

# Understanding the Psychopath from a Psychodynamic Perspective: A Rorschach Study

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## Abstract

*The psychopathic personality is organized at a borderline level of personality. Additionally, while male psychopaths are considered to manifest pathological narcissism, female psychopaths are best understood in terms of malignant hysteria. Using Kernberg's three components of borderline personality functioning (identity diffusion, reliance on primitive defenses, and transient lapses in reality testing), we examined the following Rorschach variables in 159 Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R)-delineated psychopaths ( $PCL-R \geq 30$ ; 44 males, 115 females): Dv, M-, and Kwawer PMRs (identity diffusion); (H), (Hd), and Cooper et al. (1988) RDS (reliance on primitive defenses); and X-%, Xu%, X+%, S-, WSum6, and RDS massive denial (transient lapses in reality testing). In order to study the predominant gender-specific personality style, we also contrasted Rorschach variables associated with narcissism, hysteria, and paranoia, by gender: Narcissism, Fr + rF, EGOI, (2), W:M, SumV, MOR, RDS omnipotence, and devaluation; Kwawer's narcissistic mirroring; Hysteria, IMP, AB, Hx, ROD, C, CF, SumT, Afr, CS intellectualization index, RDS primitive idealization, intellectualization, & repression; and, Paranoia, Dd, Hd, Ad, eye content, AG, AgC, AgPast, AgPot, SM, S, and RDS projective identification. Our Rorschach findings were consistent with theoretical considerations related to psychopathy and its gender-specific differences.*

## Introduction

Psychopathy is defined by pathological self-focus, profound emotional deficits, lack of remorse and empathy, and high risk of antisocial behavior (Gacono, 2016; Hare, 2003, 2016; Verona & Vitale, 2018). While many theorists have offered their scientific views since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Cleckley's (1941) conceptualization remains the most influential and clinically useful (Millon et al., 1998).

Robert Hare built on Cleckley's model to create an empirical measure assessing psychopathy (PCL-R; Hare, 2003). The PCL-R, considered the gold standard in psychopathy assessment, is a 20-item measure assessing such items as Grandiose Sense of Self, Poor Behavioral Controls, and Failure to Accept Responsibility. The PCL-R has a two-factor, four-facet structure: the callous, selfish, remorseless use of others and a chronically unstable and antisocial lifestyle factors, and the Interpersonal, Affective, Impulsive Lifestyle, and Antisocial Behavior facets (Hare, 2003). A total PCL-R score of 30 or higher is needed for categorical

designations of psychopathy for both males and females to increase the likelihood that psychopaths are present in the sample (Cunliffe et al., 2016; Gacono, 2016; Gacono & Smith, 2021; Hare, 2003; Neumann et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2021b).

Research indicates that male and female psychopathic structures are behaviorally similar but not equivalent (Beryl et al., 2014; Cunliffe & Gacono, 2005; de Vogel & Lancel, 2016; Dolan & Völlm, 2009; Forouzan & Cooke, 2005; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Pauli et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2021a, 2021b; Verona & Vitale, 2018). The personality functioning of the psychopathic male is best understood as a form of pathological narcissism (Kernberg, 1967, 1975, 1976; Gacono & Meloy, 1994, Meloy, 1988), while the psychopathic female displays a form of malignant hysteria<sup>1</sup> (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002; Cunliffe et al., 2016; Forouzan & Cooke, 2005; Gacono, 2016; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Kreis & Cooke, 2011; Smith et al., 2014, 2018). The grandiose self-structure is self-regulating for psychopathic males, bolstering an omnipotent sense of self while circumventing both internal and external threats to self-image (Gacono, 1990; Kernberg, 1967, 1975, 1976; Meloy, 1988). Psychopathic women lack men's grandiose self-structure and are not immune from experiencing themselves as damaged. They need others (e.g., pseudo-dependency, maladaptive neediness) to bolster self-esteem and obtain some sense of stability with their troubling affect (pseudo-emotionality; Cunliffe & Gacono, 2005; Forouzan & Cooke, 2005; Kreis & Cooke, 2011, 2012; Smith et al., 2021b; Verona & Vitale, 2018).

Underneath their respective personality styles, psychopathic individuals display similar levels of personality organization (borderline or psychotic; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Kernberg, 1967, 1975, 1976; Smith et al., 2021b) resting at a paranoid position (Klein, 1946; Mahler, 1975; Gacono & Smith, 2021; Smith et al., 2021b). When the defensive purposes of pathological narcissism or malignant hysteria fail to maintain homeostasis, the psychopath's paranoid style becomes behaviorally evident (Gacono & Meloy, 1994). This may become evident during clinical interview of a female psychopath when attention is withdrawn: "She would escalate into uncontrollable giggling and, during the Rorschach, slammed one of the cards (VI) on the table in a moment of dramatic outburst ... she even interpreted Reid Meloy's withdrawal of attention ... as sadistic" (Gacono & Meloy, 1994, p. 122).

### ***Personality Organization***

A structural psychodiagnostic approach with neurotic and psychotic levels of personality organization (with borderline structure between the two) provides the best template for understanding psychopathy (Acklin, 1997; Kernberg, 1967, 1975, 1976; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Meloy, 1988). Kernberg (1967, 1975, 1976, 1984) posited three issues pertinent to borderline personality organization: 1) identity diffusion (disturbances of affect regulation as well as the ability to accurately assess, interpret, and judge the meaning of important interpersonal and

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<sup>1</sup> We do not endorse the historically biased early gender associations in hysteria. As Chodoff (1982) and Pfohl (1991) discussed, the continued devaluation of the hysteria construct is primarily due to a partial understanding of its roots. Hysterical personalities are not gender-specific (Cleckley, 1941; Pfohl, 1991). Psychopathy, in either gender, represents a severe personality aberration organized at a borderline or psychotic level for which malignant hysteria (female) and malignant narcissism (male) best describe respective psychodynamic psychopathy functioning.

intrapersonal events; Kernberg, 2005); 2) reliance on primitive defenses; 3) transient lapses in reality testing (Acklin, 1997; Kernberg, 1967, 1975, 1976, 1984).

Central to borderline personality functioning is the use of primitive defenses (Acklin, 1997; Kernberg 1967, 1975, 1976, 1984), with splitting as the primary defense. Primitive (e.g., splitting) and higher-level (e.g., repression) defenses can be contrasted. Primitive defenses involve boundaries between the self and the outer world, while higher-order defenses involve internal structural boundaries between the id, ego, and superego (Laughlin, 1970). These include defenses such as devaluation, idealization, denial, and projective identification (Cooper et al., 1988; Lerner & Lerner, 1980).

Splitting involves separating oppositely-toned feelings and urges, toward either the object or the self, to avoid the simultaneous experience of these feelings. Splitting protects against the experience of unbearable affect such as guilt or anxiety (Cooper et al., 1988). On the other hand, repression is a defense resulting from an unconscious motivation to remain unaware of socially unacceptable impulses. In splitting, self and others are experienced as idealized (all good) or devalued (all bad). Splitting is a part-object orientation.

In contrast, higher-level personality organization experiences others as a balance between good and bad qualities, both of which can be tolerated simultaneously. The consistency with which one relies on these developmentally distinct defenses is important. Primitive defenses are mostly absent at the neurotic level, while those at the borderline level tend to oscillate between mature and primitive defenses (Gacono, 1997; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Schafer, 1954).

In this study, we examined Rorschach Comprehensive System (CS) variables (and supplemental-scale scores<sup>2</sup>) associated with narcissism, hysteria, and paranoia, as well as Kernberg's three components of borderline personality functioning: 1) identity diffusion, 2) reliance on primitive defenses, and 3) transient lapses in reality testing. We statistically compared select variables between PCL-R-determined psychopathic males ( $N = 44$ ) and females ( $N = 115$ ). Non-statistical comparisons of select Exner nonpatients (2007) and other sample variables (1995, 2003) are provided to highlight the personality functioning of the psychopaths.

We examined the following Rorschach variables related to narcissism: Fr + rF, EGOI, (2), PER, W:M, SumV, MOR, RDS omnipotence, and devaluation; Kwawer narcissistic mirroring; hysteria, IMP, AB, Hx, ROD, C, CF, SumT, Afr, CS intellectualization index, RDS primitive idealization, intellectualization, & repression; paranoia, Dd, Hd, Ad, eye content, AG, AgC, AgPast, AgPot, SM, S, and RDS projective identification; Dv, Dv/+, M-, and Kwawer PMRs (identity diffusion); (H), (Hd), and RDS (reliance on primitive defenses; Cooper et al., 1988); and, X-%, Xu%, X+%, S-, WSum6, and RDS massive denial (transient lapses in reality testing).

## **Method**

### ***Procedure***

The authors collected archival prisoner data at various US prisons ( $N = 442$ ; 105 males, 337 females). Participants gave informed consent to participate, and the IRB and correctional institutions approved the research. The psychopathy groups consisted of 120 females and 50

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<sup>2</sup> These supplemental scales include: 1) Rorschach Oral Dependency (ROD) scale (Masling et al., 1967); 2) Trauma Content Index (TCI; Armstrong & Loewenstein, 1990); 3) Gacono and Meloy (1994) Extended Aggression scores (AgC, AgPast, AgPot, & SM); 4) Kwawer (1980) Primitive Modes of Relating (PMR) scores; 5) Cooper et al. (1988) Rorschach Defenses Scales (RDS).

males after applying the PCL-R cutoff score of 30, from which five females and six males with  $IQ < 80$  or fewer than 14 total responses were excluded. A net total of 159 participants (female psychopaths [FP],  $n = 115$ ; male psychopaths [MP],  $n = 44$ ) were included in this study.

Inmate security states ranged from minimum to maximum. MPs were 68% Caucasian, 18% African American, 11% Hispanic, and 2% Native American, with a mean age of 31.32 ( $SD = 6.48$ , range = 18-43). FPs were 58% Caucasian, 32% African American, 8% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 2% Native American, with a mean age of 35.98 ( $SD = 9.85$ , range = 20-70). MP offenses included 16% violent crimes, 18% drug offenses, 16% sexual offenses, and 50% unknown. FP offenses were 46% drug-related, 16% fraud, 20% theft, 27% violent crimes, 12% sexual offenses, and 32% unknown.

### Measures

Gacono's (2005) Clinical and Forensic Interview Schedule (CFIS) was used to administer the PCL-R. Protocols were completed by reviewing medical, legal, psychiatric, and pertinent institutional files, followed by a semi-structured interview. The interrater reliability (Spearman's rho) for ratings was .98 for the total PCL-R score, .93 for Factor 1, .92 for Factor 2, and .87 or better for facets and PCL-R items.

All Rorschach protocols were administered and scored per the Exner CS guidelines (Exner, 2003) by doctoral-level clinicians. In addition to select CS variables, five supplemental scoring systems were coded (Kwawer PMR, ROD, RDS, Extended Aggression scores, & TCI). Interrater reliability was calculated from these protocols, with kappa coefficients ranged from .75 to 1.00 (excellent range).

### Data Analyses

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 was used for all calculations. Parametric statistics ( $t$ -tests) were used where appropriate. Due to their unequal distributions (J-shaped curves; Exner, 2003), certain Rorschach variables were evaluated with nonparametric statistical procedures (Mann-Whitney  $U$  statistics). Chi-square analyses were used when an estimate of proportional differences in the number of individuals who produced at least one of a given variable was needed.

### Results

The mean PCL-R score for FPs was 33.11 ( $SD = 2.27$ , range = 30-39). It was very similar for the MPs ( $M = 33.14$ ;  $SD = 2.32$ , range = 30-38). IQs for both FPs ( $M = 96.54$ ,  $SD = 15.18$ , range = 80-155) and MPs ( $M = 101.30$ ,  $SD = 9.58$ , range = 81-137) fell within average range. The FPs produced a valid number of Rorschach Responses (R; FP  $M = 21.88$ ;  $SD = 8.83$ , range = 14-55) with FP Lambda  $M = 0.74$  ( $SD = 0.69$ , range = 0.00-6.00; see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Rorschach Responses and Lambda between groups*

Variable	MPs (n = 44)			FPs (n = 115)			Statistic	es
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>		
R	20.52	7.62	44	21.88	8.83	115	--	--
Lambda	0.92	0.62	44	0.74	0.69	115	<sup>b</sup> 1.53	0.27

*Note.* *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; Freq = the number of individuals who produced at least one of the variables; <sup>b</sup> = t-test; R = responses; MP = male psychopaths; FP = female psychopaths.

FP total R were slightly higher than the men's R (MP *M* = 20.52, *SD* = 7.62, range = 14-52; see Table 1) while Lambda were slightly lower (MP *M* = 0.92, *SD* = 0.62, range = 0.13-2.50). This difference in Lambda represents a gender-based trend consistent with the psychopathic women producing significantly more CS determinants, indicative of greater affectivity (Gacono, 2019), or pseudo-affect (Gacono & Smith, 2021; Smith et al., 2021b).

### ***Narcissism, Hysteria, and Paranoia***<sup>3</sup>

**Narcissism.** The results of this section support the high levels of self-focus within the personalities of psychopaths, regardless of gender. Compared to Exner's (2007) non-patients (NP, *M* = 0.20, 12% produce at least one reflection) or even character-disordered persons (CD, *M* = 0.47, 20%) our samples produced more (MP = 43%; FP = 36%) of this signature marker for self-reference and focus (Exner, 2003; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Smith et al., 2019). This self-referential position is further supported by the high levels of PER (MP *M* = 2.37; FP *M* = 3.28) when compared to Exner's (2007) non-patients (NP *M* = 0.99). This cluster B type pathology separates itself from the more heterogeneous character-disordered (CD *M* = 0.93) participants (Exner, 1995; also see Gacono et al., 1990). The best comparison for the PER response, however, is between psychopathic and non-psychopathic antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) individuals, where interesting differences emerge with psychopaths of both genders exhibiting the more disturbing patterns, including greater degrees of self-focus (Cunliffe & Gacono, 2005; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Gacono et al., 1990; Smith et al., 2019, 2020a, 2021a).

The defensive use of omnipotence, frequently linked to both PER and projective identification in these samples (Gacono & Meloy, 1994), was produced more by women. This requires further study. Gacono and Meloy (1994) discussed in depth the differences among types of personal responses (PER) produced by ASPD males. In male psychopaths, the PER was reflective of their omnipotence and presented with bravado, while in non-psychopathic ASPD males, PER was a defensive measure infused with anxiety. It represented a final effort to save face when producing a response experienced as "inadequate" by the examinee (Gacono & Meloy, 1994). In female ASPDs, we have noted PERs to be of this latter category. Similar contrasting patterns may emerge through a careful idiographic analysis of omnipotence in the FP, including the differences between psychopaths and non-psychopaths. Further study is needed to understand the meaning of their responses, including what accompanies, precedes, and occurs after the response is produced (see Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Smith et al., 2021 for an idiographic analysis of the reflection response).

While devaluation is prevalent in both groups, it is produced more in women (see Table 2). In addition, two significant findings begin to shed light on the failure of the regulatory processes in the FP. They produce significantly more MOR (FP *M* = 3.00; MP *M* = 1.70) and SumV (FP *M* = 1.84; MP *M* = 0.37), exceeding Exner's (2007) non-patient adults (NP MOR, *M* = 0.93, SumV *M* = 0.35), character disordered individuals (1995; CD MOR, *M* = 1.07; SumV *M* = 0.24) and even inpatient depressives (ID MOR, *M* = 1.56, SumV *M* = 1.09; Exner, 1995).

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<sup>3</sup> In the following sections, Exner's (1995, 2003, 2007) comparative data is not used for statistical comparison. It is reported to allow the reader to anchor the psychopathy data within relevant nonpatient, characterological and other comparison samples. For example, the X-% of both psychopathy groups clearly falls within a borderline versus psychotic or normal range.

This difference between the male and female psychopaths supports the effectiveness of grandiosity for MPs. They bask in their omnipotence, which protects them from the experience of internal or external distress. When they gaze into the pool, they see an exalted version of themselves, entitled to the behaviors they perpetrate on others. The women are not so lucky; what they see when they look in the mirror is a Picasso-like distorted and damaged image of themselves (Gacono & Smith, 2021). Their SumV elevations support the ineffectiveness of their defenses in maintaining any homeostasis (Exner, 2003; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Smith et al., 2019).

Table 2

*Narcissism in Psychopaths*

Variable	MPs (n = 44)			FPs (n = 115)			Statistic	es
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>		
Fr + rF	0.73	1.05	19	0.73	1.28	45	<sup>a</sup> 1720.00	0.04
Fr + rF ≥ 1			43%			36%	<sup>c</sup> 0.34	0.05
EGOI	0.39	0.18	44	0.40	0.19	115	--	--
EGOI ≥ 0.44			7%			15%	<sup>c</sup> 1.68	0.11
& Fr + rF = 0								
EGOI ≥ 0.44			23%			22%	<sup>c</sup> 0.01	0.01
& Fr + rF ≥ 1								
(2)	6.30	4.76	44	6.72	4.54	114	--	--
(2) ≥ 10			10%			20%	<sup>c</sup> 1.86	0.11
Narcissistic Mirroring	0.79	0.96	23	0.93	1.61	67	<sup>a</sup> 1602.00	0.02
PER	2.37	1.96	35	3.28	3.58	93	<sup>a</sup> 1661.50	0.05
PER ≥ 2			57%			59%	<sup>c</sup> 0.17	0.03
W	8.67	3.03	44	9.39	4.51	115	---	--
M	3.07	2.05	40	4.13	3.22	102	---	--
M ≥ 2			70%			79%	--	--
SumV	0.37	0.56	15	<b>1.84</b>	2.03	93	<sup>a</sup> 909.50**	0.36
MOR	1.70	1.73	28	<b>3.00</b>	2.86	97	<sup>a</sup> 1298.00*	0.20
MOR = 1			13%			17%	<sup>c</sup> 0.30	0.05
MOR > 1			50%			64%	<sup>c</sup> 2.57	0.13
Omnipotence	0.14	0.36	9	<b>1.18</b>	1.65	62	<sup>a</sup> 962.00**	0.31
Omni ≥ 1			13%			<b>49%</b>	<sup>c</sup> 12.82**	0.30
Devaluation	4.82	3.40	40	<b>8.62</b>	5.52	115	<sup>a</sup> 905.00**	0.31
Dev > 1			70%			<b>94%</b>	<sup>c</sup> 21.25**	0.38

*Note.* *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *Freq* = the number of individuals who produced at least one of the variables; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; es = effect size; <sup>a</sup> = Mann Whitney U; <sup>b</sup> = t-test; <sup>c</sup> = Chi square; bold = higher value; Fr + rF = reflections; EGOI = egocentricity index; MP = male psychopaths; FP = female psychopaths.

**Hysteria.** Both groups are emotionally explosive (Pure C MP  $M = 0.70$ ; FP  $M = 1.07$ ; NP  $M = 0.17$ ; CD  $M = 0.47$ ). However, AB, Hx (human experience), and IMP (impressionistic response, Gacono, 1988), which most closely measure the hysterical impressionistic style described by Shapiro (1965), represent strategies for coping with strong affect (Gacono & Meloy, 1994), and are present in the women and absent in the males. The FPs produce more of these variables (see Table 3). Of note is a constellation of typical hysterical defenses (primitive idealization, repression, and all forms of denial; Tables 3, 6, & 7) produced significantly more by the FPs.

Table 3  
*Hysteria in Psychopaths*

Variable	MPs (n = 44)			FPs (n = 115)			Statistic	es
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>		
Impressionistic Response	0.25	0.52	12	<b>1.44</b>	2.01	68	<sup>a</sup> 973.50**	0.30
AB	0.57	1.91	8	<b>1.12</b>	1.96	51	<sup>a</sup> 1342.50*	0.21
Hx	0.17	0.59	5	<b>0.99</b>	1.85	45	<sup>a</sup> 1287.00**	0.24
Repression	1.46	1.99	28	<b>5.21</b>	3.76	108	<sup>a</sup> 537.00**	0.46
Intellectualization Index	2.33	4.66	32	<b>4.18</b>	4.58	93	<sup>b</sup> 1.97*	0.40
Intellectualization	1.65	2.16	23	<b>3.90</b>	3.88	102	<sup>a</sup> 947.00**	0.29
Primitive Idealization	0.29	0.81	9	<b>1.08</b>	1.30	67	<sup>a</sup> 973.00**	0.30
ROD	0.15	0.10	40	<b>0.27</b>	0.13	113	<sup>b</sup> 4.86**	0.98
SumT	0.23	0.77	4	<b>1.07</b>	1.35	54	<sup>a</sup> 1031.00**	0.33
SumT = 0			<b>90%</b>			53%	<sup>c</sup> 19.57**	0.36
SumT = 1			3%			<b>29%</b>	<sup>c</sup> 9.18**	0.25
SumT > 1			7%			<b>24%</b>	<sup>c</sup> 4.81*	0.18
C	0.70	1.09		1.07	1.35		<sup>a</sup> 1503.00	0.12
C ≥ 1			43%			55%	<sup>c</sup> 1.72	0.11
CF	2.37	2.14	40	2.51	1.93	101	---	--
Afr	0.56	0.25	44	0.53	0.24	115	--	--
Afr ≤ 0.55			57%			65%	<sup>c</sup> 1.05	0.08
TCI	0.22	0.20	38	<b>0.30</b>	0.20	110	<sup>b</sup> 2.03*	0.42
An + Xy	1.00	1.29	22	<b>2.07</b>	1.96	93	<sup>a</sup> 1146.00**	0.26
Malignant Internal Processes	0.57	0.92	18	<b>1.64</b>	1.75	79	<sup>a</sup> 994.00**	0.28

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *Freq* = the number of individuals who produced at least one of the variables; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; es = effect size; <sup>a</sup> = Mann Whitney U; <sup>b</sup> = t-test; <sup>c</sup> = Chi square; bold = higher

value; Hx = human experience; ROD = Rorschach oral dependency; Afr = affective ratio; TCI = trauma content index; MP = male psychopaths; FP = female psychopaths.

The FP also produce more T and ROD, which, when produced in nonpatient participants, may represent a sign of health; but for psychopaths, these only provide an intrapsychic irritant that stimulates disruptions to their personality functioning (Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Gacono et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2018). The male psychopath is less troubled by these interpersonal pulls (MP T = 0, 90%). Increased levels of malignant internal processes and An + Xy provide further evidence of the FP's internally troubled world, suggesting links to somatization. The TCI provides additional information about dissociation and trauma symptomology (Armstrong & Loewenstein, 1990; Smith et al., 2020b, 2021a). The higher rates for FPs suggest higher rates of dissociation and trauma (also linked to paranoia) than in MPs.

**Paranoia.** Consistent with a paranoid orientation, both groups focus on details (FP  $M = 3.48$ ; MP  $M = 2.83$ ; NP  $M = 1.60$ ), present an oppositional focus (Space [S] MP  $M = 2.50$ ; FP  $M = 3.69$ ; NP  $M = 2.37$ ), and are preoccupied with eye content responses (MP 73%, FP 88% produce at least one; Table 4).

Table 4  
*Paranoia in Psychopaths*

Variables	MPs (n = 44)			FPs (n = 115)			Statistic	es
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>		
Dd	2.83	2.31	40	3.48	2.96	105	---	---
Dd ≥ 3			43%			51%	---	--
Hd	1.50	1.61	31	1.73	1.67	87	---	---
Ad	2.47	2.37	40	1.83	1.73	89	---	---
AG	0.50	0.78	15	0.50	0.77	45	<sup>a</sup> 1780.00	0.01
AG ≥ 2			17%			10%	<sup>c</sup> 0.77	0.07
Aggressive Content	3.71	2.57	41	4.34	2.89	113	<sup>a</sup> 1474.00	0.07
AgC ≥ 2			67%			81%	<sup>c</sup> 2.74	0.14
Aggression Past	1.07	1.41	26	<b>2.22</b>	2.44	89	<sup>a</sup> 1104.50**	0.23
Aggressive Potential	0.39	0.50	28	0.42	0.72	79	<sup>a</sup> 1584.50	0.03
Sado-Masochism	0.11	0.31	7	<b>0.57</b>	0.88	47	<sup>a</sup> 1176.50**	0.24
S	2.50	1.74	41	<b>3.69</b>	2.59	108	<sup>a</sup> 1311.50*	0.19
S ≥ 2			67%			78%	<sup>c</sup> 2.81	0.14
Projective Identification	0.68	0.77	23	<b>3.13</b>	3.07	90	<sup>a</sup> 748.00**	0.38
Eye content	2.25	1.92		3.38	2.86		<sup>a</sup> 1283.00	0.15
Eyes > 0			73%			<b>88%</b>	<sup>c</sup> 4.68*	0.18



Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *Freq* = the number of individuals who produced at least one of the variables; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; *es* = effect size; <sup>a</sup> = Mann Whitney U; <sup>b</sup> = t-test; <sup>c</sup> = Chi square; bold = higher value; AG = aggressive movement; S = white space.; MP = male psychopaths; FP = female psychopaths.

When examined within a sequence of scores, one can see the defensive nature of the Dd response. Resorting to the Dd response represents a strategy for narrowing the stimulus field to avoid being overwhelmed by affective or dynamically based stressors (as noted by what proceeds the Dd response).

As noted in Table 4, except for AG (MP *M* = 0.50; FP *M* = 0.50; NP *M* = 0.89) both groups are hostile and angry, producing protocols abundant in responses suggesting aggressive identifications and issues (Gacono & Meloy’s [1994] Extended Aggression scores; see also Gacono et al., 2008). While both groups contain a sense of being aggressed against that underpins their entitlement toward victimizing others (Gacono & Meloy, 1994), perhaps the increased proportions and frequencies of AgPast in the FP correlate with their elevations on other indices related to trauma (TCI; Smith et al., 2019, 2020b, 2021a). Hostile affect negatively impacts both groups (S-%) and significantly more so in FPs.

The SM response (produced in high quantities with the women), like the PER and omnipotence response, requires a further analysis of idiographic qualities and may have a slightly different meaning related to gender (Gacono et al., 2008). The elevated use of projective identification with the FP speaks to the ineffectiveness of their self-focus in warding off threats to esteem and the ease with which they become behaviorally paranoid. Of note, as well, is the production of projection and projective identification responses consistent with a paranoid externalization of unwanted attributes (Tables 4 & 6).

**Identity Diffusion.** A stable identity requires a solid foundation. Disturbed boundaries disallow the foundation necessary for healthy personality functioning. In this regard, it is the high number of Kwawer’s (1980) PMR scores produced by both groups (FP, *M* = 10.15; MP, *M* = 6.54; Table 5).

Table 5  
*Identity Diffusion Rorschach Comparisons in Psychopaths*

Variable	MPs (n = 44)			FPs (n = 115)			Statistic	<i>es</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>		
Dv	2.13	2.15	31	<b>4.24</b>	3.72	107	<sup>a</sup> 1103.00**	0.27
Dv/+	0.70	0.92	22	0.54	0.88	40	<sup>a</sup> 1566.50	0.10
M-	0.73	0.91	22	0.96	1.34	60	---	---
Engulfment	0.04	0.19	1	0.20	0.52	22	---	---
Symbiotic	1.50	1.11	35	1.75	1.44	94	---	---
Merging								
Violent	1.46	1.75	29	2.09	1.99	91	---	---
Symbiosis								
Birth-Rebirth	0.25	0.44	10	0.25	0.54	28	---	---
Metamorphosis	0.14	0.36	6	0.31	0.61	31	---	---
Separation-	0.36	0.73	13	0.21	0.49	25	---	---
Division								

Bound	1.29	1.58	28	<b>2.58</b>	2.49	95	---	---
Disturbance								
Womb	0.18	0.48	9	0.17	0.44	21	---	---
Imagery								
Total PMR	6.54	3.72	44	<b>10.15</b>	6.37	115	<sup>b</sup> 2.88**	0.61

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; Freq = the number of individuals who produced at least one of the variables; \* = *p* < .05; \*\* = *p* < .01; *es* = effect size; <sup>a</sup> = Mann Whitney U; <sup>b</sup> = t-test; bold = higher value; PMR = primitive modes of relating; MP = male psychopaths; FP = female psychopaths.

Previously we have found greater frequencies of these variables for both male and female psychopaths when compared to non-psychopathic like-gender offenders (Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Smith et al., 2021). The women in this study seem significantly more disturbed than males related to the boundary issues. Psychopaths share the infusion of aggression within their respective object-relation patterns (see violent symbiosis) as well as the many nuanced themes related to fluid/diffuse boundaries presented in Table 5.

When comparing their vague developmental quality (*Dv*) to Exner's (2007) nonpatients (*M* = 0.37) and character-disordered individuals (*M* = 1.12), psychopaths have a greater propensity for producing vague responses. Stressors are prone to disrupting cognitive functioning and are more pronounced in women, adding to unstable boundaries in identity diffusion.

Table 6  
*Primitive Defenses Rorschach Comparisons in Psychopaths*

Variable	MPs (n = 44)			FPs (n = 115)			Statistic	<i>es</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Freq</i>		
(H)	0.90	1.27	22	<b>1.42</b>	1.46	84	<sup>a</sup> 1359.00*	0.18
(Hd)	0.33	0.55	13	<b>0.94</b>	1.12	63	<sup>a</sup> 1258.00**	0.23
<b>Neurotic</b>								
Higher	0.14	0.45	7	0.49	0.95	36	<sup>a</sup> 1369.00	0.16
Level								
Denial								
Isolation	1.57	1.45	35	1.81	1.90	82	<sup>a</sup> 1627.00	0.01
Reaction	0.32	0.77	10	<b>1.43</b>	1.60	77	<sup>a</sup> 854.00**	0.35
Formation								
Pollyannish	1.04	1.00	29	1.18	1.34	70	<sup>a</sup> 1636.50	0.01
Denial								
<b>Borderline</b>								
Splitting	1.25	1.55	26	<b>2.46</b>	2.44	90	<sup>a</sup> 1129.00**	0.22
Projection	0.32	0.72	12	<b>2.80</b>	2.72	98	<sup>a</sup> 488.00**	0.49
<b>Psychotic</b>								
Hypomanic	0.25	0.65	10	<b>1.13</b>	1.15	75	<sup>a</sup> 850.50**	0.35
Denial								

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; Freq = the number of individuals who produced at least one of the variables; \* = *p* < .05; \*\* = *p* < .01; *es* = effect size; <sup>a</sup> = Mann Whitney U; bold = higher value; MP = male psychopaths; FP = female psychopaths.

**Reliance on Primitive Defenses.** Reliance on primitive defenses is central to borderline personality functioning (Acklin, 1997; Kernberg, 1967, 1975, 1976, 1984); splitting is the primary defense. In neurotic personalities, repression, rather than splitting, serves as the primary defense. As has been noted previously, those individuals organized at a borderline level may demonstrate oscillations between mature and primitive defenses on their Rorschach protocols (Gacono, 1997; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Schafer, 1954). This oscillation is what we see in Table 6. In addition, we find an abundance of primitive defenses noted in Table 6 for both psychopathic groups (also see Table 2 for omnipotence and devaluation and Table 4 for projective identification).

Table 6 also highlights a focus on either idealized or devalued objects (H), part objects (Hd), and the use of splitting. Of note is the greater production of primitive idealization and devaluation by women, contributing directly to splitting responses. Splitting is indicated when an idealized percept follows a devalued percept (or vice versa). MPs do not tend to produce idealized percepts and, consequently, this type of splitting (see Gacono et al., 1991). Within an otherwise healthy Rorschach, non-primitive idealization is viewed as a healthy defense and a precursor to mature attachment (Lerner & Lerner, 1980). However, within FPs, idealization represents the oscillation of polar opposites (splitting) and immature object relations (also see PMRs).

The FP's malignant hysteria is also supported by the production of significantly more repression responses (noted in Table 3), primitive idealization, and all forms of denial (Tables 3, 6, & 7) produced by women. The increased production of projection and projective identification supports the underlying paranoid structure in psychopathy (Tables 4 & 6).

Table 7  
*Reality Testing Rorschach Comparisons in Psychopaths*

Variable	MPs (n = 44)			FPs (n = 115)			Statistic	es
	M	SD	Freq	M	SD	Freq		
X-%	0.25	0.13	44	0.27	0.12	113	---	---
Xu%	0.22	0.11	44	0.20	0.10	113	---	---
X+%	0.48	0.15	44	0.49	0.12	115	---	---
S-	0.73	0.94	22	<b>1.60</b>	1.67	84	<sup>a</sup> 1202.50**	0.24
WSum6	18.37	14.93	44	34.92	24.07	114	<sup>b</sup> 1.19	0.24
ALOG	0.13	0.35	6	<b>1.07</b>	1.45	74	<sup>a</sup> 846.00**	0.40
Massive Denial	0.57	0.74	21	<b>1.73</b>	1.78	78	<sup>a</sup> 966.00**	0.29

*Note.* M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Freq = the number of individuals who produced at least one of the variables; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; es = effect size; <sup>a</sup> = Mann Whitney U; <sup>b</sup> = t-test; bold = higher value; S = white space; MP = male psychopaths; FP = female psychopaths.

**Transient Lapses in Reality Testing.** Reality testing difficulties in non-psychotic psychopaths, as might be expected, are closer to the deficits noted in Exner's (1995) character disordered sample than his inpatient schizophrenics (see Gacono & Meloy, 1994 for a presentation of the ASPD schizophrenic patients; also Gacono et al., 2008). For example, as compared to Table 7, Exner's non-patients produced  $X+% = 0.68$ ,  $X-% = 0.11$ , and  $Xu% = 0.20$ ; his character-disordered sample  $X+% = 0.58$ ,  $X-% = 0.20$ , and  $Xu% = 0.20$ ; and inpatient schizophrenics  $X+% = 0.40$ ,  $X-% = 0.37$ , and  $Xu% = 0.20$ .

Noteworthy in Table 7 are multiple deficits consistent with Kernberg's (1967, 1975, 1976, 1984) conceptualization of reality-testing deficits related to massive denial, inappropriate logic, and the degree to which anger disrupts thinking. These deficits are most pronounced in women, attesting to the impact of strong pseudo-affective states on cognitive functioning.

## Conclusion

The findings in this study strongly support both the characterological issues related to psychopathy (narcissism, hysteria, paranoia; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Gacono & Smith, 2021; Smith et al., 2021b) and the presence of a borderline level of personality functioning among psychopathic characters (Gacono, 1990; Gacono & Meloy, 1988, 1994; Kernberg, 1967, 1975, 1976, 1984; Meloy, 1988).

These findings also provide additional support for gender differences within psychopathy (Beryl et al., 2014; Cunliffe & Gacono, 2005; de Vogel & Lancel, 2016; Dolan & Völlm, 2009; Forouzan & Cooke, 2005; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Pauli et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2021b; Verona & Vitale, 2018). What was once a clinical observation has become an empirical fact: Not only do psychopathic men and women differ, men's grandiosity functions effectively in warding off external and internal threats to self-image, while women's malignant hysteria does not. Women struggle with reliance on another to bolster self-image and attempt to achieve some stability within a constant state of affective dysregulation. They require others for mirroring. This pseudo-dependency is the cornerstone of hysteria (Chodoff, 1982; Cunliffe & Gacono, 2005; Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Smith et al., 2021b) and problematic in any psychopathic character. The psychopathic male has a greater ability to bask in their reflection, maintaining themselves by gazing at their image and safely devaluing, without attachment, any internal or external threats to their inflated image.

The Rorschach's unique ability to psychometrically map the psychodynamics and object relations of a specific personality syndrome continues to impress us (Meloy et al., 1997). Continued findings of gender differences among psychopaths provide hope that studies like this will lay the groundwork for continued exploration of the personality functioning of female offenders in general and female psychopaths in particular.

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