

Criminal Autistic Psychopathy: The Mind of a Serial Killer

A Review of

Young, Violent and Dangerous to Know

by Michael Fitzgerald


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Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, Timothy McVeigh, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and Mr. Spock are some of the personalities readers will encounter in Michael Fitzgerald's book *Young, Violent and Dangerous to Know*. Autism, psychopathy, and autistic psychopathy are some of the main concepts that are presented in the book. Indeed, serial killers and autism are possibly two of the hottest topics in mainstream media today. There is no shortage of terrible acts committed by individuals who could be categorized as psychopaths, and Grohol (2012) reported that psychopathy and sociopathy were Number 4 in the top 10 psychology, brain, and mental health news topics in 2012.

At the same time, the world of autism has been undergoing significant social, cultural, and diagnostic changes. Although not addressed in Fitzgerald's text, there was anticipation, trepidation, and controversy regarding the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) pulling together all spectrum disorders under the umbrella term *autistic spectrum disorders* (ASD). Further, there has seemingly been a quiet but radical shift in thinking about autism.

According to Golden (2013), the idea of autism as a cultural identity has been gaining traction among some of the estimated 2 million individuals in the United States with ASD. This shift in perspective became the subject of a public conversation in Seattle, Washington, in the summer of 2013, when the Washington chapter of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) criticized advertisements for Seattle Children's Research Institute on the sides of Metro buses that featured the smiling face of a boy and the message "Let's wipe out cancer, diabetes, and autism in his lifetime."

Local ASAN members objected to the way it reinforced the idea of autism as something tragic and undesirable, to be eliminated. Chapter leader Matt Young, who is autistic, explained that this sort of sentiment is an attack on who he is as a person. He said that not only does this point of view create psychological harm, but also that it can lead *neurotypical*

(a term used by some in the autistic community to describe those with typical brain function) parents to pursue what he considers desperate measures to try to fix the perceived problem. I would assume that, ironically, the vociferous individuals who made these objections are at the higher end of autism functioning and are fortunate to have the power of speech, unlike those with more severe impairments and their families, who might feel differently about their disability.

Enter Michael Fitzgerald's provocative *Young, Violent and Dangerous to Know* in which the main tenet is that there is a subgroup of ASD that Fitzgerald calls "Criminal Autistic Psychopathy type where there is the capacity indeed the most extreme capacity of all human beings" (p. 49). Set aside the use of the archaic term *autistic psychopathy* originally described by Hans Asperger in 1944 (Asperger, 1944); the woefully inadequate editing that somehow overlooked spelling, space, and grammatical errors; the use of quotes without researching and referencing the original work; incorrect citation formats; reference to fictional works to support arguments; and a chapter/book structure that may be better understood using a Zygalski sheet, and you have a book that can be thought provoking, emotion stirring, and likely inciting to individuals in the autism community.

Readers may be slightly confused regarding the use and definition of the terms *sociopath* and *psychopath*. According to Hirstein (2013), in the early 1800s, doctors who worked with mental patients began to notice that some of their patients who appeared outwardly normal had what they termed a "moral depravity" or "moral insanity" in that they seemed to possess no sense of ethics or of the rights of other people. The term *psychopath* was first applied to these people around 1900. The term was changed to *sociopath* in the 1930s to emphasize the damage they do to society.

Currently, researchers have returned to using the term *psychopath*. Some of them use that term to refer to a more serious disorder that is linked to genetic traits and produces more dangerous individuals, while continuing to use *sociopath* to refer to less dangerous people who are seen more as products of their environment, including their upbringing. Other researchers make a distinction between *primary psychopaths*, who are thought to be genetically created, and *secondary psychopaths*, who are seen as more a product of their environments.

A study conducted by Rogers, Viding, Blair, Frith, and Happé (2006) measured psychopathic traits in boys with ASD selected for difficult and aggressive behavior. The researchers wished to determine whether psychopathic tendencies could be measured in ASD independent of the autistic behavior, whether individuals with ASD with callous-unemotional traits differed in their cognitive profile from those without such traits, and how the cognitive data from the study compared with previous data of youngsters with psychopathic tendencies. The authors discovered that psychopathic tendencies were not related to the severity of ASD and that callous/psychopathic acts in a small number of individuals with ASD probably reflected a "double hit" involving an additional impairment of empathic response to distress cues, which is not part and parcel of ASD itself.

In a review of the empathy literature conducted by Blair (2005), three main divisions of empathy (cognitive, motor, and emotional) were explored in the two main psychiatric disorders associated with empathic dysfunction, namely autism and psychopathy. Results indicated that individuals with autism show impairment with cognitive (theory of mind) and motor empathy, but there were fewer indications that individuals with autism show

difficulties with emotional empathy, and if it is present, it is not of the selective form seen in individuals with psychopathy. Individuals with psychopathy were shown to have no difficulties with cognitive or motor empathy but showed marked selective difficulties with emotional empathy (Blair, 2005).

Fitzgerald, however, states in *Young, Violent and Dangerous to Know* that he believes that theory of mind deficit might be found in criminal autistic psychopathy. Fitzgerald makes practical statements toward the end of the book, discussing the importance of early identification and intervention for children with severe conduct problems and empathy deficits. According to Fitzgerald, the best understanding we can come up with at the moment is that serial killing is an empathy disorder, with some individual serial killers being on the autism spectrum. If this hypothesis is correct, one would expect neurobiological deficits similar to those seen in autistic psychopathy as well as genetic, neuroimaging, neurochemical, hormonal, and neuropsychological deficits to be found. Fitzgerald (p. 163) also states that psychosocial interventions for children and adolescents with severe conduct problems, empathy deficits, and aggression should be modified to help these children develop mind-reading skills, empathy training, and training in nonverbal behavior reading.

It is difficult to reconcile the conflicting evidence, and, truthfully, many readers may be hard put initially to extricate the main thesis from the current text that contains much anecdotal evidence. Given the recent changes in the *DSM-5*, one may have an even harder time fitting the proposals in this text with mainstream theory and research. Nevertheless, and despite Mr. Spock (fictional character from *Star Trek* television series and films) being conferred an honorary doctoral degree and referred to as Dr. Spock in the book, Fitzgerald's book is an entertaining and interesting read that may likely appeal more to the layperson and popular psychology reader than to the academic or professional who might prefer a more academically rigorous presentation.

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