Criminally Insane
Discursive Mutations of the Dangerous Individual

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Abstract: The psychopath is a historically ill-defined and overused diagnostic category. This paper analyzes the discursive development and cultural permutation of the psychopathic personality within psychiatry and law to reveal not just the categorical flexibility but also the categorical fragility of the psychopathic person. The discourse of psychopathy relies on our understanding that the identity must be assigned to another person, for what makes the psychopath’s mental deficiency so threatening is his inability to empathize and care about his condition. Within the last five years, the discourse has noticeably shifted as people ask the question: “Am I a psychopath?” In posing this paradoxical concern, the functionality of the psychopathic identity shifts from the psychopathic Other to the psychopathic Self. This shift reconfirms the categorical pliancy of the psychopath and, furthermore, complicates what it means to “know thyself.” In examining self-knowledge formation in the context of Foucault’s essay “Technologies of the Self,” we can see how the discursive power of the psychopath dilutes and condenses through self-diagnosis.

Keywords: psychopathology, discourse, Other, Technologies, Foucault, mutations
Discursive Mutations of the Dangerous Individual

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“In Paris in 1827, Henriette Cornier, a servant, goes to the neighbor of her employers and insists that the neighbor leave her daughter with her for a time. The neighbor hesitates, agrees, then, when she returns for the child, Henriette Cornier has just killed her [the daughter] and has cut off her head, which she has thrown out the window.”83

“In Scotland, a certain John Howison enters a house where he kills an old woman whom he hardly knows, leaves without stealing anything and does not go into hiding. Arrested, he denies the fact against all evidence; but the defense argues that it is the crime of a madman since it is a crime without material motive. Howison is executed, and his comment to an official at the execution that he felt like killing him was considered in retrospect as supplementary evidence of madness.”84

These two case studies are excerpted from Foucault’s essay, “The Dangerous Individual.”85 Henriette and John are what nineteenth-century psychiatry would classify as monomaniacs—criminals without motives for their crimes. Through his essay, Foucault discusses the monomaniac in relation to the fusion of psychiatry and criminology—or in Foucauldian terminology, the “psychiatrization of crime.” In the nineteenth century, legal focus shifted from the criminal act to the criminal individual as courtrooms looked for the personal motives behind crime; thus, the psychological side of criminality became a main component of the legal structure. However, the psycho-legal discourse faced a problem: there were individuals like Henriette and John committing crimes without motives and who did not, aside from their offense, exhibit any symptoms of insanity. These motiveless criminals undermined the court’s process, a process within which the repercussion for a crime directly correlated to the criminal’s reasoning. A punishment was still needed for these offenders, but because the sentence was contingent on the criminal’s rationale, the court could not function. In an effort to maintain the legal system, the court categorized the outliers: “nineteenth-century psychiatry invented an entirely fictitious entity, a crime which is insanity, a crime which is nothing but insanity, an insanity which is nothing but crime.”86 This criminal was diagnosed as the “monomaniac.”

Rather than discrediting the legal system or psychiatric knowledge, the fabrication of monomania solidified the necessity of both discourses, and, furthermore, the diagnostic category cemented psychiatry’s role within law. As Foucault points out, monomania “is the danger of insanity in its most harmful form; a maximum of consequences, a minimum of warning.

84 Foucault, “The Dangerous Individual,” 129.
86 Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 132.
The most effect and the fewest signs…it necessitates the intervention of the medical eye.”87 The monomaniac, a hybrid of mad behavior cloaked by a façade of sanity, fractured the belief that an aberrant individual could be detected by a distinguishing phenotype or symptom. As a result, there was now a potent fear that there were mentally ill people, who, until they commit a crime, do not appear insane. The only symptom of the monomaniac’s insanity was his crime, and the monomaniac’s insanity was the justification for his legal sentence. By the end of the nineteenth century, a strong co-constitutional relationship between criminality and mental illness had developed, and psychology’s incorporation into law was deemed imperative.

The monomaniac embodied what Foucault labeled the “dangerous individual,” a person so removed from culture that he is impervious to any socialization; a person not just outside social rules but outside of humanity; a person who would kill because, as John said, he “felt like it.” The dangerous individual is erratically Other, so erratic that we need both the expertise of psychology to identify him and law to confine him. As Foucault explains, the dangerous individual “was not the man of the little everyday disorder, the pale silhouette moving about on the edges of law and normalcy, but rather the great monster.”88 He was not just on the fringe of normalcy; the dangerous person was so outside that he constituted the defining opposition to normalcy. Psychology’s invention of monomania strategically drew a bold boundary between the normal and the terrifyingly psychotic and thus demarked and distinguished Us, the sane, from Them, the insane.

Monomania existed as a diagnosis for half a century until being replaced by what is legally and psychologically recognized today as the psychopath (or its variant, the sociopath).89 The “discovery” of the psychopath and the subsequent research that surrounds and supports the identity was not in fact a scientific uncovering of an undiscovered abnormality but rather a permutation of the “dangerous individual,” an identity deeply entrenched in psychiatric and legal discourses. The psychological conception of the psychopath was developed in the nineteenth century, and throughout the twentieth century, American psychologists elaborated on and solidified the diagnostic category.90 Specifically, significant research came from of post–World War II studies examining veteran behavior as well as psychological investigations of prisoners (certainly skewed populations for data collection).

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87 Foucault, “The Dangerous Individual,” 135.
89 Psychologists clinically distinguish between sociopaths and psychopaths by citing different causes and separate neurological functions for each mental illness. Generally, clinical arguments link the sociopathic identity to cultural influences that mold a sociopath into the monstrous individual that she is today. The psychopath’s frightening behavior, on the other hand, is simply innate to her character. In short, psychopathy is deviance of nature, and sociopathy is deviance of nurture. David Lykken, “The American Crime Factory,” Psychological Inquiry 8 (1997): 261–270. However, for the purpose of my research, I intentionally look at both identities as interchangeable. I align with Federman et al.’s critical discursive standpoint that the psychopathic identity is a cultural reality positioned by politics, psychiatric research, and the sensationalized media. From this standpoint, the nature versus nurture debate is not relevant because both the psychopath and the sociopath are discursively produced. See Cary Federman, Dave Holmes, and Jean Daniel Jacob, “Deconstructing the Psychopath: A Critical Discursive Analysis,” Cultural Critique 72 (2009): 36–65.
90 British physician J.C. Prichard initially developed and understood the category of “moral insanity” to encompass all socially deviant mental behaviors, including psychopathy. See Robert Genter, “We All Go a Little Mad Sometimes’: Alfred Hitchcock, American Psychoanalysis, and the Construction of the Cold War Psychopath,” Canadian Review of American Studies 40.2 (2010): 139. Differentiations within “moral insanity” were made throughout the century.
Despite these numerous efforts to refine the identity, the psychopath still remains a historically ill-defined category plagued by ambiguity. The American Psychiatric Association has had difficulty recognizing psychopathy as a diagnostic classification. The diagnosis has never been included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM), but instead is lumped under the broad Anti-Social Personality Disorder category. The diagnostic labeling of the psychopath did not create a containable aberration; conversely, it produced an unrecognizable threat that leaves room for anyone to seem deviant. As American psychiatrist Benjamin Karpman explains, by the 1950s the psychopath as a diagnostic entity was “an over-cluttered wastebasket.” By the end of the twentieth century, the psychopath was such an expansive label that a large range of behaviors could be interpreted as symptomatically psychopathic, and the only qualifier is that the behaviors seem socially deviant.

The categorical instability, if not the dubious psychological instability, of the psychopath confirms Foucault’s statement, “what is at stake in this great issue of homicidal mania [monomania] is the function of psychiatry.” Although the definition of psychopath (or what constituted a monomaniac) continues to evolve, the cultural utility of the Foucauldian “dangerous individual” does not. The psychopath is a confusing label; yet, rather than this confusion exposing the flimsy and pliant narrative that props up the dangerous individual, the vague and ill-defined psychopathic personality reinforces the notion that we must have the discursive tools to characterize these threatening criminals. And more specifically, we need the authority of psychiatry and law to explain and define the monstrous. In “Deconstructing the Psychopath,” Federman, Holmes, and Jacob critically analyze psychopathy as a diagnostic category. The authors assert that the psychopath is not a clinical reality of the empathetically void person predisposed to violence. Rather, she is a cultural reality constructed out of “discursive contexts based on shifting behavioral classifications that try to meet criminological theories of deviance and dangerousness.” The psychopath is a modern monomaniac used by clinical, legal, and historical discourses to maintain an anxious posture that there is always the threat of the dangerous individual.

**From the Clinic to the Public: The Psychopath in Popular Discourse**

In 2005 Martha Stout, clinical psychologist and faculty member at Harvard Medical School, published *The Sociopath Next Door: The Ruthless versus the Rest of Us*. The cover of the
book features photographs of eyes glaring at the reader. Beneath the sets of ominous eyes reads, “1 in 25 ordinary Americans secretly has no conscience and can do anything at all without feeling guilty. Who is the devil you know?” Without even opening the book, the cover interpellates the reader and articulates its noxious object: the Reader—in danger, the Sociopath—The Danger. Stout’s book was not the first of its kind. In 1940 psychologist Hervey Cleckley published the widely cited, The Mask of Sanity, a text that provides narrative case histories of different “psychopaths.” In the sixty years between Cleckley and Stout’s books (and in subsequent years), numerous guides to psychopathy, as I call them, have been published. Written in accessible, nonclinical language, both of these texts serve less as psychological studies and more as handbooks informing the public how to detect pathological behavior in order to avoid psychopaths.

In 2011, former FBI agent Joe Navarro authored, How to Spot a Psychopath, a 21-page informative booklet marketed under the description “Easy to use, intended for the average layperson. You don’t have to be a psychiatrist to use this.” Navarro introduces his text with the incredulity that psychopathy is not in the DSM and states that the American Psychiatric Association’s preferred use of the broader Anti-Social Personality Disorder “may be adequate for clinicians, but it leaves the rest of us in a lark. It doesn’t help us properly identify these individuals until their actions are so egregious either we, or someone we know, is victimized.” Other works such as Snakes in Suits, Corporate Psychopaths, and Without Conscience all address the average citizen, the population deemed most vulnerable to the psychopath’s danger. The latter text, featuring a pair of menacing eyes on the cover bordered between the words “Without” and “Conscience,” concludes with a literal handbook in a chapter entitled “A Survival Guide,” which lists tips and advice on how to protect oneself from the psychopathic personality. This genre of popular paraprofessional literature utilizes qualitative descriptions and not only invites but also encourages individuals to learn about the psychopathic personality, thereby greatly expanding the breadth and scope of the discourse. These guidebooks take the psychopath from the psycho-legal space and introduce her into the socio-political sphere.

These books all subscribe to the same logic: a psychopath’s madness is dangerous because he is void of restraint, empathy, and a conscience. Furthermore, his insanity is threatening to Us because he can deceivingly perform normalcy. It is this deceitful performance of sanity that justifies why the general public should be concerned and afraid. According to Dr. Robert Hare, the “premier expert on psychopathy,” people with this personality disorder are fully aware of the consequences of their actions and know the difference between right and wrong.

yet they are...terrifyingly self-centered, remorseless, and unable to care about the feelings of others.” 102 The crux of psychopathic discourse hinges on the notion that while a psychopath might internally acknowledge her own lack of empathy, she simply does not have the capacity to be concerned. These guidebooks give us the tools to understand and discipline ourselves as sane, so that in turn, we can assign the psychopathic identity onto others. It is no longer sufficient for just psychiatry and law to distinguish who is dangerous; we must be alert and equipped with the proper tools to detect the psychopaths living amongst us.

In the last two decades, research efforts have attempted to more precisely, clinically clarify the diagnostic category. Most significantly, during the 1980s the aforementioned psychologist, Robert Hare, designed the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R). In a This American Life National Public Radio interview, Hare explains that the scientific community was lacking a consistent form of measurement for psychopathic behavior, and thus, he created the PCL-R. Hare’s checklist consists of 20 diagnostic questions focused on criminal history, childhood behavior, and family life, all of which correspond to certain “psychopathic” personality traits: lack of empathy, parasitic lifestyle, egocentricity, and manipulation, to name a few. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hare began administering the test to prisoners and found that a high score on the PCL-R accurately corresponded to criminal reconviction. “This was a huge finding,” Hare states. “For years, criminologists had labored to dissect the environmental causes of crime. Then, suddenly, here was the PCL-R, a personality test...that appeared to identify the world’s most serious chronic criminals, the people we really needed to worry about.” 103

Since the formal publication of the PCL-R in 1991, the test has been used to do just that: identify the most dangerous, severe criminals. Administered in courtrooms and prisons, the checklist is most significantly used to calculate which prisoners are eligible for parole. As explained by NPR’s Alix Spiegel, “This test has incredible power in the American criminal justice system. It’s used to make decisions such as what kind of sentence a criminal gets and whether an inmate is released on parole. It has even been used to help decide whether someone should be put to death.” 104 Robert Dixon, a man who is currently serving his twenty-sixth year in prison for accessory to murder, talks about his crime and the PCL-R in this radio segment. Throughout interviews with Dixon, as well as with his family and his friends, it seems clear that Dixon is not the merciless psychopath the checklist makes him out to be. Dixon’s original conviction was 15 years with the possibility of parole. However, unable to pass the PCL-R, he has never been eligible for a parole hearing.

Hare acknowledges the hazards of a test that determines such consequences for people; yet none of his concerns address the development and use of such a checklist. His critiques focus on the administration of the PCL-R, mainly the problems that arise when improperly trained individuals administer the test and interpret the results. Hare created the PCL-R with the intention of using the test as a measurement to create better parameters to help define the psychopath. Despite Hare’s effort to clarify, the PCL-R simply regurgitated the same

102 Hare, Without Conscience, 35.
Returning to Foucault’s discussion of monomania, he argues that the identity could only function within “a knowledge system able to measure the index of danger present in an individual; a knowledge system which might establish the protection necessary...hence the idea that crime ought to be the responsibility not of judges but of experts in psychiatry, criminology, psychology, etc.”

The format of the PCL-R calculates the danger present in an individual and, considering its heavy use in the court and prison system, further yokes crime to psychiatry. The psychopath tautologically functions within this knowledge system: you are insane because you are a criminal; you are a criminal because you are insane. Given this co-constitutional relationship, the only “cure” for the psychopath’s mental illness would be confinement, physically maintaining the rigid binary of the Sane and the Insane.

The *This American Life* episode concludes with perhaps the most interesting segment of the broadcast in an act entitled, “The Results Are In.” A psychiatrist, Dr. Bernstein, administers the PCL-R to all of the producers and staff of the radio show. Unsurprisingly, no one is a psychopath; in fact, no one scores above three points (on the forty-point PCL-R scale). Despite the underwhelming results, throughout the act, staff members talk about the anxiety induced by taking the test: “I was very nervous,” says host Ira Glass. “Are you still, after taking it?” his colleague asks. “A little,” Glass responds. For entertainment value, the staff places bets on who is the most psychopathic of the bunch. While ranking one another, writer Jane Feltes asks, “If I start crying while you guys are doing this, does this mean I am not a psychopath?” Listening to the podcast, it is obvious that no one was genuinely concerned about his or her psychopathic potential, but it is clear that they are all on edge about the results of the test as anxious laughter is constantly heard from the group.

In September 2011, three months after NPR aired “The Psychopath Test,” *Reader’s Digest* published an article entitled “Are You a Psychopath?” The article features Hare’s PCL-R and a scoring guide for readers to calculate their own “level” of psychopathy. The article calls out the readers and asks them to consider their own mental stability. But then the article ironically proceeds to overview Hare’s book *Without Conscience*, which asserts that a psychopath is relentlessly consumed with her own success, and thus, she would not care about her condition. Following Hare’s reasoning, a psychopath would never be inclined to respond to the question: “Are You a Psychopath?” The article concludes by listing the nonprofit website *Aftermath: Surviving Psychopathy Foundation* as a resource for readers. The *Aftermath* website features a page entitled, “Are they [psychopaths] aware of their condition?” The response essentially follows Hare’s logic: “when they are in the midst of trying to achieve an immediate and tangible goal (e.g., to impress you or to obtain something you have), they may demonstrate strikingly poor judgment and additional impairments in their self-awareness.” In other words, it is possible that a psychopath might be acutely aware of her actions but would not care. Both the final segment of *This American Life* and the *Reader’s Digest* article contradict the prevailing

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105 Foucault, “The Dangerous Individual,” 144.
107 The PCL-R scoring rubric was later pulled from the online copy of the article “due to copyright issues.”
narrative surrounding psychopathy. If the two followed the logic laid out by psychiatry and law, the “dangerous individual” would perpetually remain the Other. Articles would ask, “Is your friend/sister/boyfriend a psychopath?” However, there is a bend in the logic, a transformation in the psycho-legal narrative, and within the paradox of self-diagnosis of psychopathy, there is a mutation in the discourse. This new momentum breaks the previous tautological movement—you are a criminal so you are mentally ill, you are mentally ill so you are a criminal. However, when applied to the self, the psychopath expands in an entirely new direction.

The Discursive Mutation: The Psychopathic Other to the Psychopathic Self

On October 26, 2010, David, a twenty-year-old male, posted the following to an online forum entitled, Ask Dr. Robert: “My question is quite short. It is simply: Is there actually any way I can help myself?” He continues, “To explain, I am a sociopath.” David lists symptomatic personality traits as justification of his self-diagnosis: “I am a compulsive liar, a proficient thief, a good manipulator and actor with a sharp tongue, people regularly call me arrogant, I dislike authority, I am constantly compulsive, I used to terrorize my animals as a child.” David proclaims that he is in the midst of a psychological breakdown and, thus, he has turned to the forum to help him answer his main question and the title of his post, “I am a Sociopath. Can I Ever Learn to Love?”

David is not an anomaly. Starting in 2006, people began noticeably using blogs and online discussion sites to inquire about their identity in regard to psychopathy. Begin to key “Am I a psychopath?” into Google, and the search engine will guess the question before you can finish typing—and it will even offer a few suggestions: “Am I a psychopath quiz,” “Am I a psychopath test,” or “Am I a psychopath book.”

Not all online postings are uploaded to forums under the authoritative monitoring of a “doctor.” Rather, most are posted on discussion boards completely open to the public—who reads the post and who responds is entirely unknown. One online user, under the alias “kid who needs help,” submitted a post on Yahoo! Answers entitled, “Am I a Psychopath or Sociopath or Narcissist?” The entry was uploaded in August 2011 and is essentially a list of about forty self-described behaviors and personality traits, including “I am an amazing liar; I have never been caught in my life for anything, mainly due to my lack of emotion and guilt.” One individual on the website SociopathWorld.com writes, “I might be a sociopath, but I’m not sure.” After a self-description of his confusion, the author inquires, “What does this sound like to you? I’m asking because as much as I’m able to make sense of the world around me, I cannot for the life of me make sense of myself.”

Others who post online are apparently distressed by the potential diagnosis. One entry is titled, “Am I a Psychopath or Is There a Cure??” In the first sentence, the anonymous poster anxiously writes, “I’m scared that I might be one because the more I research it, the more I flash back to what I have actually done.” He or she concludes dramatically, typing in all caps, “This post is my last and final attempt to see if I can possibly cure myself ... I would like to feel things.... IS THERE A CURE FOR PSYCHOPATH DISORDER? OR IF I AM EVEN A PSYCHOPATH? ... IS THERE A CURE FOR EMOTIONALLY DEAD FOLKS?”

others confused; some extremely concerned and others simply curious. Despite the varying emotions and phrasings, there is a noticeable trend toward the self as the Dangerous Individual, specifically people turning to their computers to ask the question: "Am I a psychopath?"

Drawing from Foucault’s theory in “Technologies of the Self,” we can examine the idea of self-diagnosis and identity formation to understand the discourse of psychopathy within the confessional modalities of Internet blogs and online forums. In the fall of 1982, Foucault presented a seminar at the University of Vermont entitled “Technologies of the Self.” This seminar was a turning point in Foucault’s focus. While still grappling with technologies of power, in the two years preceding his death, Foucault re-examined the topics of the self, the subject, and the ways in which we understand ourselves as subjects. “I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination,” he wrote, “the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of the self.”

In short, he focused on the formations of the self into a “subject.” Foucault died before he could compile his final theories into a book; since then, academics have worked to assemble and organize his newer theoretical ideas. The text, *Technologies of the Self*, published in 1988, serves as one of Foucault’s crucial posthumous works on subjecthood, a long-standing topic of critique among many post-structuralists. The subject, according to Foucault, is not a stagnant identity, but rather one becomes a subject through a process he defines as subjectification.

Technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immorality.

The current discursive mutation of the psychopath—the shift from diagnosis of the Other to the diagnosis of the Self—is where Foucault’s “Technologies of the Self” can be used as a theoretical apparatus. In the section entitled, “Context of Study,” Foucault explains his objective: to understand “the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge about themselves.” He goes on to list biology, medicine, and psychiatry as a few examples of the discourses that we apply to ourselves. “The main point is not to accept this knowledge at face value but to analyze these so-called sciences as very specific ‘truth-games’ related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves.”

The psychopathic identity is constituted by these “truth-games.” The PCL-R, *Without Conscience*, and Robert Dixon’s continued incarceration reveal how the diagnosis follows the particular historical narrative of the dangerous individual. However, self-diagnosis of psychopathy contradicts this discursive narrative and highlights the fragility of the psychiatric category and the multiplicity of scientific “truth.” The reasoning supporting psychopathy hinges on the understanding that we identify

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112 Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 19.
ourselves sane so that the dangerous individual remains the threatening Other. Thus, when the shift is made to self-application, it transforms the discourse and reshapes the truth-games and the rules that we follow. The truth of the psychopath has been appropriated as a way to understand our own personality and as a way to know the self rather than just the other.

In the opening pages of his text, Foucault poses a primary question: “How have certain kinds of interdictions required the price of certain kinds of knowledge about oneself? What must one know about oneself to renounce anything?”

How do we decipher our subjecthood in relation to what is prohibited? Foucault traces the development of self-understanding and explains that the subject previously functioned under the Greek notion of “Take care of yourself.” Now, however, we focus on the principle of “Know yourself.” The tension between self-care and self-knowledge is a point of interest for Foucault. He suggests that the modern philosophical principle is the latter, within which taking care of the self is implied. We “inherit[ed] the tradition of Christian morality that made self-renunciation the condition for salvation” and, as Foucault explains, “to know oneself was paradoxically the way to self-renunciation.” Thus, the movement away from self-care and toward self-knowledge revolves around the notion of self-renunciation. Foucault continues, “‘Know thyself’ has obscured ‘Take care of yourself’ because our morality, a morality of asceticism, insists that the self is that which one can reject.” Accordingly, before we can abjure anything, we must first develop self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is a constant activity and the underlying principle of technologies of the self.

To Foucault, knowing thyself is a process in which “the master/teacher speaks and doesn’t ask questions and the disciple doesn’t answer but must listen and keep silent … this is the positive condition for acquiring truth.” This posture of silence and knowledge acquisition is the format for technologies of the self. However, despite the divide between the student’s position of silence and the teacher’s possession of knowledge, Foucault makes the important distinction that we are not simply passive subjects molded by external power; rather, we can only see ourselves as subjects because of power. Performing technologies of the self (in the digital or Foucauldian sense), we are constantly engaged in the active internalization of power and knowledge that molds our subjecthood. Our insides are essentially reflections of external discourses, and thus, by looking inward, we can reveal the discursive “truths” embedded within us.

Foucault focuses on internalization of discourse and the process of becoming subject: “I studied madness not in terms of the criteria of formal sciences but to show how a type of management of individuals inside and outside of asylums was made possible by this strange discourse.” The success and power of a discourse depends the “management” of individuals through the performance of different technologies of the self. After examining the flimsy explanations upholding psychopathy’s malleable discursive truths, we can see how our individual discipline is crucial to the diagnostic stability of psychopathy. However, the shift to “knowing the self” in terms of psychopathy ends up remolding the “truths.” In self-identifying as psychopathic, we are essentially self-identifying as the Other; psychopaths are

118 Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 32.
119 Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 19.
the deviant persons in constant opposition to normalcy, and by identifying as them, we are ingesting the Other into the Self. While we can take in the psychopath, she cannot be wholly digested, because by self-identifying with the dangerous individual, we undermine the logic of her existence. The defining line that demarked Us versus Them blurs as we incorporate the psychopath into the self.

The Online Psychopath and Technologies of the Self

This relationship between the external and internal complicates when the outside is also entrenched in a digital world. When Foucault grappled with concepts of subjecthood and formations of the self, he was not theorizing in today’s culture, so attached to electronic information. Many of the “technologies of self” we all exercise today are, literally, facilitated by digital technologies. In the book, Digital Technologies of the Self, authors Yasmine Abbas and Fred Dervin re-imagine Foucault’s theory and apply it to modern society. Through this collection of essays, we can begin to understand how the digital world molds the way we might comprehend and employ Foucault’s notion of “technologies of the self” today. Facebook launched in 2004, the next year YouTube, followed by Twitter and Yahoo!Answers in 2006.120 The start of twenty-first century marked a shift in the way we use technology as a tool to understand our relationships and identities. The omnipresence of technologies in our lives means “the opportunities for stating and transforming the self/selves have become nearly limitless.”121 A multiplicity of people are taking care of themselves via a multitude of digital electronics. Abbas and Dervin explore the tension produced from fusing technologies of the self with the digital environment: “technologies contribute to the expression, (co-) construction and enactment of indentie(s) of mobile individuals.”122 The Internet, as a digital technology, allows for the invention and re-invention of our numerous identities.

Revisiting the post on Sociopath.com, we can see how the Internet serves as this space for self-knowledge formation. “I think I might be a sociopath, but I’m not sure,” the online user writes. “I’m asking because as much as I’m able to make sense of the world around me, I cannot for the life of me make sense of myself.” The goal of the post is not so much a diagnosis, but for the writer to come away with a better “sense of myself.”123 As we have become increasingly focused on knowing the self, different techniques for self-exploration developed. “A relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to the nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing. A whole field of experience opened which was absent.”124 In many regards, the use of the Internet to develop an understanding about the self aligns with Technologies of the Self. Blogs, chat rooms, and forums all act as spaces for self-knowledge formation, and considering the

122 Abbas and Dervin 6.
123 “Sociopath World.”
accessibility and availability of online spaces to write about the self, there are exponentially more “fields of experiences” we can have.

One could argue that the more involved we become with technology, the more mechanical and distant our behavior becomes as new mediums can entirely replace inter-personal interactions. Christine Rosen confronts this idea, asserting,

We haven’t become more like machines. We’ve made the machines more like us. In the process we are encouraging the flourishing of some of our less attractive human tendencies: for passive spectacle; for constant, escapist fantasy; for excesses of consumption. These impulses are age-old, of course, but they are now fantastically easy to satisfy.\(^{125}\)

Rosen’s point is an important clarification: new technologies have not created new selves, but rather, we always already have a multiplicity of desires and identities, and technologies simply allow us to explore many of them at any time. Thus, understanding the Internet as an accessible and efficient tool, we can see how the online space could be used to “know thyself(selves).”

Foucault’s discussion of the pedagogical dichotomy between the silent student and the speaking teacher shifts when online. We can, with relative ease, acquire knowledge from a variety of sources—the Internet is a space with which plurality can easily emerge and exist. This is not to suggest that the Internet transcends all discourse and “truth-games” but rather that there are various, even potentially contradictory, discourses that exist at once, and knowledge is dispersed from a variety of subjects. WebMD.com illustrates this dynamic. The website is an online medical resource that prides itself on providing reliable medical information;\(^{126}\) however, the interpretation and application of the medical information is entirely in the hands of the subject. And ultimately, the diagnoses we conclude from WebMD are self-induced. For example, celiac, a previously uncommon disease, is now one of the most prevalent autoimmune disorders; furthermore, 97% of those who believe they have celiac disease are undiagnosed by a clinician.\(^{127}\) Critics of online medical information argue that the Internet and sites like WebMD “can equip individuals to challenge medical experts, reinforcing a general mistrust of doctors and furthering the depersonalization of medicine.”\(^{128}\) While it is true that the availability of online diagnostic tools separates the interaction between the patient and the doctor, there is still a powerful connection to medicine as a truth. An interesting dynamic occurs: the medical discourse is still followed, arguably more so than before, considering the spike in celiac disease diagnoses; however, the way online information is applied to the self is entirely noncontingent on the institution of medicine.

The Internet can replace the singular space of the doctor’s (or psychiatrist’s) office with a multiplicity of information from a variety of sources. Previously, without the Internet as a tool, most people would not think to identify themselves as gluten-intolerant. However,


\(^{126}\) The WebMD online information page states: “WebMD provides valuable health information, tools for managing your health, and support to those who seek information. You can trust that our content is timely and credible.”


\(^{128}\) Copelton and Valle 625.
with the increase of space for knowledge dispersion, self-diagnosis of celiac disease increased to 97%, and the idea of “know thyself” in terms of celiac disease is possible. The Internet’s accessibility and expansiveness allows discourse to become viral, in both a technological and infectious sense. In November 2011, Google retrieved 137,000 results for “Am I a psychopath?” As of December 2013, Google was retrieving nearly seven million results, an average increase of almost 300,000 more people each month using the Internet to explore the idea of the self in relation to the psychopath. This is not to say that the Internet is the cause of the discursive mutation, for, as seen through the NPR radio broadcast and Reader's Digest article, the shift is occurring in non-online spaces. Instead, the Internet is a space of identity formation that can expedite discursive changes.

Unlike celiac disease, in the case of psychopathy, people are not turning to the Internet to diagnose symptoms. Rather, individuals are using online spaces to confess behaviors or feelings they already associate with psychopathy. In February 2012, a Yahoo!Answers user posted the question, “Am I a psychopath...?” and wrote, “I hate humans and constantly (meaning daily) have thoughts of killing someone or dream of me committing a mass murder. I lie often, sometimes I find myself lying when there is no need for it.” Through Foucault’s assertion that the subject deciphers himself in regard to what is forbidden, we can see blogs as spaces that allow us to understand ourselves in terms of what is psychopathic. Self-knowledge, according to Foucault, hinges on renunciation, and with technologies of the self “you find the obligation of the exomologesis. The sinner seeks his penance.” Foucault uses the example of the Catholic confessional, a space where the subject approaches a bishop already with the understanding of himself as a sinner. However, to receive the label of sinner, the person must also define and explain his or her sins and offenses. Exomologesis is the self-knowledge of one’s faults, as Foucault explains, “that’s the paradox at the heart of exomologesis, it rubs out the sin and yet reveals the sinner.” A confession is not just the disclosure your sins, but it is also the act of identifying the self as something forbidden.

Foucault explains that there are, in fact, two types of self-renunciation. The first, exomologesis, is renunciation through identification as a sinner; the second, exagoreusis, is renunciation of yourself by “permanently verbalizing your thoughts and permanently obeying the master.” The latter, exagoreusis, is the most influential today. According to Foucault, renunciation has sustained a hermeneutical function because “confession permits the master to know because of his greater experience and wisdom and therefore to give better advice.” However, in the context of self-diagnosis and self-identification, there is no singular bishop, psychiatrist, or “master.” A multitude of knowledge is dispersed, and the way this information

132 For more on this, Foucault addresses the topic of the Catholic confession and the sinner in depth in his text History of Sexuality Volume One.
133 Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 42.
135 Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 47.
is used can reshape and expand the discourse. The Internet serves as a confessional space; however, the space does not maintain the same power dynamic of teacher and student that Foucault discussed.

The Duality of the Discursive Mutation

In many regards, the turn from the Psychopathic Other to the Psychopathic Self aligns with Foucault’s theory of renunciation: the psychopathic identity is one of moral corruption and can be interpreted as a modern form of psychological sin. However, the interpretive role of the master and the mechanics of renunciation cannot function within the discourse of psychopathy. As pointed out, the self-diagnosis of psychopathy is inherently contradictory to the diagnostic narrative: in declaring our psychopathic identity, we are excluding ourselves from the subscribed discourse. By simply announcing, “I am a psychopath,” a person is renouncing her ability to be a psychopath because, according to the dominant discourse, a psychopath would never be concerned enough to make such an assertion. We do not need a bishop to give us an identity for us to then abjure. By simply explaining our psychopathic tendencies, we are renouncing the psychopathic identity ourselves. In doing so, we coordinate the confessional power dynamics all within a singular space of a blog post.

In confessing our identities as psychopathic, we are not just exempting ourselves from the identity, we are mutating and refiguring the discourse. Comprehending the self as psychopathic fades the line that was drawn between the Self and the Other and allows the diagnostic label to expand across both. Asking, “Am I a psychopath?” is more than just discursively contradictory, it also reveals the psychopath’s discursive potency. The power of the dangerous individual has become so expansive that we can apply it in a way that undermines its clinical foundations. Revisiting Ira Glass’s commentary on the This American Life radio show, we can see the duality of this discursive moment: on one hand, he is entertaining his audience by taking the PCL-R, a test that both the listener and Glass know he will undoubtedly fail. On the other, Glass is still notably nervous and reveals to the listener his apprehensions about the results of the checklist. Within the recorded noise of his anxious laugher is a simultaneous representation of the silliness and seriousness of the self-induced psychopath test. The psychopath is garnering power from Glass’s attempt at self-diagnosis while simultaneously losing it.

The psychopath as a discursive entity appears to be exploding and imploding at the same time. As the psychopath goes into the hands of the self, the diagnosis disconnects from the common discourse and begins to reshape. This discursive mutation reminds us of the unstable foundation of the monomaniac and confirms the ill-defined status of the “dangerous individual.” However, it also affirms the fact that the psychopath remains powerful, even in a new self-diagnostic form. We stand at a paradoxical moment when the psychopath’s ill-defined characteristics have allowed him to expand into the all-consuming category that he is today. Moreover, as the label continues to inflate, it becomes increasingly void. As something expands to encompass more and more, the less specificity it can embody. Eventually, when a category can be applied to everything, it begins to signify nothing. Yet, the psychopath’s frequent diagnostic use also reveals the power of the “dangerous individual.” Even when we do not follow the discursive “truth-games” laid out for us, we can still employ the category of the psychopath as a way to “know thyself.”
References


