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The Fractured World: A Phenomenological Study of Sociopathic Traits and Criminality in Incarcerated Men

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how incarcerated men with elevated sociopathic and psychopathic traits narrate their interpersonal relationships, their criminal behaviour, and their understanding of social rules and consequences. While quantitative research has firmly established associations between these traits and antisocial outcomes, the subjective world of offenders remains underexplored. Using thematic analysis of published autobiographical accounts, court transcripts, and clinical case materials from eighteen male offenders, this study identifies six dominant narrative themes: the unreliable world, testing others through deception, the thrill of transgression, the rejection of remorse, the performance of toughness, and the strategic use of charm. These findings deepen our understanding of how these individuals construct meaning around their crimes and interpersonal strategies, offering qualitative texture to the risk profiles that dominate correctional assessment.

Keywords

Psychopathy, Sociopathy, Antisocial Traits, Incarcerated Men, Narrative Identity, Thematic Analysis, Qualitative Research, Criminal Behavior, Interpersonal Relationships, Deception, Remorse, Forensic Psychology

Introduction

Sociopathy and criminality occupy an uneasy conceptual space. While the label "psychopath" continues to capture the public imagination, researchers and clinicians have increasingly recognised that the phenomenon it describes, callous affect, manipulativeness, and persistent antisocial behaviour, exists on a spectrum rather than as a discrete category [1]. The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* retains Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) as the primary diagnosis for patterns of disregard for and violation of others' rights, yet ASPD criteria rely heavily on observable criminal acts and largely sidestep interpersonal and affective features such as superficial charm, pathological lying, and lack of remorse [2].

This distinction matters. In correctional settings, between 40 and 80 percent of inmates meet criteria for ASPD, while only 7 to 30 percent meet the more restrictive threshold for psychopathy [3]. Sociopathy, a term sometimes used interchangeably with psychopathy, is better understood as a behavioral syndrome arising primarily from adverse environmental conditions, abusive parenting, chaotic family life, exposure to violence, rather than as an intrinsic, largely heritable trait [4]. Yet the lines between these constructs blur in both research and practice, and the subjective experience of those who carry these traits remains largely obscured by the dominance of quantitative assessment tools.

This study takes a qualitative approach to address that gap. Rather than asking how many offenders meet a score threshold, I ask how offenders with elevated sociopathic traits narrate their social world and their crimes. Through thematic analysis of documentary and autobiographical materials, I explore the interpersonal dynamics and meaning-making strategies that characterize this population. The research question guiding this inquiry is: How do incarcerated men with elevated sociopathic traits describe their relationships, their offences, and their own emotional responses to wrongdoing? By attending to the language, justifications, and narrative structures these men employ, this study contributes qualitative depth to a field that has been dominated by checklists and actuarial risk

predictions.

Literature Review

Defining the Construct: Psychopathy, Sociopathy, and ASPD

The terms psychopathy, sociopathy, and ASPD are often used loosely, and their boundaries remain contested [5]. Psychopathy, rooted in Robert Hare's operationalization of Cleckley's clinical descriptions, emphasizes affective and interpersonal features: glibness, grandiosity, pathological lying, lack of remorse, and callous lack of empathy [6]. ASPD, by contrast, focuses on behavioral criteria, repeatedly breaking the law, acting impulsively, and showing irresponsibility, and is present in nearly half of incarcerated populations [7].

Sociopathy, in the formulation offered by Walsh and Wu [8] and echoed in subsequent literature, is distinguished primarily by its aetiology: sociopathy arises from adverse environmental conditions interacting with genetic vulnerabilities, whereas psychopathy is more strongly heritable and intrinsic [2]. Behaviorally, the sociopath is often described as disorganized, unable to maintain employment or stable relationships, while the psychopath tends toward obsessive organization and superficial competence [9]. This distinction finds empirical support in latent profile analyses of offenders, which identify a "sociopathic" class characterized by antisocial behaviour without the emotional detachment that typifies other psychopathic variants [10].

The Relationship between Traits and Criminal Behaviour

The association between these traits and antisocial outcomes is well-established. A 2024 systematic review and meta-regression analysis found that individuals with any personality disorder had four and a half times the odds of violence, with ASPD showing the strongest association at over seven times the odds [11]. Recidivism risk was also elevated, with ASPD carrying nearly three times the odds of reoffending [12]. In sex offenders specifically, psychopathic traits correlate with increased general recidivism and, in roughly half of included studies, with violent reoffending [13].

What remains less clear is the mechanism. Some evidence suggests that neurological differences, reduced amygdala activation in response to fearful faces, structural deficits in paralimbic regions, may underlie the empathic and affective deficits these individuals display [14]. Neuroimaging studies consistently find functional and structural abnormalities in regions central to emotion regulation and social cognition, providing a biological substrate for the interpersonal features observed clinically [15].

The Qualitative Gap

Despite this rich quantitative literature, qualitative studies of this population remain rare. A notable exception is De Ganck and Vanheule's [16] thematic analysis of narratives from young offenders with psychopathic traits, which found that "others in general are fundamentally distrustful antagonists" that the participants believe they must protect themselves against [17]. That study identified specific interpersonal strategies: testing the reliability of others by staging situations, acting as an outlaw to demonstrate the absence of a guaranteeing law, and provoking fear in others as a means of overcoming their own anxiety [8].

Yet qualitative research on adult offenders with sociopathic traits, particularly those who have committed serious crimes and are serving long sentences, remains limited. The current study extends this line of inquiry by examining published autobiographical and documentary narratives of adult incarcerated men, attending to how they construct their social world and justify their crimes. This approach complements quantitative risk assessment by illuminating the subjective logic that underpins persistent antisocial behaviour [18].

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Sociopathic Narratives

Several theoretical frameworks inform the present study. The triarchic model of psychopathy proposes that the construct comprises three distinct but related dimensions: disinhibition, boldness, and meanness [19]. Disinhibition reflects problems with impulse control and behavioural restraint; boldness captures social dominance, emotional resilience, and tolerance for danger; meanness encompasses callousness, predatory aggression, and lack of empathy [20]. This framework helps explain why individuals with these traits may appear charming and confident in some contexts while engaging in ruthless exploitation in others.

Attachment theory offers another lens. Research suggests that psychopathic and sociopathic traits are associated with insecure attachment styles, particularly dismissing-avoidant attachment [21]. Individuals with this attachment pattern have learned that others cannot be relied upon for comfort or support, and they develop strategies of self-reliance and emotional distance that may later manifest as callousness and manipulativeness [22]. The narratives examined in this study can be read as expressions of these attachment strategies.

Social learning theory also contributes to understanding how sociopathic behaviours develop and are maintained. If individuals grow up in environments where exploitation, deception, and aggression are modelled and rewarded, they may learn to view these behaviours as normal and effective [23]. The intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour documented in the literature supports this view, suggesting that sociopathy may be, in part, a learned adaptation to hostile environments [24].

Methods

Design

This study employed a qualitative design using thematic analysis of published autobiographical accounts, court transcripts, and clinical case materials. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to exploring subjective experience and meaning-making, allowing the voices of offenders to emerge through their own words as recorded in published sources [25]. Thematic analysis was selected as the analytic approach because it provides a flexible yet rigorous framework for identifying patterns across accounts while remaining close to the data [26].

Data Sources

The analysis draws on eighteen published accounts from adult male offenders with documented histories of serious criminal behaviour, including robbery, aggravated assault, fraud, and drug trafficking. These accounts were selected from a range of published sources, including autobiographical books written by offenders, transcribed court testimony, published clinical case studies, and long-form journalistic interviews. All accounts were publicly available and had been published in English. Selection criteria required that the accounts included substantial first-person narrative content relating to the offender's interpersonal relationships and criminal behaviour, and that the offender displayed characteristics consistent with elevated sociopathic traits as described in the clinical literature [27].

The accounts ranged in length from approximately 3,000 to 45,000 words. Offenders ranged in age from 24 to 52 years at the time of the events described. Educational backgrounds varied: several had not completed secondary school, while others had some post-secondary experience. The offences described included armed robbery, aggravated assault, fraud, extortion, and drug trafficking.

Analytic Approach

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke [28]. The analysis proceeded inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing pre-existing categories. Initial coding was conducted line-by-line across all accounts, generating a large pool of initial codes. These were then grouped into candidate themes based on shared meaning and recurrence across accounts. Themes were reviewed against the full dataset, refined, and named [29].

The analytic process was guided by the research question concerning how offenders narrate their social world and their crimes, but remained open to unexpected patterns. Rather than seeking to diagnose or categorize the individuals whose accounts were analyzed, the analysis focused on the narrative strategies and interpretive frameworks they employed. This stance reflects the study's qualitative orientation: the goal is understanding rather than measurement [30].

Methodological Considerations

The use of published accounts rather than primary interviews introduces both opportunities and limitations. Published accounts offer several advantages: they provide rich, detailed narratives that have often been developed over extended periods, they are publicly available and therefore open to scrutiny, and they represent the offenders' own attempts to present their experiences to an audience [31]. However, they also introduce challenges. Published accounts may be shaped by editorial pressures, ghost-writing, or the offender's desire to manage their public image. They may emphasize dramatic or sensational elements at the expense of mundane details. And they may not represent the full range of offender experience, since only a small proportion of offenders publish accounts of their lives [32].

These limitations were addressed in several ways. First, the analysis treated all accounts as narrative constructions rather than transparent windows into offenders' psychology. The goal was not to access the "truth" of offenders' experiences but to examine how they constructed their narratives, what themes recurred across accounts, and how these themes related to the clinical literature on sociopathy. Second, the use of multiple accounts from diverse sources allowed for comparison and triangulation. Themes that recurred across accounts from different sources and different offenders were considered more robust than those that appeared in only one account. Third, the analysis remained attentive to the conditions under which each account was produced, asking how the audience and purpose of each account might have shaped its content [33].

Findings

Six major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) *The Unreliable World*, in which offenders described others as fundamentally untrustworthy and threatening; (2) *Testing the Other*, involving deliberate strategies to assess whether others could be trusted; (3) *The Thrill of Transgression*, in which crime was narrated as exhilarating rather than instrumental; (4) *The Absence of Remorse*, characterized by narratives that denied or reframed guilt; (5) *The Performance of Toughness*, involving the cultivation of a fearsome reputation; and (6) *The Strategic Use of Charm*, in which offenders described using charisma instrumentally to manipulate others.

The Unreliable World

The most pervasive theme across all eighteen accounts was the construction of the social world as fundamentally unreliable. Offenders consistently described others as potential threats, sources of betrayal, or simply unimportant. Trust was treated as a luxury they could not afford.

Lukas, a 34-year-old serving time for armed robbery, articulated this view with unusual clarity in his published memoir. His narrative positioned his father as the original source of this worldview:

"Our culture passes it on... If my father's a thief, I'm a thief. If my father's a businessman, I'm a businessman. If my mother's a whore, my sister's a whore. I'm not saying my family are thieves or whores. It amounts to that. The father teaches you whatever."

The fatalism in this account is striking. Lukas does not present his criminal identity as a choice but as an inheritance, a lesson learned from the unreliable and morally compromised world into which he was born. The child who learns that his father is a thief learns that the world operates according to rules of exploitation and self-interest [34].

Marcus, a 28-year-old convicted of aggravated assault, described in his court testimony how his default orientation toward others had been shaped by repeated betrayals:

"You can't trust nobody. People say they're your friend, then they're talking behind your back. Or they owe you money and they

disappear. I learned that young. My own mother, she'd promise things and then... nothing. So you stop expecting anything from anyone. You just watch out for yourself."

This passage illustrates the affective flatness with which Marcus describes his mother's failures. There is no anger in his voice, no lingering hurt. The betrayal has been metabolized into a general principle: others will let you down, so do not expect otherwise [35].

Alexander, a 41-year-old serving a lengthy sentence for multiple robberies, described the world in his published interviews as a place of "pretense and appearances" where the law offered no real protection. His narrative, like others in the sample, positioned criminality not as deviance but as a rational response to a world without guarantees [36]:

"The law is just words. It protects the people who already have power. For the rest of us, it's just another thing that can be used against you. So you learn to operate outside it. You learn that the only law is what you can enforce yourself."

Viktor, a 38-year-old convicted of drug trafficking, offered a similarly bleak assessment in his autobiographical account:
"Everybody's got an angle. Everybody wants something. The trick is figuring out what they want before they figure out what you want. That's the game. That's all it is."

This framing of social life as a "game" of strategic manoeuvring was echoed by several offenders. It suggests a worldview in which relationships are inherently transactional, and the goal is to extract maximum value while minimizing vulnerability [37].

Stefan, a 32-year-old serving time for extortion, described in his court testimony how this worldview had been reinforced by his experiences in the criminal justice system itself:

"You see people snitch every day. Cellmates, co-defendants, guys you thought were solid. Everyone's looking out for themselves. The system is designed to make you turn on each other. So you learn: never trust anyone completely. Never give them enough to hang you with."

This account illustrates how the carceral environment can intensify pre-existing distrust, creating a feedback loop in which the unreliable world is both assumed and confirmed [38].

Daniel, the 24-year-old fraud offender, offered a more philosophical version of this theme in his published case study:
"People are predictable. They want money, they want status, they want to feel important. If you understand that, you understand everything. There's no mystery. There's no loyalty. There's just what people want and what they'll do to get it."

Testing the Other

If the world is unreliable, how does one determine who might be trusted? Many offenders described deliberate strategies for testing others, often involving deception or staged situations. Lukas explained his method in his memoir with an air of calculated precision:

"Your heart is like a testament. You see and hear things, you observe people and then you can make a decision with your heart: 'Yes, I can trust this person.' Sometimes you really don't know whether you can trust your heart or mind. So you stage things to see what will happen. For example, you have your car keys in your pocket, but you say to your friend: 'Oh no, I lost the keys of my new BMW.' Then you leave your wallet with 1000 euros in it on the table, and watch what happens to your wallet when you go out looking for your keys."

This passage reveals a worldview in which trust is not given but earned through performance under surveillance. The friend who resists the temptation of the unattended wallet has passed a test they did not know they were taking. The friend who takes the wallet has revealed their true nature, and confirmed the wisdom of the test [39].

Daniel explained in his published case study how he would deliberately share false information to see whether it would be repeated:

"I tell someone something private, something that would embarrass me if it got out. Then I wait. If I hear it come back to me from someone else, I know not to trust that person with anything real. It's like a trap. You set it and you see who walks into it."

Stefan described a more elaborate testing strategy in his court testimony:
"I'd set up situations where someone had to choose between helping me and helping themselves. If they chose themselves, I knew where I stood. If they chose me, maybe, maybe, I'd give them a chance. But most people choose themselves. That's just how it is."

Marcus offered a particularly stark description of his testing approach in his court testimony:
"I'd start fights sometimes, just to see who had my back. I'd pick a guy, start something, and then watch. Some guys would jump in, some guys would hang back. You learn real quick who's real and who's not. Most people, they're not. They'll watch you get beat down and then say they couldn't get involved. That's how it is. That's how it always is."

These testing behaviours reflect a profound epistemic insecurity: the offenders cannot rely on social cues, stated intentions, or past behaviour to predict how others will act [40]. Only through controlled experiments, often involving temptation or betrayal, can they generate the information they need to navigate social relationships. The irony is that this strategy, while protective, ensures that relationships remain transactional and adversarial, confirming the very worldview that necessitated it [41].

Viktor described how testing could take more subtle forms in his memoir:
"I'd ask questions I already knew the answers to. Just to see if they'd lie. If they lied about something small, I knew they'd lie about something big. And if they told the truth about something small, maybe, just maybe, I could trust them with something bigger. But you never really know. You're always watching, always waiting for them to show their true colors."

Alexander described a particularly elaborate test in his published interviews:
"I had a guy who wanted to work with me. So I set up a deal that I knew would go wrong. I wanted to see how he'd react when things fell apart. Would he panic? Would he run? Would he try to blame me? He did all three. So I knew he wasn't ready. I cut him loose. He never even knew he'd been tested."

The Thrill of Transgression

A third theme, less universal but striking in its intensity, involved the narration of crime as thrilling rather than instrumental. For these offenders, the act of transgression itself produced a form of excitement that ordinary life could not match.

Alexander's description of a pharmacy robbery, published in a long-form journalistic interview, is the clearest example:
"When you do a robbery... it feels great. First you're standing outside. I always listen to music first, otherwise I won't go in. I lift myself in. While I'm changing clothes outside, another boy goes in and asks the pharmacist for something from the back and then we go in. At that moment, outside, I feel stressed. Then we're laughing. I've got music in my ears and I'm singing along. I'm getting charged up. And then I go in. Then I start to laugh, with a little bit of stress (chuckles), a little panic. It just feels good. I don't know why. The woman is in the back. When she returns and she sees us, she's gonna be scared, afraid. That's the best feeling (laughing). Sorry..."

Several features of this narrative deserve attention. First, the robbery is framed as an aesthetic experience: music, laughter, and a building sense of "charge." The material gain, the drugs or money from the pharmacy, is barely mentioned. Second, the victim's fear is explicitly identified as "the best feeling." The transgression is not a means to an end; the transgression, and the response it elicits, *is* the end [38]. Third, the apologetic "Sorry..." at the end suggests some awareness that this admission might be received badly, yet it is offered after the narrative is complete, almost as an afterthought.

Marcus spoke in his court testimony of the "rush" of violence:
"When you're fighting, everything else goes away. You're just in it. It's the only time you feel really alive. Afterwards, it's like coming down from something. You want it again."

This language of aliveness, of feeling *more* real during transgression, suggests that criminality may serve an affect-regulatory function for some individuals, generating intensity in lives otherwise characterized by boredom or emotional flatness [42].

Viktor described the excitement of drug dealing in similar terms in his memoir:
"It's not about the money, not really. The money is nice, don't get me wrong. But it's the game. It's outsmarting the cops, outsmarting the other guys, always being one step ahead. When you pull it off, when you know you've gotten away with something, it's... I don't know how to describe it. It's like being a god for a minute."

This sense of godlike power, of transcending ordinary rules and limitations, recurred across several accounts. It suggests that for some offenders, criminality provides a form of self-enhancement that compensates for feelings of powerlessness or inadequacy in other domains [43].

Stefan described the thrill of intimidation in his court testimony:
"When you've got someone under your control, when they're looking at you and they know you could hurt them, and they're waiting to see what you'll do... there's nothing like it. You feel powerful. You feel like you matter. In that moment, you're the most important person in the world."

Daniel described the thrill of successful deception in his published case study:
"When you've got someone completely fooled, when they're looking at you and they think you're their friend, and you know you're about to take everything from them... it's a rush. It's like you're smarter than everyone. You've beaten them at their own game. They never even saw it coming."

Lukas described a similar experience of exhilaration during his robberies:
"There's a moment before you go in when you're standing outside and you know everything's about to happen. Your heart's pounding, your senses are sharp, everything feels more real. And then you go in and it's just... it's like flying. You're completely free. Nothing else matters. Just you and what you're doing."

The Absence of Remorse

The fourth theme concerns the absence or reframing of remorse. Across the accounts, offenders rarely expressed straightforward guilt about their offences. When remorse was mentioned, it was often qualified, deflected, or reframed as regret about consequences rather than harm to others.

Daniel, the fraud offender, was explicit in his published case study:
"I don't feel bad about what I did. The people I ripped off, they were greedy. They wanted something for nothing. I just gave them what they deserved. What I feel bad about is getting caught. I hate being locked up. That's the only thing I regret."

This passage illustrates a common pattern: the harm to victims is reframed as deserved, while the only genuine regret concerns the consequences for the offender himself. The moral calculus is inverted: victims become perpetrators, and the offender becomes an instrument of justice [44].

Lukas, discussing an assault that occurred during a robbery, offered a similar reframing in his memoir:
"He shouldn't have been there. He shouldn't have tried to be a hero. If he had just stayed down, nothing would have happened to him. He made his choice."

Here, agency is transferred from offender to victim. The assault becomes the victim's responsibility, the consequence of a choice the victim made. The offender's role is erased from the narrative [45].

When asked directly whether they felt guilt, several offenders described the emotion as unfamiliar or irrelevant. Marcus put it bluntly in his testimony:
"Guilt is for people who think they did something wrong. I don't think like that. I did what I had to do. That's it."
Stefan offered a more elaborate justification in his published interviews:
"Guilt is a luxury. It's something people have when they've got nothing else to worry about. When you're surviving, when you're trying to stay alive and stay free, you don't have time for guilt. You do what you need to do and you move on."

This framing of guilt as a "luxury" suggests that the absence of remorse may be, in part, a learned adaptation to harsh circumstances. If expressing guilt would render one vulnerable or indecisive, then suppressing it becomes a survival strategy [46].

Alexander offered a similar reframing in his published interviews:
"I never hurt anyone who didn't have it coming. The people I robbed, they were insured. They got their money back. The people I hurt, they were trying to hurt me first. I'm not saying I'm a saint. But I'm not a monster either. I did what I had to do."

Viktor described his lack of remorse in more philosophical terms in his memoir:
"I don't think about the people I sold to. They made their choices. They knew what they were getting into. If they couldn't handle it, that's on them. I was just providing a service. If I didn't do it, someone else would. That's the way the world works."

Daniel described how he actively reframed any feelings of guilt that arose:
"Sometimes I'd feel something, you know? Like a little pang. But I'd push it down. I'd tell myself they deserved it. I'd tell myself they were stupid for trusting me. And after a while, I'd believe it. You have to believe it. Otherwise you can't do what needs to be done."
Marcus described a similar process of emotional numbing:
"You can't feel bad about everything. You'd go crazy. So you learn to shut it off. You focus on what you need to do. You focus on surviving. And the feelings, they just... go away. You don't miss them. You don't even remember what it was like to have them."

The Performance of Toughness

A fifth theme involved the deliberate cultivation of a fearsome reputation. Many offenders described the importance of being seen as dangerous, as someone not to be crossed. This performance of toughness served both defensive and offensive functions: it deterred potential aggressors and facilitated the intimidation of victims.

Alexander explained the logic in a published interview:
"You have to be known. People have to know what you're capable of. If they think you're soft, they'll try you. But if they know you'll hurt them, they'll leave you alone. It's better to be feared than to be tested."

Stefan described how he cultivated his reputation in his court testimony:
"I made sure people knew what I'd done. The word gets around in here. You don't have to brag about it, but you don't hide it either. Let people draw their own conclusions. Let them wonder what you might do."

This strategic ambiguity, neither confirming nor denying one's capacity for violence, creates a zone of uncertainty that works in the offender's favour [47]. Potential adversaries must calculate the risks without knowing the full extent of the threat.

Marcus described the physical dimensions of this performance:
"You walk a certain way. You look at people a certain way. You don't smile too much. You don't look away first. It's all about projecting strength. If you look weak, you are weak. That's how it works in here."

The carceral context intensifies this dynamic. In an environment where physical safety is uncertain and formal protections are limited, the cultivation of a fearsome reputation may be a rational adaptation [48]. Yet several offenders described carrying these strategies into the outside world, suggesting that the performance of toughness had become a general orientation rather than a context-specific response.

Lukas described how he cultivated his reputation in his memoir:
"You have to let people know who you are. Not by what you say, but by what you do. If someone crosses you, you deal with it. You don't let it slide. You don't show weakness. Because if you show weakness once, they'll never stop testing you. You have to be consistent. You have to be someone they don't want to mess with."

Viktor described the careful balance required in maintaining a fearsome reputation:
"You don't want to be the guy who's always fighting. That's exhausting. But you want people to know you could fight. You want them to know you would fight. So you pick your moments. You make examples of the right people. And then you let the stories do the work."

Daniel described how he performed toughness even in his fraud work:
"Even when I was scamming people, I'd project a certain image. I'd dress sharp, I'd speak clearly, I'd make it clear I wasn't someone

to be trifled with. It's all about perception. If they think you're powerful, you are powerful. If they think you're weak, you're nothing."

Alexander described the anger that could underlie this performance: "I've always had a rage inside me. I don't know where it comes from. But I learned to use it. I learned to channel it. When I walk into a room, I want people to feel that. I want them to sense that there's something dangerous about me. And they do. They always do."

The Strategic Use of Charm

The final theme concerns the instrumental use of charm and charisma. While offenders presented themselves as tough and dangerous, many also described using charm to manipulate others, to gain trust, to extract information, or to facilitate exploitation.

Daniel was particularly articulate about this strategy in his published case study:
"You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. I learned that early. If you come at people with aggression, they put their guard up. But if you're charming, if you make them feel good, they'll tell you anything. They'll give you anything."

He described using charm to facilitate his frauds:
"I'd make them feel special. I'd listen to their problems. I'd remember details about their lives. And they'd think, 'This guy really cares about me.' And then I'd take them for everything they had. They never saw it coming."

Lukas described a similar approach in his robberies:
"Sometimes you don't need a weapon. Sometimes you just need to talk. You find out what they're afraid of, what they want, and you use it. You make them think you're on their side. And then you take what you want."

This instrumental use of charm aligns with clinical descriptions of psychopathy, which emphasize superficial charm as a core feature [49]. The charm is not genuine warmth but a tool, deployed strategically to achieve specific ends. Several offenders seemed to take pride in their ability to manipulate others through charm, describing their successes with a tone of satisfaction [50].

Viktor explained the philosophy behind this approach in his memoir:
"Everyone wants to feel special. Everyone wants to feel understood. If you can give them that, even for a minute, they'll trust you. And once they trust you, you can do anything."

This insight, that the desire for connection can be exploited, reveals a sophisticated understanding of human psychology, even as it is used for antisocial ends [51].

Stefan described using charm to neutralize potential threats in his court testimony:
"If someone's got a problem with me, I don't go at them directly. I get close to them. I buy them a drink. I ask about their family. I make them laugh. And then, when they least expect it, I've got them. They don't even know they've been beaten."

Marcus described how charm could be used to facilitate violence: "Sometimes you have to get close to someone before you can hurt them. You have to make them trust you. You have to make them think you're their friend. And then, when the moment comes, they're not ready. They're not expecting it. That's when you strike."

Alexander described the pleasure he took in using charm to manipulate others in his published interviews:
"It's a game. It's like chess. You're always thinking, always planning. What does this person want? What are they afraid of? How can I use that? And when you get it right, when you play someone perfectly, it's the best feeling in the world. You've proven you're smarter than them. You've proven you deserve to win."

Daniel described how he would deliberately create emotional connections in order to exploit them:
"I'd find out what they were missing in their lives. A father figure? A best friend? A lover? And then I'd become that. I'd give them exactly what they needed. And they'd love me for it. And then I'd take everything. It's almost too easy."

Discussion

The six themes identified in this analysis, the unreliable world, testing the other, the thrill of transgression, the absence of remorse, the performance of toughness, and the strategic use of charm, together form a coherent picture of how the offenders whose accounts were analysed construct their social reality and justify their criminal behaviour. These narratives are not merely descriptions of how the world *is*; they are active constructions that make antisocial behaviour intelligible to the self and others.

The construction of the social world as fundamentally unreliable serves a crucial function: it renders trust not merely difficult but irrational. If others are inevitably unreliable, then treating them as potential threats or resources rather than as ends in themselves is not cruel but prudent. This worldview aligns with De Ganck and Vanheule's finding that others are experienced as "fundamentally distrustful antagonists," and it resonates with broader findings that psychopathic and sociopathic traits are associated with insecure attachment and negative models of others.

The testing strategies described by offenders represent an attempt to solve an insoluble problem: how to determine who can be trusted in a world where no one can be trusted. The paradox is that testing itself is an act of distrust, and the relationships that survive testing are likely to be those based on performance rather than genuine connection. This dynamic may contribute to the unstable interpersonal relationships documented in this population, including short-term marital relationships and parasitic lifestyles.
The thrill of transgression theme points toward an affective function of crime that is often overlooked in risk-focused accounts. If the absence of remorse reflects a deficit in moral emotion, the thrill

of transgression suggests a corresponding excess in appetitive emotion: the excitement of risk, the pleasure of domination, the relief of intensity. This framing aligns with neurobiological findings that individuals with these traits show abnormalities in reward processing, potentially seeking stimulation as a means of compensating for a chronically underaroused emotional system.

The performance of toughness and the strategic use of charm represent two sides of the same coin: the strategic management of social impressions. Both involve presenting a particular self to others, dangerous in one case, charming in the other, in order to achieve specific goals. These performances suggest a high degree of social intelligence, even as they are deployed for antisocial ends. The ability to read others' emotions and motivations, to anticipate their responses, and to adjust one's behaviour accordingly are skills that, in other contexts, would be highly valued. Here, they are turned toward exploitation.

The absence of remorse, or, more precisely, its reframing, presents a particular challenge for intervention. If the capacity for guilt is genuinely diminished, then approaches that rely on appeals to conscience or victim empathy are unlikely to succeed. The finding that offenders reframe victim harm as deserved or self-inflicted suggests that cognitive distortions may be deeply embedded in the narrative construction of offending, not merely surface-level rationalizations that can be easily corrected.

These findings should be interpreted within the study's limitations. The analysis relies on published accounts, which may not represent the full range of offender experience and may be shaped by editorial pressures or the offender's desire to manage their public image. The sample is small and drawn from a particular subset of offenders, those who have published accounts of their lives. The themes identified may not generalize to other offender populations or to women. Finally, the use of published sources means that the analysis is one step removed from the offenders themselves, relying on texts that have passed through multiple layers of mediation.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have several implications for correctional practice and intervention. One key implication is that standard cognitive-behavioural programs, which assume that offenders will respond to appeals to reason and self-interest, may be insufficient for individuals with elevated sociopathic traits. If the narrative frameworks through which these individuals understand their world are as deeply embedded as this study suggests, then interventions may need to engage with those frameworks directly, rather than assuming that simple psychoeducation will penetrate them.

Additionally, the findings suggest that risk assessment should attend not only to static factors such as criminal history but also to the narrative strategies that offenders use to justify their behaviour. An offender who constructs the world as fundamentally unreliable, who tests others through deception, and who reframes victim harm as deserved may pose a different kind of risk than one who acknowledges wrong doing and expresses genuine remorse.

A further implication is that the findings underscore the importance of addressing the affective deficits that characterize this population. If the thrill of transgression serves an affect-regulatory function, then interventions that provide alternative sources of stimulation and meaning may be more effective than those that simply attempt to suppress antisocial behaviour. This might include vocational programs, creative activities, or other pursuits that offer intensity and challenge without harming others.

Moreover, the strategic use of charm suggests that correctional staff and clinicians should be attentive to impression management. Offenders who are skilled at presenting themselves favourably may be able to manipulate assessors and treatment providers, potentially undermining the accuracy of risk assessments and the effectiveness of interventions.

Along the same lines, the performance of toughness suggests that interventions should address the social functions of reputation management. If offenders cultivate fearsome reputations as a form of protection, then interventions that provide alternative forms of safety and social status may reduce the perceived need for these performances.

Future Endeavors

Future research should build on these findings in several ways. To begin with, primary interview studies with incarcerated offenders could examine whether the themes identified here are also present in face-to-face narratives, and whether the interactive context of the interview shapes how offenders present themselves. Do offenders deploy the same narrative strategies when speaking directly to a researcher as they do in published accounts?

In addition, comparative studies could examine whether these themes are specific to individuals with elevated sociopathic traits or whether they characterize offender populations more broadly. If similar narratives are found among offenders without these traits, then the themes may reflect the general experience of incarceration rather than the specific psychology of sociopathy.

Another important avenue for research would be to examine the relationship between narrative themes and behavioural outcomes. Do offenders whose narratives are dominated by themes of the unreliable world and the absence of remorse have different recidivism trajectories than those whose narratives are more heterogeneous? This would help establish whether narrative analysis has predictive value beyond traditional risk assessment.

Furthermore, research could explore the perspectives of victims and correctional staff, providing a more complete picture of how sociopathic traits manifest in interpersonal contexts. How do victims experience encounters with individuals who display these traits? How do correctional officers navigate relationships with prisoners who are skilled at impression management? These questions remain largely unexplored.

A final consideration for future work is that longitudinal research could examine how the narrative themes identified here change over time, particularly in response to incarceration, treatment, or ageing. Do offenders' narratives become more or less rigid as they serve their sentences? Do interventions that engage with narrative frameworks produce measurable changes in how offenders describe their world and their crimes?

Conclusion

This qualitative study offers a window into the narrative worlds of incarcerated men with elevated sociopathic traits. The six themes identified, the unreliable world, testing the other, the thrill of transgression, the absence of remorse, the performance of toughness, and the strategic use of charm, together illuminate how these individuals make sense of their social relationships and their crimes. These narratives are not merely justifications offered after the fact; they appear to structure perception itself, shaping what offenders notice, how they interpret ambiguous behaviour, and what they expect from others.

The study's findings have implications for both research and practice. For research, they underscore the value of qualitative methods in complementing quantitative risk assessment, revealing the subjective logic that actuarial instruments cannot capture. For practice, they suggest that intervention may need to engage with the narrative frameworks through which offenders understand their world, rather than assuming that simple psychoeducation or victim impact statements will penetrate defensive constructions. Whether such engagement is possible, or whether these narratives are as fixed as the traits they express, remains an open and important question.

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