Why So Psychotic? A Psychoanalysis of The Dark Knight &

The Clown Prince of Crime

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Abstract

This paper is going to psychoanalyze (constructing theories on the relations between conscious and unconscious psychological processes) the popular comic book characters Batman and the Joker and how their behavior has impacted society, including politics. Both the Joker and Batman's stories display that a traumatic accident can change an entire life. Most Batman and Joker fans overlook that the two seemingly opposite characters are very much alike: They are both the textbook definition of a psychopath. Both characters are unemotional, violent, and lack a lot of empathy which are three leading indicators of a psychopath. There are various environmental and biological factors to Batman and the Joker's psychopathy that will be explained. Unfortunately, it takes incidents like James Holmes' attack on the Colorado movie theater to bring the negative influence these characters have on fans to light. Many argue that Batman cannot be a psychopath because of his fatherly love and care for Robin and his heroic lifestyle; however, recent research is showing that psychopaths may have the mental capacity for small amounts of empathy. In conclusion, while viewers and readers see Batman and Joker as psychopaths, they also fit the scientific description of a psychopath as well.

Keywords: psychopath, trauma, Batman, the Joker, psychology

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Psychopaths have greatly influenced today's media; whether it is books, movies, graphic novels, or even video games, psychopaths are everywhere. More specifically, the movie industry has been thriving off of the rise of superhero movies. These films have helped to ignite fans'
enthusiasm for superheroes; as a result, superhero-based graphic novels and video games have also increased in popularity. DC Comics, a company famously known for having psychopathic characters, has recently made a comeback to the movie industry. One DC Comic character, the Joker, is undoubtedly the most notorious psychopathic villain in the media's history. However, not all psychopathic comic book characters are restricted to villains. Batman also shows many characteristics of a textbook psychopath. When analyzing these characters from a psychologist's perspective, are these characters actual psychopaths? What sort of impact are Batman and the Joker making in today's society through various types of media?

**Biological Factors**

There is still much to be discovered about the biological component of a psychopath. However, one thing neurologists are obstinate about when it comes to the limited knowledge of psychopathy is that the limbic system plays a vital role in the brain's demonstration of psychopathic behavior. The genetic makeup of limbic system of the brain is beautifully designed to regulate mood and behavior. The limbic system is composed of the amygdala, the hippocampus, the thalamus and hypothalamus along with the cingulate gyrus, and it is located in the temporal lobe. The amygdala's function is to regulate the brain's "fight or flight" fear response along with anger and anxiety levels. An abnormal amygdala could result in increased amounts of cortisol, the body's stress hormone, which causes provoked levels of anger and aggression. When cortisol levels spike, the hypothalamus will also release more adrenaline due to an increase of fear. The thalamus helps send signals from the amygdala to higher executive areas such as the frontal lobe. If any of these components of the limbic system are dysfunctional, the individual will more than likely experience symptoms of antisocial personality disorder (Zabel-Leonard & Feifer).
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The PCL-R

If it was possible to have MRI and fMRI scans of Bruce Wayne and the Joker, it would most likely reveal an underdeveloped prefrontal lobe, a smaller amygdala and a lack of gray matter in the brain. Batman and the Joker display these spiked levels of anger and aggression, which are common symptoms of antisocial personality disorder shown by the PCL-R system. The PCL-R is a system that lists various types of indications of antisocial personality disorder; Often enough, those diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder also end up being deemed psychopathic (Hare & Neumann, 2008).

Guidelines for determining if someone is a true psychopath has improved since the early 1970's. A psychologist by the name of Hervey Cleckley wrote Cleckley's Clinical Profile that inspired a checklist for diagnosing psychopathy. Known as the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, or PCL-R, for short, his research has become the cornerstone of diagnosing psychopaths. The PCL-R is an innovative tool for determining the psychopathic traits of people (and realistic fiction characters) (Hare & Neumann, 2008).

The PCL-R lists diverse characteristics that many psychopaths display. Since every psychopath is unique, this list can be convenient in the first stages of diagnosing a psychopath. Lack of remorse and empathy, extreme levels of intelligence along with antisocial behavior are just a few of the many characteristics on the list (Hare & Neumann, 2008). There are still many other traits that both Batman and the Joker have in common.

The Characteristics of Batman & the Joker.

The Joker's personality is a lot more than just jokes and mischief. While the Joker does randomly murder civilians carelessly, he also does it cunningly. Some of it is purely impulsive, and other times (though initially, it may not seem like it) carefully planned out. Being
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Manipulative and cunning are the main characteristics of a psychopath since they are traits listed on the PCL-R. For example, in Batman: The Killing Joke, the Joker designed a plan to kidnap Commissioner Gordon. He seemingly stumbled upon Barbara Gordon, Gordon's daughter, shot her and then raped her. He smiled sinisterly and said that he was proving a point to Batman and Commissioner Gordon by doing this horrendous act (Batman: The Killing Joke).

Batman's abnormally high level of intelligence, lack of emotion, an upper-class upbringing and a potential God-complex are common indicators that he is a psychopath. The Joker's act of violent murders alone demonstrates his potential to be a psychopath. His natural intelligence and brute callousness, much like Batman's, also help support that there is more than just killing with the Joker. The Joker also displays promiscuity. In the movie Batman: The Killing Joke, it was mentioned by prostitutes that the Joker regularly visits them (Batman: The Killing Joke). The Joker's complicated relationship between himself and Harley Quinn also shows that the Joker is acting purely out of licentiousness rather than love.

Mad Love

*I found The Joker’s psyche disturbing, his dementia alarming and his charm irresistible!*

What can I tell ya? The guy just did it for me.

- Harley Quinn

Harley Quinn was once known as Dr. Harleen Quinzel, one of Arkham Asylum's newest psychiatrists. The Clown Prince of Crime managed to reel in Harleen with his charm, wit, and jokes. In the 2016 film Suicide Squad, the Joker managed to manipulate her into falling into a large container of acid willingly to win his cold heart. Many would argue that this event created the psychopathic Harley Quinn and her "mad love" for the Joker. Readily falling into a giant vat of acid for love would suggest that she was psychotic before she fell into acid; While others may
argue that she could not be psychotic at all since she is in love with the Joker. A study by Barbara Gawda shows that the region of the brain that is associated with love is affected by the temporal lobes, limbic system, gray matter and prefrontal cortex and thus concluding that it is extremely difficult for psychopaths to experience love (Gawda, 2012). This does not completely throw Quinn out of the psychopathic picture; she could still be a psychopath due to brain damage caused by the acid.

The Bat-Father

Many would argue that Batman displays empathy through his fatherly role in the orphan Dick Grayson's life along with fostering the juvenile delinquent Jason Todd. This raised the question of "If Batman exhibits signs of empathy, then how could he be a true psychopath?" The reality is that Batman has shown empathy to these two troubled individuals. But recent research shows that having any amount of empathy does not automatically label a person a non-psychopath. While psychopaths typically have a lack of empathy as a result of alexithymia (the inability to recognize emotions in oneself) or reduced activity of mirror neurons in the brain, a valid argument can be given that psychopaths simply choose to ignore the amount of empathy they have. David Lishner's research has found that both psychopaths and non-psychopath offenders have the capacity for cognitive and affective empathy. G.H.P van der Helm's findings show that a positive group environment can contribute to cognitive empathy. He studied fiftynine detained young males and saw that empathy is a key element in proper moral development (Palermo, 2012). Batman is likely to feel some empathy for Dick Grayson especially since they both witnessed their own parents' murders. While Bruce may show signs of empathy, this does not dissolve his other callous-unemotional traits. He still treats Dick and Jason coldly and retains a God-complex around them.
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Bruce especially holds a lot of authority over his blood son Damian. After Batman finally displayed empathy when it came to the tragic stories of Dick and Jason, many assumed he would feel the same for his own blood son Damian. However, since Damian came to live with Bruce, the two have butted heads since. Damian was initially raised by the League of Assassins, who taught him to fight and kill when he was four years old. As a result, Damian displayed heightened levels of anger and aggression. He hated his adopted brother Dick Grayson and even tried killing him when he did not get his way, which mirrors the actions of the famous psychopathic child Beth. All of these actions displayed by Damian are classic signs of a conduct disorder. Studies prove that environmental factors, including Damian being raised to kill and cold Bruce Wayne raising him, can cause psychopathy later on in life. However, Damian could also have a predisposition to psychopathy due to his father's genetics.

Moore's very recent studies in behavioral genetics have shown that children have between a forty-nine to sixty-nine percent chance of inheriting callous-unemotional traits from their parents (Moore, 2017). This would mean Damian would have received his callous-unemotional behavior from a parent, and most likely it would have been Bruce's genes since Bruce displays these traits as well. Pasalich, Dadds, Hawes, and Brennan's research concluded that a positive relationship between the parent and child is necessary for treating the behaviors created due to callous-unemotional traits. Batman's harsh training and rules negatively affected Damian, which allowed him to retain his psychopathic traits rather than receive the proper positive treatment he needed (Pasalich, Dadds, Hawes, & Brennan, 2012).

Why So Psychotic?

The graphic novel and movie The Killing Joke reveal the most likely origin story of the Joker. The Joker appears to be in his early twenties and destitute yet has not displayed any
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characteristics of a psychopath. The night before he decided to commit a robbery, his pregnant wife dies in a car accident. The now-depressed Joker still follows through with the robbery, but he is startled by Batman and falls into a vat of acid (Batman: The Killing Joke). Whether it was the unfortunate experience of his wife and unborn child dying, falling into a container of acid, or a combination of both, science has proof either of these incidents (along with Bruce Wayne's case) could create a psychopath due to recent studies on LSD and early-on traumatic events.

Ever since Harley Quinn and the Joker were both exposed to acid, they both became as the Joker would describe as "mad" or "looney." The chemical is most likely acid due to the chemical bleaching their skin. In a recent study in neuropharmacology on the effects of the hallucinogen LS, show that this acid has severe long-term effects including mind altering behaviors. According to a study at Purdue University, LSD has been known to cause an "impairment of social interaction" due to abnormal chemical changes of the brain's genetic makeup. LSD has been even reported by the same study to have caused psychosis and schizophrenia (Marona-Lewicka, Nichols, C. & Nichols, D., 2011).

Recent results of an Italian study of violent inmates who had experienced traumatic events in their childhood found that these particular inmates scored high on the PCL-R scale. Their high scores indicate that they are most likely a psychopath and have even more severe psychopathic traits than the average psychopath (Craparo, Schimmenti, & Caretti, 2013). Since Bruce Wayne and the Joker experienced their traumas during the period in life where there are high levels of brain plasticity, this study can also support the hypothesis that early-on trauma can cause psychosis in the brain. It is also important to note that the brain has not fully matured until it is twenty-five years old, so it is still possible to be permanently stunted in the brain due to trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder.
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The Joker's schemes make it more obvious to viewers and readers that he is mentally troubled. Therefore, it may be harder for fans who are ignorant of psychological disorders to see Batman's mental abnormalities past his depression. The Joker cleverly assumed that Batman had an awful incident that caused him to transform his main persona into the Batman. The pearls scattering could symbolize the moment Bruce lost his marbles and thus created his Batman alter ego.

There are a few psychological perspectives on why Batman fails to stop or ultimately kill the Joker. A condition of avenging Thomas and Martha Wayne's death that Bruce made for himself is that he would never kill another human being. Young Bruce Wayne declared he would end all crime to avenge his parents (Langley, 2012). Since he takes this oath so seriously, killing another being himself would most likely destroy him mentally. The video game Batman: Arkham City shows that killing another being would ultimately change Bruce's demeanor when Bruce was accused of intentionally killing the Joker.

Discussion

Batman's psychopathic qualities are also reasons why the Joker could have been stopped once and for all. Since Bruce Wayne is a multi-billionaire, he has more than enough money to fix the corrupted Arkham Asylum which is the institution where the Joker constantly escapes from. Supplying funds to get each inmate the care they need, such as one-on-one therapy and other innovative treatments, would provide the essential help the Joker needs. In a way, Arkham Asylum represents the way society needs to improve its care to mentally-ill patients while the Joker represents the fact that current mental facilities are lacking in proper care. Another option Bruce could have done is to simply donate funds to help research on curing psychopaths reach new heights.
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Batman continues to allow Arkham Asylum to contain the Joker possibly due to Bruce's psychopathic tendencies. He wants the Joker to escape to keep committing his crimes to fuel his adrenaline, to have the satisfaction of capturing him, and to keep power over him. The more Bruce Wayne becomes the Bat the more narcissistic Batman seems. An experiment conducted by Bogaerts, Polak, Spreen, and Zwets shows that individuals who are considered psychopaths by Hare's standards are more likely to exhibit symptoms of narcissism (Bogaerts, Polak, Spreen, & Zwets, 2012). Batman often shows signs of having a God-complex. In one episode of Batman: The Animated Series, when threatening a criminal for information, the criminal "swears to God" that he doesn't know anything, but Batman forcefully tells the criminal to swear to him, not God.

Another aspect that the Joker and Batman have are their traumatic experiences at a young age. Though the Joker could have been made a psychopath as a result of physical brain damage, young Bruce Wayne never sustained a physical brain injury like Phineas Gage, who exhibited antisocial behavior after being struck in the orbitofrontal cortex. This shows that environmental and emotional factors can also affect a psychopath along with biological factors. Recent results of an Italian study of violent inmates who had experienced traumatic events in their childhood found that these prisoners scored high on the PCL-R scale. Their high scores indicate that they are most likely a psychopath and have even more severe psychopathic traits than the average psychopath (Craparo, Schimmenti, & Caretti, 2013). Bruce, having watched his parents shot and murdered, experienced depression, PTSD, and hallucinations as a result. Since Bruce Wayne and the Joker experienced their traumas during the period in life where there are high levels of brain plasticity, Craparo's study can also support the hypothesis that early-on trauma can cause antisocial behavior in the brain. An example of this would be the infamous child Beth Thomas who was sexually abused by her father when she was younger than three years old. Beth
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admitted to wanting to kill her parents and brother and also murdered innocent animals. Beth is similar to Batman since she grew up to make something positive out of her trauma by helping children similar to her while Batman tries to stop as much crime as possible.

The Impact of Their Eccentric & Cold Personas

In 2008, the Joker's mania infected the world again with Heath Ledger's dark portrayal of the Joker in The Dark Knight. The film changed the world's perspective on the joke-cracking clown. The movie inspired young children to become like the Dark Knight himself, while it also inspired another very different crowd of fans. In 2012, a midnight showing of the sequel to The Dark Knight was playing in Colorado at the Aurora Theater. A man named James Holmes dressed in a SWAT suit and opened fire on the movie theater. Holmes was arrested and claimed that he "was the Joker." He made national headlines by killing twelve people and injuring over fifty people (Staggs, 2016). The impact of Holmes' terror resulting in families losing loved ones and planted fear in people across the world. Due to Holmes' horrifying actions, parents would fear for their children's safety as they would go to the movies with their friends.

Unfortunately, this was not the last attack The Dark Knight's Joker inspired. A fourteen-year-old girl in the United Kingdom recently became obsessed with serial killers like Ted Bundy and Jack the Ripper. She also was fascinated by the Columbine shooting in the United States.

According to The Sun, she fantasized about killing her mother and brother but decided to kill her best friend instead. Before unsuccessfully killing her best friend with a knife, she sliced her cheeks by the corners of her mouth to try to look like Heath Ledger's version of the Joker (Crouch, 2016). While it was not as severe as Holmes' attack, it still shows that the Joker continues to inspire psychopaths today.
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The Dark Knight and other Batman movies continue to arouse psychopaths around the world; however, the Arkham video game series has also conjured up psychopathic inspiration. While these games were not quite as popular as the Batman movies, this video game series has been one of the most successful superhero video game franchise with 2.83 million in sales with just the release of the first game. The amount of violence and the grotesque portrayal of Arkham Asylum attracted fans of all ages including young children and adolescents. A good range of these children and adolescents suffer from mental disorders including depression. In Arkham Asylum, the more violent hits and combinations of hits you can achieve, the more a person is rewarded. Since individuals with antisocial personality disorders already have difficulties recognizing a reward and punishment system, this could have a strong negative impact on these particular players. Batman is intended to be a role model for the world; a person playing Batman themselves and watches Batman knocking out psychotic inmates can add more confusion to these already emotionally stunted people (Morris, 2013).

Another important to point to make is how Batman and more explicitly, the Joker, represent the mentally-ill community as a whole. Batman shows individuals (who realize that Batman is a psychopath) that psychopaths have the potential to make something good out of a bad situation. However, the Joker places a very negative stereotype on psychopaths. A lot of members of society fail to realize that there are actually good psychopaths in the world. For example, neuroscientist James Fallon discovered he was a psychopath by accident when conducting a study on psychopaths. He tested positive for several callous-unemotional traits such as a lack of empathy, but he is also happily married and has children. Fallon and several others like him refer to themselves as "prosocial" psychopaths or a psychopath who lacks empathy but
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on a socially acceptable level (Fallon, 2013). Hopefully, there is more awareness of "pro-social psychopaths" in the future.

**The Positive Impact**

There is no denying that the Caped Crusader has spread hope and inspiration to fans around the world. Batman has no real super powers except a superhuman commitment to helping others and ultimately dedicating his life to go above and beyond to help society. He shows the world that in reality, anyone could be him if they took the time, gave a lot of dedication, and did the training required to be like the Dark Knight. Bruce Wayne's transformation of a broken childhood to a successful adulthood is also a good example for others; he did not let his parents' death stop him from being a member of society but rather encouraged him to become Gotham City's savior.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the behavior of both the Joker and Batman follow the definition of a psychopath. Various environmental factors, such as a lack of parenting and traumatic events, along with the biological factors, like an injury or genetics, can cause psychopathy. Psychopathy has several gray areas that the characters in Batman's world of Gotham can show. The impact of the Joker and Batman has inspired incidents like Holmes' attack. These characters especially impact younger fans who have diverse amounts of mental disorders. Hopefully, further research will make the positive aspects of Batman outweigh the negatives.

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