate that will soon hit the forensic practice; and I, for one, anticipate it will be a contentious one.

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