

GONE GIRL BY DAVID FINCHER

Reviewed by Ryan Botha

Department of Psychology
Midrand Graduate Institute
ryanbotha1.za@gmail.com



In cinema, popular portrayals of male psychopaths abound. Etched in cinema history are seminal male psychopathic characters from films like *Psycho*, *The Shining*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *American Psycho* and more recently, *No Country for Old Men*. The fact that there is a preponderance of male psychopaths in cinema reflects an epidemiological fact, namely, that there are more male than female psychopaths in society. Empirical data evinces this trend across North American and European

UNISA | 
university
of south africa

New Voices in Psychology
Volume 11 | Number 1 | 2015
pp. 150–156

Print ISSN 1818-6874
© 2015 Unisa Press

clinical and forensic settings (see De Vogel & De Ruiter, 20005; Grann, 2000; Hare, 2003; Hazelwood, 2006; Hemphill, Hare & Wong, 1998; Salekin et al., 1997; Vitale, Smith, Brinkley & Newman, 2002; Warren et al., 2003; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2010). This trend in cinema though may entrench a societal myth, namely, that the female psychopath does not exist (Perri & Lichtenwald, 2010). There are a handful of films that portray female deviance (i.e. *Rosemary's Baby*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Monster*) and while the delineation of the characters in these films as psychopathic is confounded by concomitant psychopathology as well as technical inaccuracies, they have opened up a space for public reflection on the notion of female psychopathy. *Gone Girl* extends on this cinematic enquiry by breaching this seemingly taboo and rarely explored subject matter, the female psychopath. What follows is brief review of the films plot followed a detailed explication of female psychopathy as evinced by the films female lead, Amy Dunne.

Helming *Gone Girl* is one David Fincher. A master storyteller of the macabre, Fincher's oeuvre includes the likes of *Seven*, *Fight Club*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and more recently, *The Social Network*. Fincher is acclaimed for producing psychologically dense and unnerving work and his cinematic portrayal of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* is firmly within this mould. In his recent works, Fincher has enlisted the services of Nine Inch Nails front man, Trent Reznor, to produce the scores for his films. Reznor possesses a remarkable ability to convey the dark and unsettling psychological undertones of Fincher's work through his music, which enhances the affective impact of *Gone Girl*.

Gone Girl opens with a piece of dialogue that quickly flags the films position with the mystery crime genre. Nick Dunne, the films male lead offers a disturbing reflection: "when I think of my wife, I always think of the back of her head. I picture cracking her lovely skull, unspooling her brain, trying to get answers. The primal questions of a marriage: what are you thinking? How are you feeling? What have we done to each other? What will we do?" This vicious and penetrative moment of reflection operates as an important red herring in the film. When Amy Dunne disappears, the audience already has a prime suspect mind. To consolidate the evidence, we are shown Nick Dunne engaging in an extra-marital affair with a student and constantly disparaging his wife's character in exchanges with his sister. To have Amy Dunne narrate the unfolding events in the film through a series of cleverly located clues is another marvelous sleight of hand by the director. Through this narration, we are given an enduring picture of Amy's character, that of a long-suffering and loving wife. In essence, it is as if two films have been constructed by Fincher. The first narrative is clear-cut; Nick Dunne appears to have killed his wife. The facts are inescapable, ranging from Nick's desire to leave his wife to the evidence of her blood all over their kitchen floor. The film leaves the viewer with a finite set of conclusions, all pointing to the tragedy that beautiful, kind and sincere Amy is dead.

The second narrative marks a moment of psychological rupture for the viewer. The score up to this point has been festering in the macabre melodies and primal resonances of a classic murder case. The filmic sequences to follow should be the discovery of Amy's mutilated and bloodied body. All of our knowledge of crime-mystery archetypes tells us this. Suddenly the score turns, the pace builds and the entire intonation of the film is altered. The impossible appears on the screen and the viewer realizes that they have been duped. Amy Dunne is seen driving on an open road heading in the direction of a new life. But how? Surely this makes no sense. One is tempted to return to earlier sequences in the film to ascertain whether this astonishing outcome holds up. Breathlessly, one finds – it does. The narrative in *Gone Girl* is stitched together with seamless precision which makes the following revelation all the more powerful: Amy Dunne staged her own death. She meticulously planned the events leading up to her feigned death with one singular purpose in mind: incriminate her husband and have him sentenced to death. An oft hackneyed phrase pops to mind: "hell hath no fury like a woman scorned". Yet one could never imagine the intricate details of Amy's sinister plan and the viewer is simply left to marvel at the sheer ingenuity of her creative evil. *Gone Girl's* plot is so dense and layered that a full explication of the film's unfolding events is not within the ambit of this review. What is of chief interest is the character of Amy Dunne and the questions that she stirs up regarding the female psychopath. This brief analysis will be conducted by framing Amy's behavior within the four seminal domains of psychopathy: interpersonal, affective, lifestyle and antisocial.

As suggested, female psychopathy is a poorly understood and an under-researched phenomena. While there is a paucity of research into the subject, seminal studies have revealed key gender differences. But firstly, a technically accurate definition of psychopathy is required. As a distinct psychiatric entity, psychopathy is considered a very serious personality disorder and has proven largely intractable in the face of treatment efforts (Harris & Rice, 2006; Maibom, 2014). In terms of its expression, the disorder is marked by specific personality and behavioural features, which include deficient processing of emotion (e.g. lack of empathy and guilt), egocentricity, grandiosity, poor judgement, callous and manipulative interpersonal relationships and sensation-seeking behaviour (Glannon, 2014). Furthermore, psychopathy is also conceptualized as comprising overt and impulsive antisocial behaviours (Hare & Neumann, 2010).

As noted, research has revealed that there are key gender differences in the phenotypic expression of psychopathy. Collectively, these studies suggest that, although psychopathy occurs more frequently and typically more severe in men, the disorder also exists in women (Wynn et al., 2012). Further, the behavioural expression of the disorder is likely to differ across gender with females showing more emotional and verbal violence as well as relational manipulation, and, to a lesser degree than males, criminal behaviour and physical violence (Dolan & Vøllm,

2009). For a detailed explication of these differences, the reader is directed to Botha et al. (2015, in press).

Fincher's film cleverly captures the interpersonal components of female psychopathy through its portrayal of Amy. The viewer develops empathy for her and is immediately inclined to cast her as victim in the film. This derives largely from Amy's recounting of the events through her journal. The sense of being duped upon finding that the journal is a complete fabrication reflects an important moment in the interpersonal exchange with a psychopath. Interpersonal components of psychopathy include glibness, superficial charm, pathological lying as well as conning and manipulative behaviour (Hare, 2003). Amy through her journal manages to fashion a dense and elaborate lie conveyed in the most convincing manner. Affectively, psychopaths are extremely low on empathy, feel no guilt and lack responsibility. As such, their capacity to sustain an elaborate lie does not register affectively. This muted affective component is also what allows them to evince a void of anxiety when confronted over their lying behaviour - they simply could not care.

The instrumental nature of Amy's plan to incriminate her husband is another hallmark of the primary psychopath. Researchers have highlighted the heterogeneity of psychopathy by delineating primary and secondary variants (see Ross, Bye, Wrobel & Horton, 2008). Primary psychopathy has been conceptualized as manifesting in callous, calculating, manipulative and deceitful interpersonal behaviours, whereas secondary psychopathy is conceptualized as having more of a neurotic basis that predisposes the sufferer toward impulsive and irresponsible behaviours (Ross et al., 2008). Amy's plan is protracted, detailed and instrumental. She has many moments during its design to morally reflect on its implications, to empathically consider what will happen to her husband. However, she lacks the neuro-circuitry to do this; she is an affective iceberg and in this manner exhibits the seminal symptomatology of the primary psychopath. We see this aspect again when she tricks her husband into having his sperm frozen and later impregnates herself with it to ensure he will not leave her.

In terms of the lifestyle components of psychopathy, key features would include sexual promiscuity, parasitic lifestyle, impulsivity and irresponsibility. Amy Dunne as we learn later in the film evinces many of these features. She has been involved in a string of sexual relationships which all ended with her attempting to destroy the reputation and lives of her partners. She is exceedingly parasitic as exemplified by her emotional manipulation of her ex-boyfriend to materially provide for her while she is in hiding. As noted, the overreaching phenotypic expression in the film is that of a primary psychopath, Amy does not exhibit many impulsive moments, most of her behaviour is instrumental, pre-planned and intentional. This form of instrumental planning is taken to disturbing extremes toward the climax of the film where she has to perform a series of anatomically unsettling manoeuvres in the build up to the murder of her infatuated ex-boyfriend. It is at this point of the film that a highly

controversial component of female psychopathy comes to the fore, namely, the issue of violent behavioural displays.

The antisocial component of psychopathy includes violent behavioural displays, juvenile delinquency, revocation of conditional release and criminal versatility. The chronicity of psychopathy is difficult to establish with Amy and the only evidence of this stems from a series of flashbacks in the film detailing some of her former relationships. As such, components such as juvenile delinquency cannot be evaluated. The same applies to revocation of conditional release which pertains to sentenced offenders. However, it is clear that Amy has the capacity to evince diverse criminality ranging from fraudulent behaviour and stealing to cold-blooded murder. The latter behaviour also speaks to the issue of violent behavioural displays, a key feature of the antisocial component. Empirical research suggests that this aspect is in fact rare in female psychopaths. For example, research has shown that female psychopaths displayed fewer explicit acts of violence and instead engaged in forms of manipulative and destructive relational aggression (Forouzan & Cooke, 2005). Other researchers (see Perri & Lichtenwald, 2010) contend that instrumental violence is an important feature of female psychopathy. This is what makes the character of Amy such a fascinating case study, she manifests much of the key symptomatology of psychopathy and in this way offers the viewer a compelling illustration of the disorder. It also allows for the clinician or academic using the filmic illustration to provide a detailed rating of her psychopathic behaviour on all key dimensions. On the basis of the evidence collated above, it is clear that Amy Dunne would clearly score beyond the minimum threshold of 25/40 (see Cooke & Michie, 2001) on the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) with significant score elevations in the interpersonal and affective component. As such, Amy offers the viewer an excellent depiction of a primary female psychopath.

In conclusion, *Gone Girl* provides a rare and detailed picture of the female psychopath by speaking directly to many key components of the disorder as elucidated through empirical research. In this manner, the film functions as a very useful supplement for academics in the discipline of psychopathology as it serves to illuminate key aspect of an ill-understood phenomena, the female psychopath.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



DR RYAN BOTHA is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Midrand Graduate Institute (MGI) and a registered counselling psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). After completing his Master of Social Sciences degree in Counselling Psychology at the University of Fort Hare (UFH), Ryan completed his PhD research in a forensic psychology stream at the University of the Free State (UFS).

REFERENCES

- Botha, R., Louw, D.A., & Loots, S. (2015). Gender and cultural considerations in the assessment of psychopathy. *Crime Quarterly*. Under review.
- Cooke, D. J., & Michie, C. (2001). Refining the construct of psychopathy: Towards a hierarchical model. *Psychological Assessment, 13* (2), 171-188. doi:10.1037/1040-3590.13.2.171
- De Vogel, V., & De Ruiter, C. (2005). The HCR-20 in personality disordered female offenders: A comparison with a matched sample of males. *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, 12*, 226-240.
- Dolan, M., & Vøllm, B. (2009). Antisocial personality disorder and psychopathy in women: A literature review on the reliability and validity of assessment instruments. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry, 23*, 2-9.
- Forouzan, E., & Cooke, D. J. (2005). Figuring out *le femme fatale*: Conceptual and assessment issues concerning psychopathy in females. *Behavioural Sciences and the Law, 23* (6), 765-778. doi:10.1002/bsl.669
- Glannon, W. (2014). Intervening in the psychopaths' brain. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics, 35*, 43-47. doi:10.1007/s11017-013-9275-z
- Grann, M. (2000). The PCL-R and gender. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment, 16* (3), 147-149. doi:10.1027/1015-5759.16.3.147
- Hare, R. D. (2003). *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised* (2nd ed.). Canada, Toronto: MHS.
- Hare, R. D., & Neumann, C. S. (2009). Psychopathy: Assessment and forensic implications. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 54*(12), 791-802.
- Harris, G. T., & Rice, M. E. (2006). Treatment of psychopathy: A review of empirical findings. In C. J. Patrick (Ed.) *Handbook of Psychopathy* (pp. 555-572). New York: Guilford Press.
- Hazelwood, L. L. (2006). *Gender differences in a prototypical analysis of psychopathy*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Texas, United States.
- Hemphill, J. F., Hare, R. D., & Wong, S. (1998). Psychopathy and recidivism: A review. *Legal and Criminological Psychology, 3* (1), 141-172. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8333.1998.tb0035.x

- Maibom, H. L. (2014). To treat a psychopath. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 35, 31-42. doi:10.1007/s11017-04-9281-9
- Perri, F. S., & Lichtenwald, T. G. (2010). The last frontier: Myths and the female psychopathic killer. *The Forensic Examiner*, 800, 592-1399.
- Ross, S. R., Bye, K., Wrobel, T. A., & Horton, R. S. (2008). Primary and secondary psychopathic characteristics and the schedule for non-adaptive and adaptive personality (SNAP). *Personality and Individual Differences*, 45 (3), 249-254. doi:org/10/1016/j.paid.2008.04.007
- Salekin, R. T., Rogers, R., & Sewell, K. W. (1997). Construct validity of psychopathy in a female offender sample: A multitrait-multimethod evaluation. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 106 (4), 576-585. doi:10.1037/0021-843X.106.4.576
- Vitale, J. E., Smith, S. S., Brinkley, C. A., & Newman, J. P. (2002). The reliability and validity of the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised in a sample of female offenders. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 29 (2), 202-231. doi:10.1177/0093854802029002005
- Warren, J. I., Burnette, M. L., South, S. C., Chauhan, P., Bale, R., Friend, R.,... Van Patten, I. (2003). Psychopathy in women: Structural modelling and comorbidity. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 26, 223-242. doi:10.1016/S0160-2527(03)00034-7
- Weizmann-Henelius, G., Putknonen, H., Gronroos, M., Lindberg, N., Fronen, N., & Häkkänen Nyholm, H. (2010). Examination of psychopathy in female homicide offenders: Confirmatory factor analysis of the PCL-R. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 33 (3), 177-183.
- Wynn, R., Hoiseth, M. H., & Petterson, G. (2012). Psychopathy in women: Theoretical and clinical perspectives. *International Journal of Women's Health*, 4, 247-263. doi:10.2147/IJWH.S25518