

SOCIALIZED/SUBCLINICAL PSYCHOPATHS IN INTIMATE PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS: PROFILE, PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE AND RISK FACTORS

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In the present theoretical review we analyze the likely relationship between subclinical psychopathy and various forms of psychological maltreatment in intimate partner relationships. Thus, it is necessary to delimit the concept of subclinical psychopathy, as well to examine psychological abuse or maltreatment in couple relationships, also known as emotional and/or invisible violence, since it is the type of abuse mostly perpetrated by psychopathic partners in their intimate relationships. This will permit us to provide a set of indicators in order to characterize a non-psychopathological profile of the psychopathic aggressor in the couple. We delimit the general profile of the successful psychopath in the intimate relationship, as well as the kind of intimate relationships they often establish and the indicators of psychological abuse that represent risk factors in the relationship. Finally, we also review the likely associations between these indicators and psychopathic traits.

Key words: Intimate relationships, Profile, Psychological abuse/maltreatment, Socialized, successful/subclinical psychopathy, Risk factors.

En la presente revisión teórica analizamos las posibles relaciones entre la psicopatía subclínica y las diversas manifestaciones de maltrato psicológico en las relaciones íntimas. Para ello es preciso delimitar el concepto de psicopatía subclínica, así como también la problemática del maltrato psicológico en la pareja, también denominado violencia emocional y/o violencia invisible, puesto que es el tipo de maltrato que mayormente perpetran las parejas psicópatas en sus relaciones, todo lo cual nos permitirá ofrecer un conjunto de indicadores para concretar un perfil no psicopatológico del agresor psicópata en la pareja. Delimitamos el perfil general del psicópata integrado en la pareja, así como también el tipo de relaciones íntimas que suelen establecer y los indicadores de maltrato psicológico que representan factores de riesgo de la relación. Finalmente, también revisamos las posibles relaciones entre esos indicadores y los rasgos psicopáticos.

Palabras clave: Factores de riesgo, Maltrato psicológico, Perfil, Psicopatía integrada/subclínica, Relaciones de pareja.

Criminal psychopaths and socialized (or successful) psychopaths? What are the differences between the two? Are they essentially different things? Research has already provided considerable evidence in relation to these issues (Hare, 1993; Garrido, 2000; Pozueco, 2010; Pozueco, Romero, & Casas, 2011a), as well as on the necessary distinction between psychopathy and antisocial personality disorder (Hare, Hart, & Harpur, 1991; Torrubia & Cuquerella, 2008; Pozueco, 2011; Pozueco et al., 2011b).

Here, we should like to stress and make clear that the fundamental difference between criminal psychopaths and socialized, subclinical, “successful” or non-criminal psychopaths is the actual commission of a crime – fraud, theft, bribery, perversion of justice, tax offences, actual bodily harm, family and intimate partner violence, manslaughter, murder, sexual assault, etc. – given that,

according to various studies, the two types of psychopath have the same basic structure of personality and emotions, differing only in the behavioural aspect – some are anti-social and criminal, while others are not. Furthermore, as recently pointed out by Marietán (2011), it is important to distinguish those who are psychopaths from those who simply appear to be. This point is a crucial one, since not everyone that displays certain isolated psychopathic traits at particular moments and/or in specific situations is a psychopath in the strict sense; rather, they simply behave as such – giving the appearance of being psychopaths – in certain situations.

On the other hand, the relationship between psychopathy and intimate partner abuse has also been highlighted by numerous studies, which moreover do not focus solely – as is generally thought – on research addressing the specific problem of gender violence (which tends to refer almost exclusively to men as the abusers of their partners or ex-partners). In the present article we make no distinctions of sex and/or gender, since

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psychopathy, as numerous recent studies have found, is a-sexual, occurring in both men and women; we prefer to use the term intimate partner violence (IPV), which refers not only to physical violence, and also covers both women and men.

As regards the specific context of *intimate partner violence* and its multiple forms of expression – physical, psychoemotional, economic, sexual, etc. –, it should be stressed that it has some well-established previous correlates that begin to manifest themselves even during the courtship stage of a relationship. There are types/styles of love or relationship – according to Sternberg’s (1986, 1997) Triangular Theory of Love – that are inadvisable for all those who believe it possible to establish a healthy intimate relationship involving genuine commitment, regardless of the ups and downs of everyday life in general and that of couples in particular. In this regard, psychopathic partners are incapable of participating in an intimate partner relationship based on respect, love, commitment, faithfulness, etc.; they are also more likely to resort to psychological than physical violence.

The aim of the present theoretical review is to provide an up-to-date overview of the problem of subclinical psychopathy in intimate partner relationships. The fundamental conclusion is that the relational dynamics of socialized psychopaths (males and females) are very similar, revolving basically around unfaithfulness, manipulation and various kinds of coercive interaction patterns, all of which leads us to think that intimate relationships with socialized psychopaths, despite their superficial charm, are characterized by a type of violence that is mostly of a psychological nature, and generate suffering in the victims.

SOCIALIZED PSYCHOPATHS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE WITHIN THE COUPLE

The psychosocial profile of socialized or subclinical psychopaths

“Likeable,” “charming,” “intelligent,” “alert,” “impressive,” “confidence-inspiring,” and “a great success with the ladies” (or the opposite sex): these are the sorts of descriptions repeatedly used by Cleckley (2) in his famous case-studies of psychopaths. But psychopaths are also, of course, “irresponsible,” “self-destructive,” and so on. These descriptions highlight the great frustrations, concerns and puzzles involved in the study of psychopathy:

“Psychopaths seem to have in abundance the very traits most desired by normal persons. When so many so-called normal individuals attend assertiveness training, the untroubled self-confidence of the psychopath seems almost like an impossible dream. When many young persons are feeling the need for social skills training, the magnetic attraction of the psychopath for members of the opposite sex must seem almost supernatural.” (Ray & Ray, 1982, p. 135).

Cleckley’s (1976) main hypothesis in relation to psychopaths is that they present an affective deficit, which he refers to as *semantic aphasia*. In a similar line, two other authors working in the field of psychopathy stated quite graphically that “the psychopath knows the words, but not the music” (Johns & Quay, 1962, p. 217). Such people feel emotions in only the most superficial of ways. They do strange, self-destructive and heterodestructive things, because consequences that would fill ordinary people with shame, self-loathing and embarrassment move the psychopath only to an insignificant extent. What for others would be terrible things to do are merely passing inconveniences for the psychopath. Cleckley (1976) also argued that psychopathy is quite common in society in general; indeed, and after considerable clinical experience in his private practice, he reported in his book *The Mask of Sanity* various cases of psychopaths who functioned more or less normally in society, such as businessmen and women, doctors, and even psychiatrists.

Eysenck and Eysenck (1978) considered criminal psychopathy as an extreme of a “normal” personality dimension (or dimensions), though it should be noted that these authors attempted to equate – erroneously – psychopathy with *psychoticism*. For her part, Widom (1977, 1978) was among the first to design a specific methodology for evaluating and characterizing non-institutionalized psychopaths (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995), classifying criminal psychopaths as “*unsuccessful*” psychopaths – for the fact of their having been apprehended and jailed after committing one or more crimes.

The implication, of all this is that many psychopaths may exist in society who cope better than do those who come to the attention of the judicial and welfare systems. Harrington (1974) went further, asserting that the psychopath is, indeed, “the man of the future”, the new type of person produced by the evolutionary pressures of



modern life. Smith (1978), however, was critical of this general point of view, focusing on the genuine incapacities also displayed by the clinical psychopath.

Nevertheless, the main problem is that the study of psychopathy at a clinical level has been commonly associated with a range of mental disorders, of both a psychotic nature and a neurotic one, as well as with various personality disorders; with these last types of disorder psychopathy does indeed share some isolated traits (narcissism, a certain histrionic manner in particular cases and in some of the person's behaviours, etc.), but little more. It is well known that Eysenck's work in this area focused mainly on psychoticism, and that he made the error of including psychopathy as a mere subcategory of it. Bearing in mind the lengths to which Cleckley went to stress the enormous differences between psychotics and psychopaths, Eysenck's approach seems, at the very least, unnecessarily confusing.

From the legal-forensic perspective, we have the concept of criminal psychopathy. It is certainly the case that psychopathy has been studied mainly with samples of prison inmates, and has generally focused more on men than on women. But the state of this issue has been different for some twenty years now, since the introduction of the first self-report measures for evaluating socialized or subclinical psychopathy, removing the need for long and time-consuming structured interviews.

The differences between subclinical psychopathy and criminal psychopathy are clear, and basically concern their behavioural dimension. The two principal exponents of these concepts of psychopathy have been, respectively, US psychiatrist Hervey Milton Cleckley and Canadian forensic psychologist Robert D. Hare. For purposes of comparison, Table 1 lists psychopathic traits according to each author's perspective.

The biggest problem the psychopathy construct has come up against is that of having been continually and blindly associated with both antisocial behaviour and criminal behaviour, despite the fact that, as early as 1941, Cleckley stressed that antisocial behaviour is not an essential symptom of the psychopathy syndrome, understanding syndrome as simply a set of symptoms, and not as synonymous of psychopathological condition, since psychopathy is also characterized by the total absence of any psychopathological manifestation.

Nor is criminal behaviour a core or essential element of psychopathy, as recently highlighted by, for example, Skeem and Cooke (2010). The problem here is that the psychopathy traits included in the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 1991, 2003) have been employed as though they were the only ones that characterized psychopaths. The PCL-R is the most well-known assessment instrument internationally, and is used for assessing psychopathy specifically in legal and prison

TABLE 1
FEATURES/TRAITS OF PSYCHOPATHY ACCORDING TO THE
CLINICAL AND LEGAL-FORENSIC PERSPECTIVES

SUBCLINICAL PSYCHOPATH (Hervey Milton Cleckley, 1941, 1976)	CRIMINAL PSYCHOPATH (Robert D. Hare, 1991, 2003)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Superficial charm and good "intelligence". 2. Absence of delusions and other signs of irrational thinking. 3. Absence of "nervousness" or psychoneurotic manifestations. 4. Unreliability. 5. Untruthfulness and insincerity. 6. Lack of remorse or shame. 7. Inadequately motivated antisocial behaviour. 8. Poor judgement and failure to learn by experience. 9. Pathologic egocentricity and incapacity for love. 10. General poverty in major affective reactions. 11. Specific loss of insight. 12. Unresponsiveness in general interpersonal relations. 13. Fantastic and uninviting behavior with drink and sometimes without. 14. Suicide threats rarely carried out. 15. Sex life impersonal, trivial, and poorly integrated. 16. Failure to follow any life plan. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Glibness and superficial charm. 2. Grandiose sense of self-worth. 3. Need for stimulation and proneness to boredom. 4. Pathological lying. 5. Conning and manipulativeness. 6. Lack of remorse or guilt. 7. Shallow affect. 8. Callousness and lack of empathy. 9. Parasitic lifestyle. 10. Poor behavioral controls. 11. Promiscuous sexual behavior. 12. Early behavior problems. 13. Lack of realistic, long-term goals. 14. Impulsivity. 15. Irresponsibility. 16. Failure to accept responsibility for own actions. 17. Many short-term marital relationships. 18. Juvenile delinquency. 19. Revocation of conditional release. 20. Criminal versatility.



contexts, but not in the general population. However, as Skeem and Cooke point out, “the PCL-R is not the theoretical construct of psychopathy... The PCL-R is one of the several useful tools that help to advance our understanding of psychopathy” (Skeem & Cooke, 2010, p. 442).

Thus, if the criteria or traits included in the PCL-R were the only ones that defined the psychopathy construct, we would obviously be mistakenly reducing it to the criminal context. Moreover, and although this point often seems to be overlooked, the PCL-R, as highlighted by Hare in several papers (Hare, 1991, 1993, 1996, 2003), is based almost entirely on previous work by Cleckley (1941, 1976), to the extent of its incorporating – as can be seen in Table 1 – the same criteria as those drawn up by Cleckley but with some modifications at a purely terminological level and including traits of anti-social and criminal behaviour.

Finally, from the subclinical perspective, however, psychopathy is studied not as an artificial clinical category, but as a general personality trait in the general or civil population (Benning, Patrick, Blonigen, Hicks, & Iacono, 2005; Hall & Benning, 2006; Lynam & Derefinko, 2006), and not in either the clinical or the legal-forensic population. From this approach, the study of socialized or subclinical psychopaths is easy to understand: it deals with people who fulfil the criteria for psychopathy and who are not involved in criminal behaviour; as to whether they are *potentially* criminal is another question.

Psychological abuse in intimate partner relationships: violence that is invisible but detectable

Psychological violence goes by many names: *non-physical abuse* (Hudson & McIntosh, 1981), *mental or psychological torture* (Russell, 1982), *psychological abuse* (Walker, 1979, Tolman, 1989), *emotional abuse* (NiCarthy, 1986), *indirect abuse* (Gondolf, 1987), *psychological aggression* (Murphy & O’Leary, 1989), *verbal abuse* (Evans, 1996), *intimate terrorism* (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000), and so on.

Whilst *physical violence* would seem to be easily identifiable in interpersonal relationships given that the effects on victims are readily observable, the manifestations of *psychological abuse* are harder to detect. Even so, there are indicators of psychological abuse in couples, some more obvious than others. Some indicators – such as threats, criticism, insults and humiliation – help to make it more obvious; others, in

contrast, such as manipulation of information or disregard for one’s partner’s emotions, are more subtle (Marshall, 1999). In turn, we should not forget that in many cases a lack of evidence of harm done to the partner derives not from the fact that no such harm has been done, but from the fact that the abuse has a basis in love (Ravazzola, 1997).

Not all men and women who wish to control their partner go to the extreme of using *physical violence* to achieve their goals. However, some research has shown that aggressors tend to have greater levels of need for control over other people (Stets, 1991). The reality is that exercising control over one’s partner is a matter that transcends mere physical aggression, whose expression within the marriage or relationship is the product of a gradual increase in *coercive interaction patterns* that emerge prior to the consolidation of the couple, that is, during the period of courtship (Blázquez, Moreno, & García-Baamonde, 2010). Thus, the key concept here is that of coercive interaction patterns, which, translated to the field of psychopathy, would be involved in the so-called *cycle of psychopathic manipulation* (Hare, 1993; Babiak, 1996, 2007; Garrido, 2000, 2001, 2004; Babiak & Hare, 2006; Marietán, 2011; Pozueco, 2010), a coercive/manipulative cycle in which, as we shall see presently, psychological violence, in its diverse expressions, is the habitual *modus operandi* of socialized psychopaths of both sexes.

Finally, it is important to stress that psychological abuse can be inherent to physical violence, be antecedent to it, or occur in its absence. Whatever the case, psychological abuse is more difficult to identify and assess than other forms of violence (McAllister, 2000), so that it has been suggested to estimate its severity according to both the *frequency* with which it occurs and its *subjective impact* on the victim (Walker, 1979, 2000). Its consequences are at the very least as pernicious as those of physical abuse (O’Leary, 1999).

What we are faced with, then, is a kind of *invisible violence* (Asensi, 2008), which can be understood as any behaviour – physical or verbal, active or passive – that threatens or violates the emotional integrity of the victim, in a continuous and systematic process (Loring, 1994), and with the aim of intimidating or degrading the victim or causing in him or her feelings of guilt or suffering (Villavicencio & Sebastián, 1999; McAllister, 2000).



Indicators of psychological abuse (IPA) and/or covert and manifest mechanisms of emotional abuse

There are a range of factors and subfactors or *indicators of psychological abuse* (IPA) in the couple that already begin to manifest themselves during courtship (Blázquez & Moreno, 2008a; Blázquez et al., 2009, 2010), including the following: humiliating, disparaging or belittling one’s partner, both in public and in private; social and economic isolation; threats of violence against the partner or his/her loved ones; destruction or harm to things valued by the victim – objects or animals; repeated threats of divorce or desertion, and so on. To these we could add denial of the violence and the attribution of absolute responsibility for the abuse episodes to the victim, as well as all those behaviours and attitudes involving any form of psychological aggression (Blázquez & Moreno, 2008b; Moreno, Blázquez, García-Baamonde, & Guerrero, 2011).

Taverniers (2001) drew up an extensive list of IPAs (see Table 2), categorizing them according to the extent of the evidence for them. Later on we shall show how closely they can be associated with psychopathic traits.

FACTORS	SUBFACTORS
1. DEGRADATION	1. Humiliation 2. Disparagement 3. Belittling 4. Contradicting 5. Scorn
2. HOSTILITY	1. Reproaching the victim 2. Insults 3. Threats
3. INDIFFERENCE	1. Lack of empathy and support 2. Monopolization
4. INTIMIDATION	1. Judging, criticizing, correcting, etc. 2. Threatening postures and gestures 3. Destructive behaviours
5. IMPOSITION OF BEHAVIOUR PATTERNS	1. Social blocking 2. Orders 3. Deviations 4. Abusive insistence 5. Invasions of privacy 6. Sabotage
6. BLAMING	1. Accusations 2. Gaslighting 3. Denial/Refutation
7. APPARENT BENIGN DISPOSITION	1. Manipulation of reality

At the same time, as Blázquez et al. (2009) point out, various studies have considered as differential categories of psychological abuse such forms of violence as:

- ✓ *Economic abuse*: aimed at total control of the victim’s financial resources.
- ✓ *Structural abuse*: refers to the power relations and imbalances that generate and legitimate inequality.
- ✓ *Spiritual abuse*: involving the destruction of the victim’s cultural or religious beliefs or obliging them to renounce their personal beliefs and accept a particular belief system.
- ✓ *Social abuse*: refers to social blocking of the victim, their isolation from interpersonal relations and the disparagement of those relationships.

However, it is preferred to consider these types of abuse as subcategories of psychological abuse, since they are aimed at creating deep-seated feelings of worthlessness in victims that destroy their self-esteem and generate in them a state of helplessness (Blázquez et al., 2009).

Finally, it should be mentioned that Asensi (2008) advocates the inclusion of economic abuse in psychological abuse as a form of controlling the victim, and includes the IPAs listed by Taverniers (2001) within the category of *covert and manifest mechanisms of emotional abuse* – see Table 3. As in the case of Taverniers’ (2001) IPAs, later on in this paper we shall also show how these emotional abuse mechanisms can be closely linked to psychopathic traits.

SOCIALIZED PSYCHOPATHS IN INTIMATE PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

The general profile of the socialized psychopath in intimate partner relationships

Psychological-emotional violence as a principal resource: a cognitive-behavioural profile shared with the Dark Triad of Personality

Subclinical psychopathy is one of the three components making up the so-called “Dark Triad of Personality” (DTP), the other two being *Machiavellianism* and *narcissism*, both also assessed and described at a subclinical level, and with which the DTP shares many cognitive-behavioural characteristics, even though we are talking about independent constructs (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Although the DTP is not a specific target of analysis in the present article, it is important to note that it has been widely studied in research on intimate partner relationships and psychological abuse, whose findings have shown that, for example, people with DTP:



- ✓ Seek to exact revenge on those who have harmed or offended them (Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2004).
- ✓ Harass or stalk their romantic targets (Lau & Paulhus, 2008).
- ✓ Live out their deviant sexual fantasies (Williams, Spidel, & Paulhus, 2005; Williams, Cooper, Howell, Yuille, & Paulhus, 2009).
- ✓ Tend to start up and maintain intimate partner relationships that are disastrous, counterproductive and even dangerous (McHoskey, 2001; Austin, Farrelly, Black & Moore, 2007; Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010; Jonason & Webster, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2010, 2011; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011).

As we stated earlier, although subclinical psychopathy emerges as an independent construct, the truth is that among its characteristics are various narcissistic and Machiavellian traits. What people displaying these three types of “dark” personality have in common is that they tend not to use physical violence for achieving their goals, unless they perceive that they have run out of resources or tricks for getting their way. Psychological-emotional violence is the principal resource that people with these kinds of personality apply to their victims: they lie, they

deceive, they manipulate, they extort, they treat people like objects, and so on. The motives behind all such despicable behaviours that destabilize their victims are diverse and highly personal, so that each case must be looked at individually; in any case, they generally abuse psychologically and/or emotionally with the aim of exercising control and power over their victims, since they see this as one of the easiest ways of taking advantage of them and reaping the benefits.

But while psychopathic members of a couple coincide in some aspects with the typical aggressors described in studies on so-called gender violence, the former neither fit a *psychopathological profile* nor use physical violence exclusively. Thus, psychopathic partners have a specific *cognitive-behavioural profile* that coincides in some points with the profile of the abuser who is *generally violent* (Spidel, Vincent, Huss, Winters, Thomas, & Dutton, 2007), but without the psychopathological connotations that can be used in attempts to exonerate them from their actions (Warren, 2009). We shall now review some of these cognitive-behavioural traits and relational dynamics.

First of all, it is important to stress once more that not all men and women who set out to control their partner (this *desire for control* is another powerful explanatory indicator) go to the extreme of using physical violence to achieve their objectives (González & Santana, 2001a,

TABLE 3
COVERT AND MANIFEST MECHANISMS OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE, ACCORDING TO ASENSI (2008)

COVERT MECHANISMS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Disparagement ✓ Denial ✓ Projection/Accusation ✓ Denial of abuse by abuser 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Negative connotations ✓ Subtle threats to abandon the victim physically or emotionally ✓ Actual abandonment of the victim, physically or emotionally
MANIFEST MECHANISMS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Scorn ✓ Shouting ✓ Insulting or using bad language ✓ Criticizing ✓ Giving orders ✓ Showing bad moods ✓ Denying and holding back affect ✓ Ignoring ✓ Isolating the victim from his/her family and friends ✓ Keeping a close check on the victim's activities and how he/she uses his/her time ✓ Trying to restrict the victim's resources (money, telephone, etc.) ✓ Interfering in the victim's opportunities (work, medical attention, education, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Accusing the victim of being involved in repeated and intentionally harmful behaviours ✓ Throwing objects, though not necessarily at the victim ✓ Hitting things, slamming doors ✓ Ridiculing the victim ✓ Expressing disgust for the victim ✓ Threatening to leave the victim (physically or emotionally) ✓ Excessive expression of jealousy ✓ Threatening the victim's life, pets, property or family ✓ Exposing the victim to scenes of abuse of his/her children, pets, parents, etc. ✓ Obliging the victim to perform illegal activities ✓ Provoking the victim so that he/she defends him/herself



2001b); nevertheless, some studies have suggested that these types of aggressors tend to have a greater need than others to exert control over people (Stets, 1991).

If violence does occur in the relationship, it tends to appear gradually, as the members of the couple become more committed to one another (Arias, Samos, & O'Leary, 1987). However, before the violence appears, there are a series of indicators that should put those who are starting a new relationship on alert, the following factors being predictive of the aggravation that can occur in more advanced stages of the relationship (Adams, 1988, 2007; Hare, 1993; Cerezo, 2000; Garrido, 2000, 2001, 2004; Rodríguez de Armenta, 2007, 2008; Blázquez & Moreno, 2008a, 2008b; Blázquez et al., 2009, 2010; Storey, Hart, Meloy, & Reavis, 2009; Pozueco, 2010; Moreno et al., 2011):

- ✓ *Attempts to control and isolate*: they want to know everything you do, they demand explanations for everything, they prohibit and threaten, they impose rules, they make you play apparently innocuous "little games" that ensure their control – psychological ruses –, they try to make sure you have no secrets from them, they criticize your friends and acquaintances (trying, moreover, to provide justifiable reasons why you should not hang around with "those people"), they demand that you devote the majority of your time to them, and so on. In many cases, the behaviours they deploy for controlling the victim basically involve coercion and intimidation, through which they ensure the victim's "silence".
- ✓ *Overt and covert aggression*: they frequently express anger and are verbally aggressive, regardless of whether or not they use physical violence.
- ✓ *Scorn and humiliation*: they stop talking to you or disappear without explanation, arrive late, make fun of you, use what they know about your life to reproach you, flirt with others to make you suffer, etc.
- ✓ *Manipulation*: they set traps to see whether you're lying or how much you love them, they lie repeatedly and, although they know that what they tell you is unlikely, they try to adapt the story so that it fits better if you catch them lying; moreover, they are apt to frequently "rectify" your ideas or comments.
- ✓ *Denial of errors and blaming others*: they do not say sorry – and if they do so, they don't really mean it, since they would do it again in time –, they refuse to discuss matters that worry you, they blame you for things, etc. When they shift the blame to others, in most cases they

make themselves appear as the victims, trying in this way to divert attention towards the behaviour of the *real* victim, whom they try to portray as "mad" and "a liar".

Public facade: there is a great discrepancy between their public and private behaviour.

Clearly, the *cognitive-behavioural profile* of the socialized psychopath is *multifaceted*. Moreover, all the indicators or risk factors we have identified show that the aggression most often perpetrated by these people against their victims is of a psychological-emotional nature.

Socialized psychopaths are characterized by being able to lie brilliantly – sometimes for the pure pleasure of doing so and without anything obvious to be gained – and by appearing to be quite charming. But this ability to captivate is merely a tool they use for attracting the interest of potential partners/victims; there is nothing genuinely human behind the mask or facade. Hence, the potential victim will often be just one more of those whom the psychopath has taken advantage of in his/her life, regardless of whether the intimate relationship has lasted a few weeks or many years, during which time he/she has repeatedly perpetrated psychological abuse that can have affected the victim to such an extent that his or her condition becomes almost untreatable; the effects of this type of abuse by psychopaths are indeed truly harmful for their victims:

"Being in a relationship with – and even worse, being married to – a psychopath is a bad deal; probably the worst you can make [...]. They may not be the type of person who hits you most, but they will certainly be the one who does it most calmly, in the most premeditated, implacable way. It's very easy for them, since they don't love you at all (Garrido, 2001, pp. 66-67).

"Habitual aggressors of this type attack their partners emotionally, seeking to erode their self-esteem and to shame or embarrass them, all with the purpose of increasing their degree of control and power over them, and also for the pure pleasure of hurting the victim and/or of "striking back". Physical abuse is closely bound up with emotional abuse, and it is highly unlikely to find the former without the latter – indeed, we could say that all physical abuse also inflicts an emotional wound, since when we are struck we inevitably feel anger and humiliation. Both are means of achieving control and dominion over the victim" (Garrido, 2001, p. 117).



Relations between IPAs and subclinical psychopathic traits: Risk factors

In addition to what has already been said, if we pay particular attention to IPAs (Taverniers, 2001) and to the *covert and manifest mechanisms of emotional abuse* (Asensi, 2008) that we already reviewed (see Tables 2 and 3), we can immediately see that the similarities with *psychopathic traits* – and also with several of the narcissistic and Machiavellian aspects – are crystal clear.

The majority of these indicators and/or mechanisms of psychological-emotional abuse form part of the very essence of the different psychopathic traits, basically those which have to do with *Factor 1* of the PCL-R or *personality/interpersonal and emotional traits*, and also (though to a lesser extent and not necessarily so) with some of those of *Factor 2* of the PCL-R, or *behavioural/lifestyle traits*. Of particular relevance for the purposes of this section is the recent research article entitled *Psychological Abuse in Young Couples: Risk Factors* (Moreno et al., 2011).

In a study carried out at the University of Extremadura (Spain), these authors assessed 648 university students – 277 men and 371 women – from a range of faculties and aged 17 and 23, with a view to identifying IMPs prior to the consolidation of their relationship – marriage or starting to live together.

In order to assess psychological abuse in the intimate partner relationships of students, Moreno et al. (2011) created the Psychological Abuse Questionnaire (*Cuestionario de Maltrato Psicológico; CMP*), based on numerous national and international surveys and screening/diagnostic instruments that have looked at the problem of domestic violence. The results revealed *coercive interaction patterns* in students' courtship relations, the IPAs found including hostility, blaming, abusive insistence, apparent benign disposition, indifference, and scorn or contempt. The CMP includes items such as the following:

- ✓ *Destructive Behaviour and Recrimination*: "My partner kept telling me over and over again what he/she didn't like about me" and "My partner would constantly drag up things from the past to make fun of me".
- ✓ *Gaslighting*: "My partner denied having said things to me that he/she actually had said" and "My partner continually accused me of imagining things that had happened".
- ✓ *Denial/Refutation*: "My partner assured me that he/she would never do harm to anyone, least of all to me" and

"My partner accused me of inventing the fact that he/she did me harm".

Blaming: "My partner constantly blamed me for things that were not my fault".

In addition to the analysis we have made so far, let us now continue to explore the relationship between IPAs/covert and manifest mechanisms of emotional abuse and psychopathic traits.

For example, the IPA *apparent benign disposition* largely corresponds to the psychopathic traits *glibness and superficial charm* and *manipulation*. The subfactor *manipulation of reality*, included in the IPA apparent benign disposition, presents some interesting aspects. In general, psychopaths attempt to initiate intimate contact by presenting themselves as nice, good-natured people, but are manipulating reality, since they are not actually like that, though their victims do not discover this until the psychopaths take off their mask –until they change their behaviour and start to show themselves as they really are (Pozueco, 2010). Such manipulation of reality increases when the abusive member of the partnership initiates or perpetrates at the same time the insidious process of *gaslighting*, which can make victims feel they are losing their mind – or indeed, can "drive them crazy" (Blázquez & Moreno, 2008b).

As Taverniers (2001) points out, belittling or disparaging one's partner is a form of psychological abuse in which abusers typically disregard the feminine/masculine part of their victims, as well as their abilities or skills, their reality and their experience. It can be seen as "an underlying mechanism aimed at instilling the feelings of inferiority necessary for establishing the asymmetrical relationship that gives rise to the emergence of other expressions of violence within the couple, be they covert or explicit" (Blázquez et al., 2009, p. 707). This subfactor of IPAs is reflected, according to Moreno et al.'s (2011) study, in the kind of caustic criticism, humiliation and habitual discrediting of one's partner that makes it easier for the abuser to assume subtle attitudes which cast doubt on the relevance of the victim's actions, constantly *trivializing* them. In this regard, it should not be overlooked that psychopaths, like narcissists, typically have a pompous or grandiose sense of their own worth (Cleckley, 1941, 1976; Hare, 1991, 2003), which tends to increase when they humiliate their partners, family members, friends, employees, acquaintances, and so on (Hare, 1993; Garrido, 2000, 2001; Pozueco, 2010).

As far as the subfactor *trivialization* is concerned, the



IPAs identified by Blázquez et al. (2009) and Moreno et al. (2011) refer to comments expressing an undervaluing of the victim and a lack of recognition of any personal success he or she might have achieved. Once this relational dynamic – whose objective is to establish permanent and systematic control over the victim (Loring, 1994) – has been installed, it is common to find the emergence of *destructive behaviours* whose purpose is to frighten them and oblige them to remain within the relationship; such behaviours might range from the destruction of objects of financial or sentimental value belonging to the victim, to the maltreatment of his or her pets. Several studies have also found that both subclinical psychopaths and people scoring high in the DTP use tactics of retention of their partner for their own benefit – economic, social or sexual –, retaining them until they have squeezed out all they can or they get bored with them (Williams et al., 2005; Jonason et al., 2009; Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009; Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010; Jonason, Li, & Richardson, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2010, 2011).

As we pointed out above, the most common reason why psychopathic partners psychologically abuse their partners/victims is to gain *power and control* over them (Hare, 1993; Garrido, 2000); to this end, they often prevent them from having any kind of contact – social, with friends or with family – that could stand in the way of such control (Garrido, 2001, 2004). This kind of isolation or *social blocking* is another of the IPAs identified in the intimate partner relationships of young couples, and through which one member of the couple achieves total control over the other (Blázquez et al., 2009). The insidious process involved has been referred to as the *cycle of psychopathic manipulation* (Garrido, 2001, 2004; Babiak & Hare, 2006; Pozueco, 2010):

“Abusers will attain total control over their victims when they impose social blocking that isolates them from family, friends and any other contact the victims can establish with the outside world that is beyond the abusers’ control and manipulation. The expressions of this subfactor can be summarized as continual attempts at restriction, affecting the victim’s affective or social life, and which often reach humiliating levels” (Blázquez et al., 2009, p. 708).

Expressions of disapproval or criticism are, according to Taverniers (2001), probably the most common form of

hostility within couples, establishing themselves as an integral part of the dysfunctional relationship in everyday life. Such expressions cover various aspects:

“They can be described as constituting a violent mechanism (though not an explicitly aggressive one) that consists in demanding of the victim that he or she adapt in a rigid and stereotypical way to the psychopath’s own expectations about how he/she should act, ignoring the victim’s individuality.

“This variable can be seen in our study in the form of recrimination about things that happened in the past, constant complaints about aspects of the victim that the abuser finds unsatisfactory, malicious comments whose sole purpose is to upset the victim, and, most representative of all, continual criticism of the victim’s behaviour, which the abuser arbitrarily decides is warranted” (Moreno et al., 2011, p. 563).

Constantly finding fault and criticizing one’s partner in a malicious way is characteristic of egotistical people. Machiavellian people are extremely egotistical, scathing and hypercritical (Christie & Geis, 1968, 1970); and it is well known that one of the essential traits of psychopaths is their tremendous egocentrism (Cleckley, 1941, 1976; Hare, 1991, 1993). Reproaching their partners for past actions they did not actually do is a tactic often used by psychopathic partners, even to the extreme of making the victims believe they really did do them. Abusers often insist and insist in their efforts to convince their victims, even when what they are trying to convince them of borders on the absurd (Garrido, 2001, 2004; Pozueco, 2010).

Another subfactor included in the principal factor *blaming* is that which concerns *accusations*. This is an IPA...:

“(…) employed by abusers to instil a sense of opprobrium in their victims. Thus, victims become the target of their partners’ attacks of anger or feelings of insecurity and the person on whom they project indiscriminately their own lack of satisfaction. The fact that victims are unable to control such accusations, that they suffer criticism regardless of their behaviour, means that they learn to live in a perpetual state of helplessness [Seligman, 1974], which in turn takes a psychological toll and negatively affects their personality [Martos, 2006].



"The most common types of accusation found in our study are those of blaming the victim exclusively for any kind of problematic situation the abuser might be experiencing, taking offence at the slightest and most innocuous comments the victim might make in the course of a normal day, making judgemental allegations that suggest the victim is abnormal compared to other men/women, and lastly, totally disparaging everything the victim does in whatever context" (Moreno et al., 2011, pp. 563-564).

In this line, we should remember that another of the defining features of psychopaths is the absence of feelings of guilt and/or remorse for what they have done (Cleckley, 1941, 1976; Hare, 1991, 1993); thus, a person who does not feel guilty or whose conscience is untroubled about the negative consequences of his or her acts is free of the "moral brakes" that cause the rest of us to reflect, excuse ourselves and try not to do the same thing again. Furthermore, we should highlight the lack of shame and/or scruples that characterizes psychopaths, so that they have no qualms about hurling accusations at their partner or at other people.

Finally, let us consider the subfactor *abusive insistence*, included in the principal factor *imposition of behaviour patterns*. According, once more, to the authors of our study of reference:

"*Abusive insistence* constitutes a form of imposition of behaviour patterns that is characterized by the psychopath's repeating his/her demands of his/her partner until the latter fulfils them out of sheer exhaustion. The evidence from our study indicates that the psychopathic partner persistently claims to be right whenever there is a discrepancy, makes the other partner have sex when he or she does not want to, puts pressure on the victim until her or she drops his/her own plans and falls in with the other's, and finally, stubbornly insists on making the victim satisfy all his or her desires" (Moreno et al., 2011, p. 564).

Psychopaths are also characterized by having an *impersonal and/or poorly integrated sex life* (Cleckley, 1976), and this would cover aspects such as forcing one's partner to have sexual relations when they do not want to, or insisting on their performing degrading or humiliating sexual practices (Williams et al., 2005). Abusive insistence starts to appear in psychopathic partners when they have already been in the relationship for some time,

commonly tends to be focused on frivolous sexual requirements, and is generally found in the intermediate phase of the *cycle of psychopathic manipulation* (Pozueco, 2010).

We should point out that all of these traits and behaviours of psychopaths related to the different IPAs will depend on the type of relationship the psychopath intends to initiate, as well as the type of victim he/she is trying to take advantage of. Furthermore, such traits will tend to appear, once the relationship is established, according to the particular phase of the *cycle of psychopathic manipulation* that has been reached, this cycle covering the whole period from studying potential victims and stalking them, to an eventual break-up (Hare, 1993; Garrido, 2000, 2001, 2004; Pozueco, 2010).

Characterization of the intimate partner relationships of socialized psychopaths with their partners/victims

Possibly even more clearly, we can observe the relations between the various IPAs and psychopathic traits on reviewing the specific scientific literature on the subject. Of particular relevance for the purposes of this section is the paper entitled *Sex, Lies, and More Lies: Exploring the Intimate Relationships of Subclinical Psychopaths*, presented by Williams et al. (2005) at the 1st Conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Psychopathy. That paper, which we follow closely, reported the findings of a research study on the topic.

Problems in intimate partner relationships are of interest to both researchers and the general public, and include violence in the relationship (such as violence against women, or battering), coercive or risk sexual behaviours, and infidelity or "mate poaching" (Williams et al., 2005).

According to the classic research, among the different individual variables identified as predictors of relationship problems are borderline personality disorder, substance abuse, and trait anger (Dutton, 1998). However, an important and especially destructive personality variable has been greatly neglected in this line of research: subclinical psychopathy (Williams et al., 2005). Subclinical psychopathy shares the principal characteristics of its legal-forensic counterpart, even though they tend to be less extreme than those found in criminal psychopathy (Cleckley, 1976; Hall & Benning, 2006; Patrick, 2007; López, 2010).

The association between psychopathy and violence in intimate partner relationships can be explored through research findings on batterers. Although academics tend



to vary with regard to the way they label subgroups of batterers, there is a reasonable degree of consistency or consensus on the personality traits, the psychopathology and the patterns of abuse that define these subgroups (see, for a review, Dutton, 1998; Tweed & Dutton, 1998; Huss & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2000, 2006). One of these subgroups is known as *generally violent/antisocial*. In light of the surprising similarities between *generally violent/antisocial* abusers and psychopathic men (Spidel et al., 2007), *criminal psychopathy* may be a good candidate as a correlate of the problems in many intimate partner relationships (Williams et al., 2005).

In their paper, Williams et al. (2005) criticize the fact that research has rarely considered "the most destructive personality – *subclinical psychopathy*" (p. 1) in studies on problems in intimate partner relationships. These authors studied the influence of subclinical psychopathy in the intimate relationships of 612 undergraduates, employing for that purpose the third version of the *Self-Report Psychopathy Scale* (SRP-III) by Paulhus, Neumann and Hare (in press), a self-report on subclinical psychopathy with 44 items derived from the original PCL-R. Broadly speaking, Williams et al. (2005) found that subclinical psychopathy was associated with a wide range of risk and violent sexual behaviours, with diverse negative attitudes and cognitions towards one's partner and towards intimate relations in general, and with different indicators of infidelity. All in all, these results suggest that the intimate relationships of subclinical psychopaths are extremely abusive and volatile as regards both attitudes and behaviours.

Let us look a little more closely at the statistical results of this interesting study. In our conclusions section we also discuss the findings and conclusions of these authors.

With regard to the variable *risky/dangerous/reckless and violent behaviours*, it was measured through the *Violence Assessment Index* (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998), the *Aggressive Sexual Behavior Inventory* (Mosher & Anderson, 1986) and the *HIV/AIDS Risk Behavior Form* (Huba et al., 2000). In their study, Williams et al. (2005) found correlations with the SRP-III, all of them significant at $p < 0.01$. Total scores on the SRP-III correlated strongly with coercive sexual behaviour ($r = 0.38$), with risk sexual behaviour ($r = 0.37$) and with violence in the intimate relationship ($r = 0.32$). A more detailed analysis of these correlations revealed that each of the four SRP-III subscales – *Affective Insensitivity*, *Interpersonal Manipulation*, *Erratic Lifestyle* and

Antisocial Behaviour – correlated significantly and to varying degrees with the different dependent measures or self-report instruments that served to assess the study variables we are reviewing here.

As far as the variable *attitudes towards relationships and towards one's partner* is concerned, this was measured via the *Rape Supportive Attitudes Scale* (Lottes, 1991), the *Perceived Relationship Quality Component* (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) and the *Relationship Questionnaire* (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Williams et al. (2005) also found correlations between the SRP-III and the attitudes scales mentioned. They found that the SRP-III correlated positively with acceptance of rape myths ($r = 0.33$) and with indifferent attachment style ($r = 0.10$, $p < 0.05$). Negative correlations were also observed between SRP-III scores and feelings of both commitment ($r = -0.32$) and trust ($r = -0.23$, $p < 0.05$) in relation to one's partner. Two of the SRP-III subscales, *Affective Insensitivity* and *Antisocial Behaviour*, showed strong correlations with lack of commitment, whilst the strongest correlation of the *Antisocial Behaviour* subscale was with mistrust. The *Affective Insensitivity* and *Interpersonal Manipulation* subscales displayed the strongest associations with acceptance of rape myths, and it was *Interpersonal Manipulation* that correlated most strongly with indifferent attachment style.

Finally, the third variable studied by Williams et al. (2005) in relation to subclinical psychopathy was *infidelity*, which was measured through the *HMP Attraction Survey* (Schmitt, Shackelford, Duntley, Tooke, & Buss, 2001), the *Anonymous Romantic Attraction Survey* (Schmitt & Buss, 2001) and the *Sociosexual Orientation Inventory* (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). The authors found robust correlations between the SRP-III and cheating fantasies ($r = 0.42$) and cheating behaviours ($r = 0.39$). Although psychopaths were more likely to engage in mate-poaching ($r = 0.41$), there was no relation with the variable *successful mate poaching* ($r = 0.11$, $p > 0.05$). Those scoring high in subclinical psychopathy were also more likely to *seek short-term partners* ($r = 0.36$) and to consider the possibility of having *sexual relations with someone they just met* ($r = 0.34$). To varying extents, all the SRP-III subscales showed significant correlations with the different instruments or measures of infidelity. Finally, and contrary to what is generally thought – some think men are more unfaithful, while others think the same about women –, these authors



found that “gender differences in all the correlation patterns mentioned were minimal” (Williams et al., 2005, p. 5).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In general, research has revealed and described the subclinical psychopath as a person – of either sex – with an ideal self-concept quite similar to that of many people in the general population. Ray and Ray (1982) commented, somewhat ironically, that “the psychopath is [a type of person] that is too good to be true” (p. 140); it was no coincidence that they gave their article the title *Some apparent advantages of subclinical psychopathy*. Without any doubt, just like the image projected by these people, such “advantages” are deceptive, as also highlighted by other authors, such as Cleckley (1941, 1976), Hare (1993), Lykken (1995) and Garrido (2000), on finding, after many years of research involving real cases, that subclinical psychopathy is especially prominent in persons of high socioeconomic and professional status, citing examples of doctors, teachers, politicians, artists, business people, etc. More recently – over the last two decades or so – various authors have corroborated the presence of subclinical psychopathy in the general population through the study of “normal personality” traits and models (Williams & Paulhus, 2004; Benning et al., 2005; Cooke, Michie, & Hart, 2006; Hall & Benning, 2006; Lilienfeld & Fowler, 2006; Lynam & Derefinko, 2006).

We should also stress, as mentioned above, that many different factors and subfactors make up the IPAs in the couple that already begin to manifest themselves at the courtship stage (Blázquez & Moreno, 2008a). All the indications are that each of these manifestations of emotional violence as regulatory elements of marital interaction can arise at any point in the course of an intimate relationship (Blázquez et al., 2009, 2010), taking on different forms of expression that change as the relationship itself evolves (Castellano, García, Lago, & Ramírez, 1999). Thus, although we start out from assuming the existence of properties inherent to the dynamic of abuse, such as the cyclical nature and increasing intensity of the aggression (Walker, 2000), research has also revealed that IPAs vary according to age, being found most often in young people aged 17-18 (Blázquez et al., 2009; Moreno et al., 2011).

Quite another thing is the possible relation between IPAs and psychopathic traits, which would have to be

corroborated empirically – and even then, the results obtained through merely correlational studies would have to be treated with caution, given that their interpretation may be too speculative. In this regard, we are of course not suggesting that persons showing manifestations of psychological abuse against their intimate partners are necessarily psychopaths – either socialized/subclinical or potentially criminal. Hence, it is important to stress that a person can be diagnosed as a psychopath only when he or she has been assessed with the instruments specifically designed for that purpose, and regardless of whether he/she has been or is currently in a couple relationship. Therefore, psychopathy and psychological abuse should be assessed independently, and at the same time researchers should explore the possible relation between the two that has been revealed in a wide range of studies.

What is clear from the relevant scientific literature is that socialized psychopaths maintain intimate relationships in which the majority of the IPAs reviewed here are found. The study by Williams et al. (2005), which we have already discussed, provides evidence of this. Let us return to it once more to consider their own conclusions:

“Psychopathy demonstrated strong and consistent correlations with a wide range of problematic relationship behaviors. Not only are psychopaths more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior, they are more likely to use coercive tactics to obtain sex, including the use of drugs or physical or verbal intimidation. The latter indicates that psychopaths use fear and other manipulative tactics to dominate and control their partners. The violence that pervades psychopaths’ lives appears to extend to their intimate relationships.

“Psychopathy was also associated with several negative attitudes regarding their partners and relationships in general. It is noteworthy that many of these same attitudes and cognitions have been recognized as risk factors for sexual aggression (e.g., Malamuth, 2003). In particular, psychopaths demonstrate less commitment and trust towards their partner, and have a more dismissive attachment style in general. Even more disturbing is the fact that psychopaths are more accepting of rape myths and hold more pro-rape attitudes. Together, it is possible that these attitudes and cognitions sow the seeds of psychopaths’ violence towards relationship partners.



“Finally, psychopathy demonstrated consistent links with another fundamental relationship issue – infidelity. Psychopaths appear to be constantly contemplating or actively pursuing short-term sexual opportunities, regardless of their relationship status or that of their potential targets. Psychopaths are also unconcerned with getting to know their cheating target, suggesting that the target might as well be an anonymous stranger. This dismissive attachment style and lack of commitment towards their partner are both likely to play a role in their infidelity.

“Based on the correlations between subclinical psychopathy and relationship violence, it appears that the link between batterers and forensic psychopathy may be generalized to subclinical psychopathy as well. Aside from actual self-reported behavior, subclinical psychopathy is also associated with several attitudes and cognitions that are considered risk factors for abuse. The intimate relationships of psychopaths appear to be a dangerous environment for their partners – one that is fraught with detachment, mistrust, and abuse” (Williams et al., 2005, pp. 5-6).

It is often said that no two people are alike; nor are two psychopaths alike. Given the individuality and idiosyncrasies of each person, it follows that the dynamics of subclinical psychopaths’ relations with their partners or potential partners will vary greatly. Nevertheless, research findings have shown that the majority of the intimate relationship dynamics associated with these types of persons are very similar, being fundamentally oriented to the selection of short-term partners, the creation of a volatile atmosphere in their relationships (Jonason et al., 2011), and the maltreatment of their partners if the relationship lasts. These people, then, have a great deal in common with each other, and this can make it easier for professionals to produce a relatively prototypical profile of these psychological aggressors within couple relationships and to draw up basic preventive guidelines for victims and potential victims.

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