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Psychopathy, child development, and prevention: a psychodynamic conceptual analysis with implications for education and mental health

Psicopatía, desarrollo infantil y prevención: un análisis conceptual psicodinámico con implicaciones para la educación y la salud mental

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This conceptual analysis examines the psychodynamic mechanisms underlying the development of psychopathic traits and violent behavior, with special emphasis on early childhood relational experiences and their implications for education and mental health intervention. **Metodología:** Drawing on Amenabar Beitia's (2014) qualitative research with incarcerated individuals and integrating current empirical literature on attachment, narcissism, and callous-unemotional traits, we construct an integrated psychodynamic framework articulating the contributions of Freud, Fromm, Reich, Winnicott, Bowlby, and Fonagy. **Results:** Three core psychological mechanisms are identified: pathological narcissism, projection, and empathy deficit - each rooted in deficient early relational environments. Parental figures play a critical mediating role: maternal sensitivity functions as a protective factor against the development of psychopathic traits, while harsh, inconsistent, or persecutory parenting constitutes a significant risk factor. The social superego dimension and collective violence are also discussed. **Conclusion:** Psychopathy and severe violence are not inevitable biological outcomes but rather developmentally modifiable trajectories. Early prevention through psychologically informed parenting programs and emotionally responsive school environments represents the most promising strategy to interrupt these pathways.

Keywords: psychopathy, child development, narcissism, empathy deficit, mental health.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Este análisis conceptual examina los mecanismos psicodinámicos subyacentes al desarrollo de rasgos psicopáticos y comportamientos violentos, con especial énfasis en las experiencias relacionales de la primera infancia y sus implicaciones para la educación y la intervención en salud mental. **Metodología:** Basándonos en la investigación cualitativa de Amenabar Beitia (2014) con personas encarceladas e integrando la literatura empírica actual sobre apego, narcisismo y rasgos callos-inemocionales, construimos un marco psicodinámico integrado que articula las contribuciones de Freud, Fromm, Reich, Winnicott, Bowlby y Fonagy. **Resultados:** Se identifican tres mecanismos psicológicos fundamentales: patológicos, narcisismo, proyección y déficit de empatía, cada uno basado en entornos relacionales tempranos deficientes. Las figuras parentales desempeñan un papel mediador fundamental: la sensibilidad materna actúa como un factor protector frente al desarrollo de rasgos psicopáticos, mientras que la crianza dura, inconsistente o persecutoria constituye un factor de riesgo significativo. También se discuten la dimensión del superyó social y la violencia colectiva. **Conclusión:** La psicopatía y la violencia severa no son resultados biológicos inevitables, sino trayectorias modificables en el desarrollo. La prevención temprana mediante programas de crianza psicológicamente informados y entornos escolares emocionalmente sensibles representa la estrategia más prometedora para interrumpir estas vías.

Palabras clave: psicopatía, desarrollo infantil, narcisismo, déficit de empatía, salud mental.



1. INTRODUCTION

Criminal violence and psychopathy represent some of the most challenging phenomena at the intersection of Psychology, education, and public mental health. Despite decades of research, the precise mechanisms through which psychopathic traits develop - and the conditions under which they can be modified - remain subjects of active theoretical and empirical debate. Psychopathy affects approximately 1% of the general population but accounts for 65-75% of convicted criminals (Hare, 2003), a disproportion that highlights both its clinical relevance and its societal cost.

Two dominant explanatory traditions have shaped the field. Neurobiological accounts emphasize structural and functional anomalies - particularly in the amygdala and orbitofrontal cortex - that predispose individuals to effective deficits and antisocial behavior (Kiehl et al., 2001). Developmental-relational accounts, by contrast, focus on early attachment experiences, parenting quality, and relational trauma as key modulators of psychopathic trait expression (Schimmenti, 2019; Van der Put et al., 2024). The present article adopts the latter perspective - without dismissing the former - arguing that a psychodynamic reading of violence offers unique conceptual contributions that are both theoretically rigorous and practically actionable.

The primary source informing this analysis is Amenabar Beitia's (2014) book *Cómo hacer de un niño un psicópata: Claves psicológicas de la violencia* (How to Turn a Child into a Psychopath: Psychological Keys to Violence), which synthesizes years of in-depth interviews with incarcerated individuals convicted of serious violent offenses in Mexican penitentiaries. This work is situated within a broader psychodynamic tradition - incorporating Freud, Fromm, Reich, Winnicott, Bowlby, Fonagy, Lacan and Nasio - and constitutes a rich source of clinical observation that merits systematic integration with current empirical research.

1.1 Aims and Scope

This conceptual analysis pursues three interconnected aims: (a) to identify and characterize the core psychological mechanisms associated with the development of psychopathic traits and violent behavior within a psychodynamic framework; (b) to examine how early relational experiences - particularly parenting quality and attachment security - mediate the expression of



these mechanisms; and (c) to derive theoretically grounded and empirically informed implications for preventive intervention in educational and mental health contexts.

In doing so, this article extends current knowledge by presenting a novel argument: that psychopathic development is best understood not as a fixed biological program but as a dinámica,relational process that is modifiable-particularly in its early stages-through targeted educational and psychotherapeutic intervention. This argument challenges purely biological determinism while offering a more hopeful and empirically defensible, framework for prevention.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Design and Approach

This article constitutes a conceptual analysis, a peer-reviewed article type that explores the concepts and issues defining a field by examining their constituent elements and interconnections (Frontiers in Psychology, 2014). The analytical approach is hermeneutic-integrative: it interprets and synthesizes theoretical constructs and empirical findings to produce a novel conceptual framework.

2.2 Primary Source

The primary theoretical source is Amenabar Beitia's (2014), selected on the basis of four criteria: (a) its originality as a qualitative clinical investigation based on longitudinal in-depth interviews (ranging from 1 to 30+ sessions) with individuals convicted of homicide, rape, and other violent offenses; (b) its systematic integration of multiple psychodynamic traditions; (c) its explicit attention to educational and preventive implications; and (d) its relevance to the Latin American sociocultural context, which remains underrepresented in the anglophone literature.

2.3 Secondary Sources and Integration Procedure

Secondary sources were selected through targeted searches in Scopus, PubMed, and Web of Science using the terms: psychopathy AND (attachment OR parenting OR child development); narcissism AND (empathy OR violence); callous-unemotional traits AND (early childhood OR prevention); psychodynamic AND (violence OR antisocial behavior). Searches were limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2024. References cited in key papers were also examined (backward snowballing). A total of 28



empirical studies and theoretical reviews were incorporated, selected for their direct relevance to the three conceptual categories identified in the primary analysis: (1) core mechanisms. (2) developmental antecedents, and (3) preventive implications.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Core Psychological Mechanisms

3.1.1 Pathological Narcissism

Central to the psychodynamic account of violent behavior is the construct of pathological narcissism-characterized by an unstable, grandioso self-representación that requires constant external confirmation and is vulnerable to intense shame and rage when threatened (Kernberg, 1975; Ronningstam, 2022). In Amenabar Beitia's (2014) framework, this construct anchors the analysis of criminal violence: the perpetrator's act is not merely impulsive aggression but frequently a motivated attempt to shore up a fragile narcissistic equilibrium.

This interpretation aligns with contemporary empirical and clinical research. Schalkwijk et al. (2021) demonstrated that pathological narcissism involves impairments in both identity and self-direction, as well as in. Empathy and intimacy-precisely the domains that Amenabar Beitia identifies as deficient in violent offenders. Crucially, the oscillation between grandiosity and vulnerability that characterizes narcissistic functioning (Day et al.,2022) creates conditions in which the other is experienced either as an instrument-of-self-aggrandizement or as a persecutory threat to be eliminated.

Nasio's (1992) theoretical elaboration of Lacan's concept of the superego offers an additional layer of analysis. The 'savage superego'- a primitive, non-socialized instance that demands absolute gratification regardless of the other's needs- operates alongside the moral superego in a tension tat places the ego in an irresolvable double bind. In psychopathic individuals, the savage superego gains dominance, not because moral structures are absent, but because the persecutory quality of the internalized moral authority makes Guillermo intolerable, leading to its systematic externalization through projection.

3.1.2 Projection and the Dehumanization of the Other

Projection- the unconscious attribution to external objects of psychic contents that the subject cannot tolerate within the self-constitutes the second core mechanism identified in this



framework. In violent offenders, projection operates at multiple levels: intolerable affects (shame, fear, worthlessness) are attributed to the victim, who is thereby constructed as the bearer of all that is despised. This process enables the perpetrator to maintain narcissistic stability while directive destructive impulses outward.

The clinical vignette of Javier Rosado analyzed by Amenabar Beitia (2014) illustrates this mechanism with precision: the victim is described in contemptuous, dehumanizing terms ('poor wretch,' 'face worth hitting') that reflect the perpetrator's own projected self-representations. Psychoanalytic object relations theory (Kernberg, 1975) has long described splitting and projection as the primary defenses of borderline and antisocial pathology, and contemporary research confirms their centrality in narcissistic and psychopathic representations (Ronningstam, 2022).

The social dimension of projection is equally important. Amenabar Beitia (2014) observes that the collective exclusion of the violent offender from the category of 'human'- treating them as monsters or beats-mirrors at the social level the same projective mechanism that the offender deploys against their victims. This observation invites a reflexive critique: punitive responses to violence that rely on moral exclusion may reproduce, at a collective level, the same psychological dynamics that generate individual violence.

3.1.3 Empathy Deficit and the Failure of Mentalization

The third core mechanism is the deficit in empathic functioning- the inability to recognize and respond to the inner life of the other as a subject with their own mind, emotions, and dignity. Fonagy's (1999) concept of mentalization provides a precise theoretical account of this deficit: psychopathic individuals are characterized by an impaired capacity to conceive of others as having minds of their own, which underlies the instrumental treatment of others as objects.

Current meta-analytic evidence strongly supports this account. A comprehensive meta-analysis by Borroni et al. (2022) across 100 studies (N=31,630) found significant negative associations between narcissism and both affective and cognitive empathy, with antagonism/entitlement accounting for the greatest variance. Similarly, Castiello et al. (2023) documented that callous-unemotional traits-the affective empathy (recognizing and sharing others' emotional states) in early childhood, with this association detectable as early as age three (Demetriou & Fanti, 2023).



Importantly, the empathy deficit in psychopathy is not simply the absence of an ability; it involves an active defensive organization. As Schalkwijk et al. (2021) argue, narcissistic patients are 'not willing to focus their attention on the other,' suggesting that empathic engagement is experienced as threatening to the fragile self-system. Amenabar Beitia (2014) frames this as an 'emotional amputation'- a disconnection from the capacity to feel is simultaneously a disconnection from the self.

3.2 Developmental Antecedents: The Role of Early Relational Experiences

3.2.1 Attachment Security and Psychopathic Trait Development

The empirical literature on the relationship between attachment quality and psychopathic trait development has grown substantially in the past decade. A meta-analysis by Gao et al. (reviewed in Van der Put et al., 2024) demonstrated that insecure attachment- particularly avoidant and disorganized patterns - is positively associated with psychopathic traits across the lifespan. The developmental mechanisms are multiple: insecure attachment impairs the acquisition of emotional regulation capacities, the development of mentalization and the internalization of prosocial norms.

Yan et al. (2023) followed 1,149 families longitudinally from infancy to adolescence using the Strange Situation Procedure and found that infant attachment style predicted affective psychopathic traits (remorselessness, unemotionality, callousness) at age 15. Specifically, disorganized attachment in infancy-associated with caregiving that is simultaneously a source of fear- was the strongest predictor of later affective psychopathy. This finding directly supports Amenabar Beitia's (2014) argument that parenting characterized by inconsistency and threat creates the relational substrate for psychopathic development.

Maternal sensitivity has been identified as a key protective factor. Centifanti et al. (2016) demonstrated that maternal sensitivity moderated the expression of psychopathic traits in adolescent males with low inhibitory control- that is, sensitive parenting buffered the risk of psychopathic development even in temperamentally vulnerable children. For females, secure attachment mediated this protective effect. These findings suggest that psychopathic trait expression is not simply determined by biological temperament but is substantially shaped by relational experience.

3.2.2 Parental Figures: Protective and Risk Functions



Within the psychodynamic framework elaborated by Amenabar Beitia (2014), the maternal figure functions as the primary organizer of early self-development: it is through the mother's sensitive, consistent, and attuned responsiveness that the infant gradually acquires the ability to differentiate self from other, internal from external, the real from the phantasized. Winnicott's concept of 'holding'-the environmental provision that enables the infant's psychic integration-captures this function precisely.

Parental practices identified as risk factors in the primary source-in sensitivity to the infant's distress, use of fear as a regulatory tool, prohibitions that block legitimate emotional expression, and the normalization of coercive control- are each well-documented as contributors to antisocial development in the empirical literature. Erhart et al. (2021), in a longitudinal study of 1,145 adolescents, found that a deteriorating family climate was the strongest longitudinal -level factors. Interestingly, social support sometimes increased antisocial behavior in this study, suggesting that the quality rather than quantity of social relationships matters most.

The paternal figure receives particular attention in Amenabar Beitia's (2014) framework. The father's function is theorized as facilitating the transition from dyadic to triadic relating- from the other-child dyad to the social world structured by law and alterity. A 'protective father' who establishes limits from a position of loving authority facilitates this transition and models the internalization of law as something that protects rather than persecutes. A 'persecutory father'- who exercises authority through fear, arbitrariness, or violence- produces a fundamentally hostile relationship to law that may generalize to all social authority.

Childhood psychological maltreatment, primarily originating from parental figures, has been identified as a recognized risk factor for callous-un emotional traits (Todorov et al., 2023, as cited in the Nature Humanities and Social Sciences Communications study). Recent empirical work confirms the intergenerational transmission of these patterns: parental experiences of childhood maltreatment are associated with greater emotional suppression in parenting, which in turn predicts callous-un emotional traits in children- a finding with profound implications for preventive intervention at the family level.

3.3 The Social Dimension: Collective Violence and Exclusion

Amenabar Beitia's (2014) analysis extends beyond individual Psychology to encompass the social dynamics through which violence is reproduced. Two phenomena receive particular



attention: machismo and intimate partner violence, and the collective exclusion of the offender from the human register.

Intimate partner violence is theorized as rooted in a paradoxical structure: the abusive partner’s need for absolute control over the other reflects an underlying terror of abandonment and a profound insecurity about masculine identity. Fromm’s (1975) formulation-that destructive passion is the attempt to make life meaningful through violence when other avenues are foreclosed-provides the psychodynamic foundation for this account. Contemporary research in forensic Psychology broadly confirms this picture: IPV perpetrators show elevated rates of insecure attachment, pathological narcissism, and emotional dysregulation /reviewed in Day et al., 2022).

The social exclusion of the violent offender is analyzed by Amenabar Beitia (2014) as a collective projective mechanism that serves defensive rather than rehabilitative functions. When society treats the violent offender as categorically ‘other’- as monster, beast, or non-person- it simultaneously disavows the presence of destructive potential within the collective itself and forecloses the possibility of understanding the developmental pathways that produced the violence. The author’s position-that violent offenders remain human and retain rights- is not a moral relativism but a epistemological and ethical prerequisite for any effective framework.

Table 1
Summary of Core Mechanism, Developmental Antecedents, and Preventive Implications

Domain	Key Construct	Empirical Support
Core mechanism	Pathological narcissism - projection -empathy deficit	Borroni et al. (2022); Schalkwijk et al. (2021); Demetrio & Fanti (2023)
Developmental antecedent	Insecure / disorganized attachment in infancy	Yan et al. (2023); Centifanti et al. (2016)
Developmental antecedent	Harsh, inconsistent, of fear-based parenting	Erhart et al (2021); Van der Put et al. (2024)
Developmental antecedent	Callous-unemotional trait expression shaped by	Demetriou & Fanti (2023); Yan et al. (2023)



	relational experience	
Preventive implication	Parenting supports programs	Savaglio et al. (2023);
	improve child mental health	Everest et al. (2021)
	outcomes	
Preventive implication	Early psychotherapeutic	Centifanti et al. (2016);
	intervention modifies	Fonagy (1999)
	developmental trajectory	
Preventive implication	School-based emotional	England-Mason et al. (2023);
	learning reduces antisocial	Erhart et al. (2021)
	behavior	

Note. All empirical references cited were indexed in Scopus at the time of writing.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Psychopathy as a Developmentally Modifiable Trajectory

The central thesis of this conceptual analysis is that psychopathic trait development, while influenced by biological factors, is substantially shaped by relational experience and is therefore amenable to prevention. This thesis is supported by converging evidence from multiple research traditions. Longitudinal studies show that early maternal sensitivity moderates the expression of psychopathic traits in temperamentally vulnerable children (Centifanti et al., 2016). Meta-analytic findings confirm that insecure attachment is associated with psychopathic traits across clinical and secure settings (reviewed in Van der Put et al., 2024). And neuroimaging research indicates that parenting interventions can produce measurable changes in the neural circuits underlying emotional regulation and empathic processing (reviewed in England-Mason et al., 2023).

These findings challenge both extreme positions in the nature-nurture debate. Against strong biological determinism, they demonstrated that environmental factors substantially modulate genética and temperamental predispositions. Against environmental determinism, they acknowledge that biological factors-particularly low fear reactivity and impaired amygdala functioning- create genuine risk that must be addressed proactively. The psychodynamic framework elaborated here does not adjudicate this debate but offers a richer account of the mechanisms through which relational experience shaped the internal working models,



defensive structures, and affective capacities that either protect against or facilitate violent development.

4.2 Implications for Education

The educational implications of this framework are substantial and specific. Three áreas of intervention emerge as particularly relevant: teacher training in emotional development, curricular integration of social-emotional learning, and school environments as contexts of relational repair.

Teachers are primary observers of children's emotional development and relational functioning. Equipping them with knowledge of early developmental risk indicators - empathy deficit, emotional dysregulation, relational aggression, and social withdrawal- enables timely identification of children who may benefit from additional support. This is not a matter of stigmatizing vulnerable children but of providing preventive resources before difficulties become entrenched.

The systematic integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) into the school curriculum is among the most empirically supported preventive strategies for reducing antisocial behavior. Parenting and school-based interventions targeting prosocial skills, empathy development, and emotional regulation show small to moderate effect sizes on antisocial behavior, with effects maintained at follow-up (Losel & Beelmann, 2003, as cited in Savaglio et al., 2023). More recent meta-analyses confirm that interventions targeting emotion socialization- teaching children to recognize, understand, and regulate emotions- produce significant improvements in social functioning (England-Mason et al., 2023).

The school as a context of relational repair deserves particular emphasis. For children who have grown up in contexts of neglect or maltreatment, the experience of consistent, warm and limit-setting relationships with adult figures can provide corrective relational experiences that partially compensate for early deficits. Amenabar Beitia's (2014) conceptualization of 'cultivators'-adults who actively nurture children's emotional and psychological development- articulates a vision of teaching as a fundamentally relational vocation, and one whose preventive remains underutilized.

4.3 Implications for Mental Health

From a mental health perspective, this framework underscores the primary of early intervention and the centrality of parenting support as a preventive strategy. The empirical



evidence reviewed here consistently shows that parenting quality mediates the relationship between biological risk and behavioral outcomes. Programs that support parents in developing sensitive, consistent, and non-coercive parenting practices - such as the Incredible Years, Triple P, and Parent-Child Interaction Therapy-have demonstrated significant reductions in externalizing problems and antisocial behavior in children with emerging conduct difficulties (Savaglio et al., 2023).

For those who have already developed severe psychopathic traits, the therapeutic implications are more complex. Amenabar Beitia's (2014) analysis of the penitentiary context underscores the ethical and practical importance of maintaining therapeutic engagement with incarcerated individuals. While the literature is cautious about the effectiveness of standard treatments for psychopathy (Hare, 2003), emerging approaches focused on mentalization - the capacity to understand behavior in terms of mental states-show promise, particularly for individuals whose psychopathic features are more environmentally determined than constitutionally fixed (Fonagy, 1999).

The abandonment of therapeutic engagement with violent offenders is not only ethically questionable but strategically counterproductive: it forecloses the possibility of reducing recidivism and perpetuates a cycle of violence that ultimately harms both the individual and society. A mental health system informed by the psychodynamic framework articulated here would invest in preventive programs during childhood, maintain therapeutic services within penitentiary contexts, and resist the temptation to exclude violent offenders from the moral community of persons deserving care.

4.4 Theoretical Contributions

Beyond its applied implications, this conceptual analysis makes several theoretical contributions. First, it demonstrated the compatibilidad and complementary of classical psychodynamic constructs (Freud's instinct theoretical, Winnicott's holding, Bowlby's attachment, Fonagy's mentalization) with current empirical research on psychopathy and antisocial development. Rather than treating psychoanalytic theory as an antiquated alternative to neuroscience, this framework positions it as a generator of conceptual hypotheses that contemporary research can test and refine.

Second, the analysis introduces Nasio's (1992) distinction between the moral superego and the savage superego as a novel conceptual tool for understanding the specific quality of guilt



dysregulation in psychopathic individuals-not as the absence of guilt but as its systematic externalization in response to a persecutory internal moral authority. This distinction has clinical implications: therapeutic work with psychopathic individuals may be more productive when it addresses the persecutory quality of the superego rather than simply attempting to install guilt.

Third, the framework situates individual psychology within a social context, arguing that the social exclusion of the violent offender mirrors-and potentially reproduces-the projective dynamics that characterize individual violence. This observation invites interdisciplinary collaboration between psychology, sociology, and criminology in the design of social responses to violence that are both just and effective.

4.5 Limitations

Several limitations of this conceptual analysis must be acknowledged. First, the primary qualitative source (Amenabar Beitia, 2014) is based on clinical interviews conducted in a specific sociocultural context (Mexican penitentiaries), which limits the generalizability of the clinical observations to other cultural settings. Cross-cultural validation of the proposed framework is needed. Second, the article does not address sex differences to psychopathy differ between males and females (reviewed in Freitas et al.,2024). Future analyses should address this gap explicitly. Third, as a conceptual analysis this article does not generate new empirical data; its contributions lies in the integration and interpretation of existing evidence rather than in hypothesis testing.

5. CONCLUSION

This conceptual analysis has argued that psychopathic behavior and severe criminal violence are best understood not as biological inevitabilities but as the endpoint of developmental trajectories that are substantially shaped by relational experience. Three core psychological mechanisms - pathological narcissism, projection, and empathy deficit- operate in an articulated fashion, each rooted in early relational deficits and each amenable, in principle, to preventive intervention.

The most significant insight of the psychodynamic framework reviewed here may be its insistence on the humanity of the violent offender. This is not a moral capitulation but an epistemological requirement: understanding violence from within- from the subjective world



of the perpetrator- is a necessary Condition of understanding, and therefore for preventing, it. As Fromm (1975) observed, even the most destructive human being is attempting, however catastrophically, to make life meaningful.

The practical implications are clear. Investment in early parenting support, emotionally responsive school environments, and the systematic integration of social-emotional learning into education represents the most cost-effective and evidence-based strategy for reducing the developmental pathways to psychopathy and violence. Mental health systems that act early, that support families, and that maintain therapeutic engagement with high-risk individuals- rather than abandoning them to purely punitive management- are both more humane and more effective.

Future research should test the specific hypotheses derived from this framework through prospective longitudinal designs, examining the interplay of temperamental, parenting, and social factors in the development of psychopathic traits across diverse cultural contexts. The integration of psychodynamic clinical insight with rigorous empirical metodología remains one of the most productive frontiers in developmental psychopathology.

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Conflicto de Intereses: Los autores afirman que no existen conflictos de intereses en este estudio y que se han seguido éticamente los procesos establecidos por esta revista. Además, aseguran que este trabajo no ha sido publicado parcial ni totalmente en ninguna otra revista.

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