

# The psychopath in the corner office: A multigenre

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[Correction added on 16 December 2020, after online publication: Table 1 has been updated.]

## Abstract

Workplace bullies can be found in all organizations. Using a Narrative Inquiry and Arts-Based Research methodological framework, this article shares the findings of a multiyear study in which 185 women, in 27 states, and 15 countries share their stories of workplace abuse. Narrative Inquiry reflects the multilayered complexity of people's lived lives by inviting research texts that utilize diverse genres and mediums to tell the story of the findings. Art-Based Research invites the researcher to mine for meaning on a level not fully accessible through traditional narratives and then share out insights in genres that generate deep cognitive dissonance while evoking empathy and urging response. The stories, poems, book review, observational field notes, dialogues, lists, charts, and visual genres were crafted by the researcher as representations of the saturated themes that emerged from the data and are supported by other empirical research. This is a multigenre that tells the stories of successful psychopaths and the resilient women who survived them.

## KEYWORDS

art-based research, feminist research, gender, narrative inquiry, psychopathy, workplace bullying

## Psychopath

An individual, often grandiose and charming, who manipulates, sabotages, and harms others for personal gain or entertainment while experiencing no guilt or remorse for her actions. She lies, even when unnecessary, and is incapable of sustaining healthy collaborations or relationships. Unbound by ethical standards and societal norms, her behavior is often impulsive and reckless. (Fix & Fix, 2015; Gao & Raine, 2010).

### Successful psychopath

A psychopath who manages to stay out of jail and rise through the ranks of her organization (Babiak & Hare, 2019; Boddy, 2015).

To the victim: "You are not to return to campus. Your security clearance has been cut off, and your technology access deactivated."

To the victim's co-workers: "You are not to talk to her. If you do, you will become part of the process."

Co-workers to each other: What does that even mean? It means we will be next if we defend her. I have already forgotten who she is. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a school administrator)

Dear Reader,

This is a guide to psychopaths. Not the ones who mutilate their victims and stack them neatly in the walls of their suburban home at the end of the cul-de-sac and then offer a friendly wave to their unexpected neighbor as they get into their 2007 blood-stained Volvo. No, this is a field guide for those successful psychopaths who sit in the corner office, lead schools, direct hospitals, guide nonprofits, and manage hedge funds. This is a cheat sheet for psychopaths who stay out of prison and maintain a board seat as part of their successful ruse. Welcome to their circus (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010).

She overheard the Marketing Director whisper in my ear, "I hope one day you will take her place." The proclamation launched her covert battle cry in which she systematically disassembled my reputation until I was left with small pieces of shrapnel to represent who I used to be. She took my confidence, my courtships, my creations, and my career. Each time she cut me, the sides of her mouth rose, emanating undisguisable glee, joyous in my agony. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a social worker)

## 1 | THE SETUP

I hear you. What happened next? Where do you place your pain?

I am an art-based and narrative inquiry researcher. I study what people have to say and make sense of their tellings through storying across genres. Story is a verb. It is the act of saying I am. For the last 2 years, I have asked 185 women, in 27 states, and 15 countries to tell of a time they were manipulated, sabotaged, gaslighted, or locked out of opportunities at work. Then flip the script and share the counter-narrative of a culture that encouraged them to question and create. To deepen the excavation, I conducted follow-up, unstructured interviews, lasting from 1 to 3 hours, with 22 of the original participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The transcriptions and field notes from each survey and interview were coded for emerging themes. Overlapping themes were collapsed together. The data were then rewritten in story format using poetry and prose, tapping into Austin's (2018) "performative imagination" and using Kostera's (2006) method of narrative collage.

The bolded quotes intermixed throughout this multigenre are examples of Flash Fiction, capturing the essence of individual, extended interview conversations. Flash Fiction encapsulates the world in a format that is both naked and microscopic. It "is simply a story in miniature, a work of art carved on a grain of rice—something of import to the artist or writer that is confined and reduced, either by design or outcome, into a small square space using the structural devices of prose line and paragraph form with the purpose of creating an intense, emotional impact"

(Masih, 2009, p. 9). The stories, poems, book review, observational field notes, dialogues, lists, charts, and visual genres were crafted by me as representations of the saturated themes that emerged from the data and are supported by other empirical research (Faulkner, 2009; Leavy, 2016).

I tell these women's stories through a feminist lens, because I am a feminist and these are the stories of how women's experiences are shaped by power (Chesler, 2003; Cooper, 2019; Dancyger, 2019; Kelly, 2020; Woodiwiss, 2017). Kelly (2020) describes feminist research as that which situates knowledge in place and circumstance, explores the intersectionality of multiple identities, demands reflexivity, addresses inequality, insists on political action, adds to the critical discourse and scholarship, and makes transparent the researcher's own stories and connections to the work. Ultimately, the charge of feminist research is to engage in provocative discourse that enacts change (Chemaly, 2019; Dancyger, 2019; Kelly & Gurr, 2020; Traister, 2018; Woodiwiss, 2017). After all, "Feminism, for us, is concerned with equality for all women and human beings, not about individual women reproducing male patterns of privilege and exercising power over everybody else" (Fotaki & Harding, 2018, p. 26).

I tell these women's stories through verse, prose, and visuals—a diversity and fluidity of form inspired by narrative inquiry and art-based research. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), "Humans are storytelling organisms, who individually and collectively lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p. 2). The process is both recursive and reflective, starting in the community listening to the storying of women, moving to field notes which are rewritten in story format including plot and characters, and culminating in collaborative research text whose insights inform cultures (Czarniawska, 2004). Narrative inquiry reflects the multilayered complexity of people's lived lives by inviting research texts that utilize diverse genres and mediums to tell the story of the findings, including metaphors, poetry, flash fiction, and narrative collages (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2009; Kostera, 2006).

Art-based research invites the researcher to mine for meaning on a level not fully accessible through traditional narrative and then share out insights in genres that generate deep cognitive dissonance while evoking empathy and urging response (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Barrett, 2011; De Vries, 2007; Eisner, 2006; Kostera, 1997; Pelias, 2011).

For this specific telling, I zoom in on stories of the worst offenders, the ones who not only bullied their victims but dragged their careers, dignity, and confidence so far into the woods as to render parts of their lives unrecoverable. These are the men and women who swallowed the pills of neoliberal philosophy and morphed into what Bloom and Rhodes (2018) describe as moral hazards, selfish hoarders, and contributors to the present-day plague of mass alienation. This is a multigenre that tells the stories of those successful psychopaths and the resilient women who survived them.

I thought it might be fun to have a protégé until others took notice and wanted to see how she looked in my crown. Complete reputational demise and enforced silence was my only insurance policy. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a teacher talking about her principal)

## 1.1 | A destruction in verse

Have you seen her?

Have you heard her?

She has something

Hire her

Me

Yes

I couldn't. I'm happy here

Come

More money, more prestige, more

Appeal to her ego

Yes

I love it here

We love her here

She is

Taking charge

Asking questions

Digging for solutions

Loved

Celebrated

Perhaps, she should run the office instead of

YOU

She sees

She hears

She knows

TOO much

Ruin her

Slowly

Gossip

Manipulation

Sabotage

What's wrong?

Why are doing this?

Gaslight

Because you were our third choice

Because people don't like you

Because you are weak

Stop

This is my career

This is how I care for my family

Help

Ignore her in the halls, delete her from your contacts, share the story that she is the Problem

Destroy her

Or

You will be destroyed

She is the problem

We are glad she is

gone

Look

A shiny new girl

(Fowles & Dindo, 2009; Gullhaugen & Sakshaug, 2019; Hare, 2002; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Verona & Vitale, 2006, pp. 415–436).

I worked in the office for ten years. I had a group of women I ate lunch with each day and exercised with each afternoon. Some weekends we would go out for drinks. We told each other about our families and what we were struggling with inside our hearts. Then one day, our boss started to target me. Almost immediately, I was excommunicated from the group. They took me off the group text, sat

at a new table, and went running without me after work. When the abuse got too much and I finally quit, I reached out to them for support. There was radio silence. They knew my character, my heart, and my hard work yet remained quiet as they stood witness to the stripping of my dignity. My psychopath boss hurt my career, but my “friends” broke me. To this day, the abandonment haunts my soul. It is traumatizing to be ostracized from a community. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a project manager)

## 2 | THE CYCLE

This is how it works. One day you walk by, and the psychopath sees your shine. You glitter. And she likes that. She thinks you will be fun to play with and perhaps help her be shiny too. So she plucks you, right out of the spot where you felt welcome and known. And there is grace, and dinners, and disclosures inside of what feels like a friendship. Except it is not. Psychopaths are not capable of relationships. Over time, your shine shadows her. So she stops playing with you. She puts her first game away and starts another. It is called Sabotage. It is played with the chess pieces of manipulation and gossip. Each day, she layers a new coat of paint atop your reputation and opportunities. To make sure you crumble, she meticulously removes each of your support beams. You watch in bewilderment at how she plays the game. First, she threatens the people who work for you and then the people who work with you. You are growing into lonely. Standing by yourself. Stripped naked on the playground as people gawk. One day you become so small you seep into the creases. All mentions of you vanish. This whitewashing is necessary in order for the accomplices to live with what they have done. The next day, the psychopath selects her new victim (Namie, 2014; Namie & Namie, 2011).

After I was pushed out, I watched the organization in a type of morbid obsession, looking to see what would happen next. Though I received a large settlement for the abuse, my boss continued to bad mouth me and make it sound like I was fired. She would tell people I had a Human Resource issue. Which I most certainly did. Her. I hoped the higher-ups would attempt to clean house once they learned the truth. To my surprise, they quickly hired someone new. In a little over a year, she had left too. Instead of unpacking and examining the ugly, the Marketing Director continued to develop her skills as a fiction writer. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a college professor)

## 3 | THE TRUTH

I decided to tell the truth. The one I stored for 2 years in the top drawers of the mahogany desk. Each day the psychopath would flatter. Lie. Threaten. And I simply smiled—told myself I was fine—yet my warrior's heart heaved from harboring her deceit. In response, I stepped inside myself and shoveled dirt atop the person I used to be. Most victims do that. We hide. Some gain weight as a way to envelope their hurt. Others visit the hospital to lower their blood pressure, heal their heart, or untangle their intestines. One mother told me her adult son threw himself in front of a train to make the pain stop. I gave up eating. I planned to shrink myself until I was too small to target. That is what relentless bullying does. It eats your insides and changes your outsides, and leaves you desperately seeking community. Paradoxically, you are left completely alone. Your peers isolate you onto an island and join ranks with the oppressor in the hope to avoid their own victimization. Your administration and governors step into the basement to map the cover-up. The fear, secrecy, manipulation, and complacency join together to craft an intricate plot that pushes you out and stalemates the organization's psychological safety. The gaslighting mimics the psychological thriller playing at the corner cinema, but this is not a movie, this is a front-row seat to your shattering (Sprague et al., 2013; Stone, Brucato, & Burgess, 2019; Warren et al., 2003).

I watched my legs dangle over the bridge, swaying back and forth as if they too sensed the instability of tomorrow. Hope fell from my pocket, creating a ripple, as it skipped across the surface where I would collide. Soon, I would remember what it feels like to be infinite and alive. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a historian)

#### 4 | WORDS FROM THE WISER

If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive. (Brown, 2012, p. 75)

When I read what other people said, it was the first time I recognized that my pain was not an isolation tank, and that through listening and talking, I could drain her toxicity from my fingers and once again write my story she had claimed authorship over. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with an employee at a nonprofit)

#### 5 | CHAT RADIO'S QUESTION OF THE WEEK: ARE ALL BULLIES PSYCHOPATHS?

Now it's time for our top pick from the mailroom.

Dear Dr Dread, My boss leaves me out of meetings and belittles me in front of colleagues. Could she be a psychopath? Sincerely, Hoping It's Not So.

Dear Hoping It's Not So, It is possible that your boss is a psychopath, the Cadbury Bunny, or simply a bitch. My bet is on the latter. Successful psychopaths are most often bullies, but most bullies are not psychopaths. According to the Namie (2017), the founders of the Workplace Bullying Institute, approximately 19% of people experience bullying on the job. Psychopaths, however, are a much rarer breed that relentlessly pursues their prey and own ambition without the trappings of guilt, conscience, or fear. Psychopaths encapsulate approximately 1% of the general population; 10%–15% of prison inmates; and as much as 4% of organizational leaders according to Babiak et al.'s (2010) study in which they analyzed the interviews, personal records, performance assessments, 360° evaluations, and salaries of individuals identified by their companies to attend management development programs. Sincerely, Dr Dread.

We all loathed and feared her, yet when she walked by we stood upright in a consolatory salute, outwardly pledging our loyalty to a commission we did not support. She feigned over board members and people of influence who pulled her up the ladder, not because they liked her, but because she emanated confidence that told them to believe. A head-on view revealed a mask split down the middle, offering onlookers opposing sides depending on how she stood to benefit from the interaction. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with an engineer)

#### 6 | FIRST IMPRESSIONS: A CONVERSATION FROM THE TEACHER'S LOUNGE

September 2019

What do you think of Sherrie?

She is an eloquent dresser, confident, with an air of grandiosity. She easily engaged me in conversation but not without establishing an immediate hierarchy and asserting her expertise on everything from fundraising to curriculums. By the end of our 4-minute conversation, I felt smaller, as if she had stepped atop my clogs in an effort to push me several inches into the linoleum flooring.

June 2020

What do you think of Sherrie?

When we first met, I thought she was simply socially inept, unaware that she comes across as pompous and shallow. Now, however, I see it is more calculated than that. In less than 12 months, I watched her systematically destroy Tory's career. She disinvited her to meetings, withheld information, took credit for her work, badmouthed her to superiors, and created rumors about misdoings. The culture here is now one of fear as we each step lightly as to avoid being targeted next (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Rime, Bouvy, Leborgne, & Rouillon, 1978; Shao & Lee, 2017). It is as if overnight the culture of the common good has been whitewashed by a backdrop of neoliberalism in which profits and personal gain have been placed atop a monument as a symbol of ultimate truth. We are instructed to bow down and worship, quietly of course (Fisher, 2009; Fleming, 2015; Standing, 2020).

The chaos kept us guessing. We never knew if we were arriving at a party, a wake, or a cover-up for last week's boardroom assassination. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a hospital administrator)

## 7 | THE MADNESS CONTINUUM

Have you ever walked into a Home Depot and casually collected approximately 147 color panels? You know those shiny rectangles that start with Muted Desert and finish with Brilliant Sunshine. Psychopathy, too, exists alongside a continuum with narcissism and Machiavellianism—collectively called the Dark Triad. Narcissists are egocentric and entitled, whereas Machiavellians are cold and deeply manipulative. Psychopaths anchor the far right of the continuum, characterized by antisocial behaviors and remorselessness (Jones & Paulhus, 2010, pp. 249–267; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & Story, 2013; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012).

She told the development officer how to raise money, the lawyer how to litigate, the banker how to distribute funds, and the project manager how to create. Though in reality, she was only credentialed in manipulation. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a college professor)

## 8 | MUSEUM DOCENT

Here we have a psychopath, a rare breed in societal's wild. You can identify this creature by her stride—confident and bold—owning the landscape. She is charming and polished, adorning a fitted wool coat anchored by Italian boots and accessorized with a fine grain leather clutch. In conversation, she ticks off lists of accomplishments, specific enough to evoke awe but too general to confirm—skating the boundary between embellishment and deception. In her presence, you feel seen and known as if you have traveled a lifetime together. It is a ruse. Void of consciousness, she scrutinizes those who impede her spotlight, identifies their vulnerabilities, and uses the intel to connect in ways that mimic friendship. It's a war trick of the trade, know thy enemy, so she will show you how to destroy her (Brooks, 2017; Brzović, Jurjako, & Šustar, 2017; Hare, 1993).



To beat back the community's criticisms over my departure, she constructed a narrative, the lie lightly lifting from her tongue, "She stole from the company." My lawyer said it is always the first storyline bullies manufacture. She floated the story discreetly, seeing if it would land and stick. Each day, she added to the plotline, attempting to paint me as the villain, a concocted story that got its sea legs since questioning the writer was forbidden. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with an employee in a midsize corporation)

## 9 | THE "PROVE IT" MANUAL

So, is she an agitated cat, Queen Bee, or a successful psychopath?

The primary measure for psychopathy is the Hare Psychopathy Checklist—Revised (PCL-R), which zooms in on four correlated dimensions: interpersonal (glibness, superficial charm, manipulation, exaggerated self-worth, pathological lying), affective (lack of empathy, failure to feel remorse, refusal to accept responsibility for one's actions, shallow affect), lifestyle (high arousal needs, impulsivity, unrealistic goal setting, parasitic relationships), and antisocial (childhood delinquency, lack of behavior control, and criminal versatility) (Hare, 2003). The PCL-R and accompanying case study is administered by a trained clinician (Le, Woodworth, Gillman, Hutton, & Hare, 2017). It consists of 20 open-ended interview questions that seek information and patterns across a participant's lifespan, as opposed to zooming in on a single event or point in time (Skeem & Cooke, 2010b). Each answer is scored on a 0–2 continuum, with 0 signifying never and a 2 indicative of behaviors that pervade all aspects of the person's life (Blais, Forth, & Hare, 2017). So, what scores award you a psychopath name tag? A score of 30 and above signifies a high-level psychopath, whereas a score between 21 and 29 is indicative of a person with moderate psychopathic tendencies. To put that in context, the average person comes in below 5. Put another way, approximately 1% of the general population are psychopaths and approximately 15% of incarcerated men and 10% of incarcerated women are psychopaths (Babiak & Hare, 2019; Blais et al., 2017; Gacono, 2015; Hare 1993, 2003; Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Skeem & Cooke, 2010a; Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013).

## 10 | SUCCESSFUL PSYCHOPATH: AN EXPLORATION OF SELF

I am a successful psychopath

Patent leather heels propped atop the glass desktop in my corner office

Business card reads—*Boss*

Intentional in hurt and emptied of remorse

I thrill seek

At your expense

Fed by a neoliberal—success-seeking culture, credit cards, and self-imposed power

Lacking in connections but heavily connected

Three hardwiring adaptations keep me from incarceration

One—I possess a rev in my autonomic nervous system that allows me to intuit the feelings of others and pretend to care—yet I don't

Two—I muzzle my impulsivity and use the stored energy to grab onto the heels of the woman who can drag me to the top—trampling alongside the back of the girl I stabbed on my ascent

Three—my working memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-regulation—all stored in my drawer marked executive functioning—enables me to operate in a predictable environment while actively destroying projects, deals, and reputations that make me slow

Lacking empathy and remorse for my predatory action

I do not fret

I skip the apologies

And—create chaos with concocted emergencies to cover my tracks

With a steady pulse and decreased heart rate, I trip the new girl in the hall, with the ease of sipping tea

Power

Privilege

Predator

In the evening, I hang up Cleckley's (1941) mask on the back of my bathroom door

I am a successful psychopath

(Babiak & Hare, 2019; Fleming, 2015; Fowles & Dindo, 2009; Ishikawa, Raine, Lencz, Bihrlé, & Lacasse, 2001; Lilienfeld, Watts, Francis-Smith, Berg, & Latzman, 2015).

## 11 | CLECKLEY'S MASK OF SANITY: A BOOK REVIEW FROM 1941 (FICTIONAL)

The American psychologist, Hervey M. Cleckley (1941), in his new book, *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Clarify Some Issues About the So-called Psychopathic Personality*, has fallen to his knees and walked into the tilt-a-whirl of psychopaths. Collecting field notes from the locked rooms of institutions and using the pages to create the foundation of what will become the study of psychopathy. Cleckley describes the ways in which pretty monsters drift amongst us, hollowed of emotions, their flawed wiring overriding internal regulating structures. They present behind a mask that mimics the most appealing parts of humanity while plotting our demise.

## 12 | ZOOLOGIST'S OBSERVATIONAL FIELD NOTES (FICTIONAL)

### 12.1 | Fundraiser

She scans the room for importance, sizing the stairsteps to the top. She offers him a hand and lists accomplishments that are not her own. She presents herself as an expert in a field she has never taken the time to learn. When he digs deeper, she pivots to new prey.

### 12.2 | Home

She enters the home of her fourth husband. With each cycle, she switches the pictures out. Psychopaths are known for their fleeting relationships and parasitic lifestyle.

### 12.3 | Office

She counts her trophies, motivated exclusively by the prize, shucking off risk and pain to claim her ultimate recognition and reward. The sign "Mass Corruption" hangs atop her desk. Her total disregard for the common good inflicts depredation on her targets and community.

### 12.4 | Cafeteria

She takes stock, attempting to identify her next victim. Who is most likely to threaten her throne? She passes over the woman to her left, for she lacks social capital and hits back. The one on the right captures her attention. That one is beloved, innovative, and bold. Yes, she is the one to cut.

### 12.5 | Morning meeting

Each day, she holds court at 9:30 a.m.—detailing whom to impress, whom to exploit, whom to manipulate, and whom to ice out. She sits atop the tallest chair at the rectangular table, surrounded by pawns desperate to hold small pieces of her power. She tells the Communication Director whom to slander, the Technology Director whose work to steal, and the Project Manager how to create the presentation she will later claim as her own. The meeting concludes with reminders for cover-ups, keeping her hands clean. Dirtied, the pawns get up and carry out their duties. They are the wheel cogs that keep her rolling (Dutton, [2013](#); Forouzan & Cooke, [2005](#); Lorenz & Newman, [2002](#); O'Boyle et al., [2013](#); Schyns, [2015](#)).

## 13 | T-SHIRT LOGO

Style over substance

## 14 | VACANCY: A POEM

Inherent defect

Miswiring of the prefrontal lobe and amygdala

Disconnected

Recognizing emotions but void of concern

It is not that she doesn't understand but that she doesn't care

The carrot dangles

Consequences are inconsequential in reward's pursuit

She easily engages

Builds houses that look like friendship

Rooms empty

If you notice the void

She pulls on her cape labeled V for victim

Whispers, "I am misunderstood"

Offering excellent explanations for the dead buried in the basement

Holding the shovel, she inquires, "Would you prefer to get on message or join them?"

(Skeem, Polaschek, Patrick, & Lilienfeld, [2011](#); Sprague, Javdani, Sadeh, Newman, & Verona, [2012](#); Thomas, [2014](#); Walker & Jackson, [2017](#)).

I was the top performer for the ten years before she came. Threatened by my accomplishments, she told the Director of Human Resources, I was incompetent and missing deadlines. She forgot to mention she disinvited me to the meetings in which projects were explained and timelines set. When I attempted to plead my case to HR, I found them to be neither human nor resourceful. Marionette strings entwined their office, each one playing a central role in the puppeteer's script. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a sales representative)

### 14.1 | Why

Why do successful psychopaths get hired?

We live on the outside of ourselves

Value what yells and shines

Clothes, confidence, and comments capture our attention

Cast our vote

Our underside holds the murkiness

Where we choose not to look

They drop their antisocial cards in the top drawer

Occasionally recovered for late-night indulgence behind the screen

The sunlight gifts only grandiosity, charm, and decisiveness

Yet she is

Callus

Impulsive

Enraged

Covertly hidden behind Cleckley's (1941) mask

Which hangs on the back of her office door

Well-meaning managers embrace the "feel good" culture and go with their gut

Hiring or promoting the woman who seems too "good to be true"

So they must act fast

Bypassing committee's concerns

Breaking established interview protocols

Designed to protect us from

Her

The consequences are

Prolonged

Far-reaching

Catastrophic

Once hooked on, "she's the one" candidate selection

Confirmation Bias

Snags shirt collars from looking in new directions

Each one defending their chess move

Despite poor 360 reviews from peers and subordinates

Low scores on agreeableness and follow-through

The successful psychopath

Rises in the ranks

Gliding on charisma and decisiveness

Which veils her

immorality

and

incompetence

The piranha is fully birthed

Taking permanent residence in the corner office

Where she will hunt and dissolve her prey

While touting the company's mission

The firm's brand hung proudly on the wall behind her

She leans back

And

Laughs

(Babiak & Hare, 2019; Babiak et al., 2010; Fisher, 2009; Mullins-Sweatt, Glover, Derefinco, Miller, & Widiger, 2010; Namie & Namie, 2009).

## 15 | THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BOYS AND GIRLS IN THE MADNESS INDUSTRY: REPORTING FROM APRML (A PSYCHOPATH RUINED MY LIFE) NEWS NETWORK

Early research posits that psychopaths lack understanding of others' emotions. Recent work suggests the opposite. Psychopaths possess a heightened understanding of how others feel yet are indifferent to that hurt, putting them in pole position to identify weaknesses and strike their prey. Female psychopaths, in particular, know how to evaluate the social capital of a potential victim and systematically destroy it. Her condition is positively correlated with other diagnoses, including histrionics, borderline, and schizotypal personality disorders (Warren et al., 2003). She is a rarer breed than her male counterpart, reportedly just one out of four, perhaps due to genetic differences or inherent biases within assessment tools most often used to evaluate men (Verona & Vitale, 2006, pp. 415–436; Wynn, Høiseith, & Petterson, 2012). Female psychopaths, in comparison to their male counterparts, score higher on lifestyle and interpersonal features, including manipulateness, impulsivity, and grandiosity yet are lower on antisocial features, such as delinquency and remorselessness (Sprague et al., 2013). She demonstrates an increased need for connection and group affiliation, often recruiting oblivious men or aggressive women to do her dirty work. She distances herself from the perception of malevolence (Gacono & Meloy, 1994). Less likely to resort to violence than men, she exerts power and control through intense and targeted relational aggression, actively attempting to harm another's reputation and career through sabotage, gossip, and ostracization (Wynn et al., 2012). She does her work in the public sphere, humiliating the targets and convincing colleagues to ostracize them from business deals and social functions.

To keep her credibility, the female psychopath practices splitting, presenting herself as the victim and eliciting sympathy, while at the same time, subtly threatening the livelihood and reputation of others if they choose to dispute her carefully curated narrative. Attempts to fight back are met with disproportionate retaliation (Freeman, 2016). Her sense of entitlement and complete lack of remorse helps her to justify her attacks. If a male colleague or confidante attempts to waylay her mission, she may start to sexualize their interactions, making him feel like he just might have a chance. Unlike men, her subtle advances are not attempts at dominance or sexual pleasure, but a means for accomplishing a personal goal (Ramsland, 2019). If she mistakenly targets a cheetah who retaliates, she creates swirls of chaos to camouflage her rage and incompetence that dance just below the surface. When the damage becomes evident, bosses, governors, and boards will often engage in elaborate cover-up as an effort to deflect their participation in the damage that ensued. Though a female psychopath may present as more relational and less violent, she is as ruthless and cunning as her male psychopath counterpart, masquerading kindness and care as a tactic to win (Cunliffe et al., 2016, pp. 167–190; see Table 1).

Her weapon was social capital. She systematically dismembered my reputation and deleted me from the social hierarchy. I was completely banished from the tribe. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a medical doctor)

## 16 | I AM A PSYCHOPATH: A TWO VOICE POEM

(Cauce et al., 2000; Forouzan & Cooke, 2005; Lorenz & Newman, 2002; Nicolls & Petrila, 2005; Salekin, Rogers, Ustad, & Sewell, 1998; Sprague et al., 2012; Vitale, Maccoon, & Newman, 2011; Wynn et al., 2012).

TABLE 1 I am a psychopath: A two voice poem

I am a male psychopath	I am a female psychopath
The majority of studies have been done on me	I have been ignored in favor of white, incarcerated men
As a child, I violated rules, hurt animals, and was aggressive with my peers	As a child, I learned to fight with words, bringing my prey to her needs through gossip and manipulation
I externalize	I internalize
As an adult, I am more likely to be physically violent	As an adult, I am more likely to be relationally aggressive
I am a bodily threat	I am a psychological terrorist
I am shaped by my culture, I seek power	I am shaped by my culture, I seek validation and social capital
People describe me as charming and grandiose	People describe me as outgoing and flirtatious
My crimes are scam and fraud	My crimes are manipulation and sabotage
I make power plays to obtain dominance	I play the victim in order to elicit attention and sympathy
I punish through violence and fear	I punish from obliterating your reputation and cutting you out of the social network
I lie	I lie
I am hands-on in my destruction	I get others to do my dirty work
I am in the boardroom and courthouse	I am attracted to lead caring organizations like schools and hospitals
If I get caught, I threaten harm	If I get caught, I play the victim and threaten self-harm as a plea for sympathy
I make up around 15%–30% of the prison population. I am most likely to hurt or kill a stranger (Babiak & Hare, 2019)	I make up about 11% of the prison population—perhaps the test is culturally biased. I am most likely to hurt or kill a person I know (Wynn et al., 2012)
We are calculating, callous, and void of remorse. We are psychopaths	

It arrived one day—my voice—after being lost for almost fourteen months. It knocked on my door and said it was time to disrobe and place my shame on the bench by the door. Standing naked in the hallway, I welcomed myself back. Without apology, I wrote my story across the tissues that use to wipe my tears. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with a nurse)

## 17 | THE LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF KEEPING SUCCESSFUL PSYCHOPATHS ON THE JOB

Over time, the charisma, decisiveness, and veil of perceived knowledge starts to erode the health of the organization—which foreshadows the pending crumble. Welcome to the last chapter entitled: The Fall (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013).

1. *Offloading*: The successful psychopath often possesses a magnetic personality and is lauded as a strong communicator and strategic thinker, yet deep dives reveal low competence, responsibility, and work production. While appearing precocious, she strategically offloads research, presentations, grading, and other preparatory work onto subordinates—all while claiming sole ownership for praised projects she did not engage. Participants are left feeling both duped and taken advantage of—leading to low morale and burnout (Babiak et al., 2010).



2. *Talent loss*: The successful psychopath's intense need to retain the spotlight, take credit for other's work, and target individuals she perceives to threaten her crown—demoralizes superstars who challenge the quotient of what is possible. Sixty-five percent of targeted innovators are fired or driven to seek employment where they can contribute and grow (Namie, 2017). Left behind are box checkers and linear thinkers who are all too happy to sit in mediocrity and carry out her schemes (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).
3. *Fear cultures*: The target dreams of the day the successful psychopath is exposed and forced to answer for her actions. Unfortunately, such reckoning happens less than 11% of the time (Namie, 2014). The successful psychopath wields her control through power plays, threatening employees' job security if they dare to push back. She is an expert at obliterating her targets' reputations and insisting the community ostracizes her victims. Fear of “being next” pervades the work culture. Each day people quietly do her bidding and attempt to stay under her radar and off the targeting range. Innovation ceases as employees follow her directions to “color inside the lines” (Bloom & Rhodes, 2018; Fisher, 2009; Fleming, 2015; Rodríguez-Muñoz, Moreno-Jiménez, Sanz Vergel, & Garrosa Hernández, 2010).
4. *Possible self-destruction*: In some instances, the successful psychopath underestimates the strength of one of her targets and is caught off guard when she bites back. Within that cage fight, the target covertly documents conversations, interactions, and incidents that expose the psychopath's unethical and destructive dealings and then shares them privately or publicly with those equipped to take action. In these moments of reckoning, when it would be in the successful psychopath's best interest to apologize and attempt amends—her impulsivity, vindictiveness, and stimulus-seeking behaviors—cause her to react in a manner that harms herself, the target, and the institution. Though the brave target most often loses her job, her bold voice has created cracks and lingering questions (Furnham et al., 2013; Namie & Namie, 2009; Paulhus & Williams, 2002).
5. *Potential crumbling*: Though the psychopath may successfully toil dismay across the cultures of her work for months, years, or even a decade—sometimes her rash decision making, lack of content competence, and inability to focus on the institution's mission over her own, creates expanding fissures in her community. Over time, her grandiosity and charm weaken the adhesiveness used to secure her mask. The community starts to become weary as she continually fails to close the deal, make the fundraising goal, and put the company's mission over her own—leaving the institution searching for ways to push her quietly out the back door (Cleckley, 1941; Edmondson, 2019; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Shao & Lee, 2017; Walker & Jackson, 2017).
6. *Cover-ups*: The successful psychopath, void of consciousness and remorse, will claim zero responsibility for the potential toppling, but will instead gear up to restart the cycle in a new community who doesn't yet know her name. In her wake, the organization may be left with a battered reputation, low-profit margins, a crumbling capital campaign, and a mounting stack of problems falling out of the closets she strategically kept locked. As the community assesses the aftermath, they often suffer deep shame for their blinders that prevented them from seeing the scope of the problems and their participation in the annihilation of victims. To band-aid their embarrassment, some institutions engage in elaborate cover-ups instead of courageously critiquing the pain, evaluating the damage, searching for ethical solutions, and making amends with victims. These hospitals, schools, and corporations cover, quiet, and perpetuate a culture that is ripe for a new psychopath to rise—for that which we do not claim and process plays forth again (Edmondson, 2019; Namie & Namie, 2011; Verschuere, Crombez, De Clercq, & Koster, 2005).

They sat in a circle with their name tags turned out, debating whether to mop up what spilled or simply place the oriental rug atop the stains and commend each other on the decorating style. (Flash Fiction based on field notes from an interview with an employee in food service)

## 17.1 | Tools of the trade

Successful psychopaths possess an arsenal of tools to systematically discredit, torture, and dismiss their prey. Instead of resorting to physical violence and murder, like their incarcerated counterparts, successful psychopaths use six tools for obliteration: vulnerability, belonging, pawns, splitting, victim shaming, and chaos.

### 17.1.1 | Vulnerability

We are wired to care, daily stepping past our job expectations to support our colleagues, students, and patients. Inside our lockets, we carry the belief of good intentions, offering up our hearts and experiences, believing in the power of relationships. The psychopath exploits our innate decency and uses it first to fabricate a friendship and second to attack—launching poisonous arrows into our most vulnerable spots (Cleckley, 1941; Waal, 2009).

### 17.1.2 | Belonging

We long to be part of a community, to walk into a room where we have purpose and value. Successful psychopaths make space for us at the lunch table and listen intently as we place pieces of our lives on our plate. She cozies up to us on the bench, pleased by our willingness to share. She puts our stories in her purse to be later turned against us and hides our ideas discreetly in her back pocket, gold she will later retrieve and name it her own (Namie & Namie, 2011; Waal, 2009).

### 17.1.3 | Pawns

Day laborers are necessary to sweep the destruction under the rug as the boss saunters by, and someone must be available to pull the trigger when she is busy at the ball pulling the marionette's strings. Pawns are essential to the mission and share colliding characteristics, including a thirst for power mixed gingerly with the packaging of low self-esteem. Executing the psychopath's dirty work gifts them both purpose and power (Hare, 1993; Namie & Namie, 2011).

### 17.1.4 | Splitting

The successful psychopath sees two types of people. Those empowered to advance her mission and those who exist to meet her whimsies. When she walks into a room, she quickly assesses each person's value and tailors her interactions accordingly. She is gracious and grandiose to those deemed valuable and dismissive and unkind to those who sit below her in the amphitheater. Powerful players who dare to cross her, will inevitably see the dark side of her soul. She is an elegant gazelle who transforms into a cheetah when the mission requires claws (Babiak & Hare, 2019; Boddy, 2015; Cleckley, 1941).

### 17.1.5 | Victim shaming

Successful psychopaths target victims who pose a threat to their dictatorship or possess the characteristics and talents the psychopath longs for but cannot obtain. Once she zooms in on her target, she flips the script and crafts an elaborate storyline of why it is the victim's fault she got put on an improvement plan, demoted, or swiftly pushed toward the exit. With strategic precision, she launches a smear campaign to dismantle the victim's confidence,

devastate her career, and leave her excommunicated from the community she once labeled home (Babiak & Hare, 2019; Namie & Namie, 2011).

### 17.1.6 | Chaos

Chaos is the tent that sets atop the successful psychopath's destruction and diverts mounting questions of her own incompetence. Crises give way to microphones where she grandstands and assigns blame to the one who unmasked her first (Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 2002).

## 18 | STEPS FOR CREATING CHAOS

Step 1: Manufacture a crisis and appoint yourself the crisis manager.

Step 2: Blame the target for the decline. It is her fault the capital campaign failed, the project tanked, and the public's disillusionment with the organization is ticking up the flagpole.

Step 3: Shout emergency. Make people panic. Cast yourself as the hero.

Step 4: As the seams unravel, entertain yourself by kicking the dog and shooting arrows at the targets you place on your victims' backs.

Step 5: Secure backroom players to save us from impending doom. Steal ideas, ravage their services, and pat yourself on the back for the company's revival.

Step 6: As the medal is placed around your neck, thank the little people who made it possible and remind them how lucky they are to be part of this community.

Step 7: Take an ax to the camera in the hallway that holds the counter-narrative, labeled truth (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Schyns, 2015).

## 19 | WITNESSING

Dear David Kessler,

I fell. Descended many flights. For months, all I could do was look at the walls of the hole. My legs were engulfed by the grief. Kicked out. Knocked down. Left alone. The word "why" pounded the walls of my brain, leaving small indentations that mocked and immortalized the hurt. Then you whispered, "Your loss is not a test, a lesson, something to handle, a gift, or a blessing. Loss is simply what happens to you in life. Meaning is what you make happen" (Kessler, 2019, p. 7). I am trying to make meaning now. My pain is locked inside a nondisclosure agreement. The signing silenced the truth and emboldened her to rewrite my script.

Successful psychopaths are brilliant storytellers, rebuilding the plot, casting themselves as the victor. Human Resources and Marketing aids the construction, willingly churning the lies and launching them out onto the sidewalks. In the evenings, she commands the custodians to sweep the dirt under the rugs and lock the closets where the bones are kept. The injustice revictimizes the victims.

Today I read your book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief* (Kessler, 2019). I turned the last page, took a breath, and then flipped on the light. The beams produced a reckoning of sorts. I am growing into this new knowing. I am starting to understand. My psychopath feels no remorse for what she has done, her pawns will continue to carry her torch, and my former friends will remain silent, pretending not to remember their part. There is no reason. There will be no resolution. Apologies notes are not in the mail. My Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder will continue to greet me at the most peculiar of times. Meaning making is a one-woman job.

I found my meaning in the stories of others. As an ethnographer, I started to study the culture of cruelty and the players who hurt. Inside that work, I found purpose that soothed my skinned knees. You told me, "Each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn't mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining" (Kessler, 2019, p. 29).

I have become a witness. Each day I hold my sisters' hands and touch their stories. As I listen, I absorb parts of their pain. I validate their loss. I tell their stories. Together we chant—"I see you. You no longer have power over us." "I see you. You no longer have power over us." "I see you. You no longer have power over us."

Sincerely, Resilient

(Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Kessler, 2019; Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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