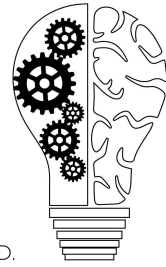


Episode 067: Joker the Movie: A Character and Cultural Psychoanalysis

Hans Von Walter, M.D., David Puder, M.D



DAVID PUDER, M.D.
**PSYCHIATRY &
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

This PDF is a supplement to the podcast “Psychiatry & Psychotherapy” found on [iTunes](#), [Google Play](#), [Stitcher](#), [Overcast](#), [PlayerFM](#), [PodBean](#), [TuneIn](#), [Podtail](#), [Blubrry](#), [Podfanatic](#)

There are no conflicts of interest for this episode.

This blog will not be about Joker in other films, but only about the recent film “Joker.”

On this week’s episode of the Psychiatry and Psychotherapy podcast, my colleague, Dr. Hans Von Walter to talk about Joker, the film, character analysis, psychoanalysis, and cultural analysis.

My Reflections on the Movie

As a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, and someone who cares about suffering people, during the movie I felt a mix of nausea, disgust, sorrow and pleasure. Afterwards, I had a headache, but in the best way possible. Maybe this paper is to help me better understand this movie, with the dark lighting, grim ambience, filthy apartments with no skyline, and unsettling music. It left me feeling unsettled, angsty, and maybe, if you are reading this, you have some similar emotive responses leading to your curiosity about his diagnosis.

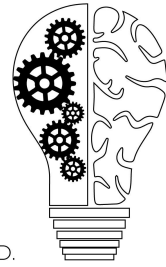
A friend told me, “If a movie makes you feel something, good or bad, it’s done its job. It’s not about whether you like it or not, it’s about if it worked to make you suspend disbelief that that person or those people were actually going through that thing.” And Joaquin Phoenix’s Joker did that. He was incredible. Maybe the complexity of the story and the things I will discuss here are in part the reason it is the [top](#) profitable comic book movie of all time.

I really think the most interesting part of the film, is the empathy they are able to generate in the audience.

Perhaps the start of the empathy the audience begins to feel is when they show a character who we want justice for, and some sort of growth and transformation in that

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character takes place. Joker clearly demonstrated empathy. Although odd, his kindness towards his mother—giving her a bath, greeting her when he got home—seemed like he was an immature and childlike boy trying to show kindness to her. Further, when he made a kid laugh on the bus, we saw his human side, his desire to connect to others. He seemed to feel empathy for his coworker, Gary, and sorrow when the other clowns made fun of him. Towards young Bruce, he demonstrated humor and also a desire to connect. When reflecting on the kids who beat him up, he said, “Oh, they were just kids.”

All of these instances developed our empathy for him and give us a background to continue to care about his character, even when he begins to commit horrific acts of violence.

Joker demonstrated deep desire for empathy and connection, something that as an audience member, I felt a desire to give him.

He says “The worst part of having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you don’t,” which anyone who has suffered from mental illness might resonate with. There were parts of him that deeply needed empathy, but at the same time there were aspects of his moral decision making that are not tied to mental illness, but rather choice—namely his violent murders.

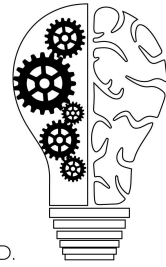
When his boss asked him why he lost the sign, he said, “Did you not hear? I got mugged.” This was an authority figure who did not see him, understand him, and ultimately believed the worst about him. I wanted to jump into the scene and defend him.

To the social worker, he said, “No one hears me, you never listen, you ask me the same questions.” His therapist responded, “You are on six medications. They have to be doing something.” He yearned to be heard, understood, empathized with. He wondered if anyone could see his suffering.

He told the man he thought was his father, Wayne, that he just wanted a little warmth. From the talk show host, instead of ridicule for his medical condition, he desired a hug,

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and even went as far as to have a delusion where the host told him, “I wish I had a son like you.” In his fantasy of his female neighbor, he desired a back rub during his mother’s hospitalization.

The Murders

The first two murders were in self defense. When the three men on the subway were being sexually provocative to a young girl on the bus, we feel a sense of compassion for her, and anger towards them. Then when they start beating Joker up, and he shoots his gun, we feel it is a reaction in self defense. Then the situation switches from a reaction to rage, which seems to come from deep humiliation. He shoots the third man as he runs away.

After some heartbreaking scenes where he discovers his past (in movies they ignore HIPPA protections)—that his mother has been lying to him and was incredibly abusive, he kills his mother. Someone commented online that maybe he was doing this to put her out of her misery, showing some are seeing this as more altruistic than just murder. He kills Randall, his former clown coworker, because he made fun of him and lied to their boss about him. He then kills Murray Franklin after being humiliated on television about his medical condition.

As the movie progresses, we begin to blur our idea of traditional right and wrong, and enter into his mind, and his reasons for murderous rage.

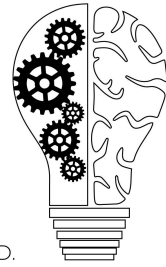
Did Joker have a Medical Diagnosis?

Joker’s Laughing Disease...

Arthur Fleck clearly had a diagnosis of pseudobulbar affect—uncontrollable episodes of crying and laughing, made worse by any emotional content. In the US alone, 1.5-2 million people suffer from this condition. During his laughter, there was always a deep

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sorrow and agony underneath. There are also huge amounts of stigma he experiences with this diagnosis.

I have seen multiple clients with pseudobulbar affect from traumatic brain injury. One would laugh at the most inappropriate times (like after a physical altercation with his significant other), and he faced large amounts of public stigma for laughing at inappropriate times. Scenes from the movie where he was attacked for the laughter are not too far from reality. Having this from a TBI is common ([Brooks, 2013](#)). If Joker (as was insinuated in the movie) had enough traumatic brain injuries to develop pseudobulbar affect, it was a significant amount of injury, certainly enough to cause neurological functioning.

He had a Clear History of a Traumatic Brain Injury

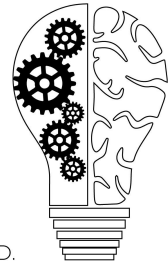
Arthur carried a card with him to inform those around him of his pseudobulbar affect, which mentioned that he had a history of TBI. Arthur Fleck seemed initially to have an almost childlike intelligence, disorganized life, and a below average IQ. He used simple language. His sketchbook seemed chaotic and also childlike. Traumatic brain injuries can leave someone with increased depression, anger, loss of cognitive function, and also pseudobulbar affect, so it is likely his traumatic brain injury continued to influence his psychological state.

What types of psychiatric issues did Joker have or not have?

The movie did a good job of not putting his violent acts as a consequence of his psychiatric influences. Often movies or politicians make the mistake of depicting the psychiatric issues as the thing that leads to great violence. **Only 5% of violent events in the US occur from someone with mental illness ([Stuart, 2003](#)).** People who are mentally ill are more likely to be victims of violence than people who do violent acts.

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How did Joker's childhood trauma influence his behavior?

He experienced childhood trauma and then continued trauma in how he was treated throughout his life.

He continued to have an odd relationship with his mother—one example was him giving her a bath, another was coauthoring her narratives (checking her letters). Early on as a young child, he clearly sided with his aggressor (his mother), while she neglected him and let others abuse him. **Instead of being angry, he found it more adaptive to align with her, nurture her, and be her caretaker.** His anger, resentment, and unhappiness was deep inside him. When trauma occurs at a young age, it often is not represented in the mind as a narrative, or something that is remembered like one thing leading to another. In his conversion his anger turned from being inward against himself, showing up as depression, to being outward to the point of a murderous rage when he kills his mother.

Did Joker have a psychiatric diagnosis?

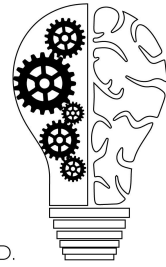
Did Joker have high functioning asperger's or autism?

People with high functioning autism, which used to be called asperger's, lack cognitive empathy, but have affective empathy. Like Joker, they have significant issues with social interactions. People with high functioning autism also have a narrow set of interests. Joker was not autistic, because he seemed to deeply desire social connection (most of his fantasies were surrounding connecting with others). Further, aspergers are not more violent, and often more a victim of violence.

Joker described chronic depression

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Arthur Fleck described chronic depression, saying things like, “All I have are negative thoughts,” and “The worst part of having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you don't.”

Chronic, ongoing depression is sometimes called dysthymia. Depression is characterized by low interest, poor sleep, sometimes irrational guilt, low energy, poor concentration, increased or decreased appetite, and suicidal thoughts. Sometimes I have seen chronic and difficult to treat depression in people with chronic trauma, borderline personality disorder or a history of a traumatic brain injury. We know he did have a TBI and childhood and subsequent trauma, which along with his dynamics with his mother led to a chronic depression. However depressed patients are not more violent than the general population.

What were Joker’s psychotic delusions?

Joker had the desire for being important and being connected to important people. For example, during his fantasy of being on the show, he demonstrated a desire for a fatherly hug and being told, “I wish I had a son like you.” When he had a fantasy of dating the woman in his apartment complex, within the delusion, she was at the comedy club laughing at his jokes, and was concerned about him during his mother’s stroke.

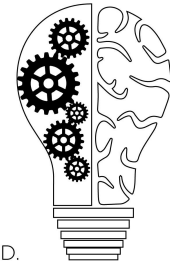
The movie pulls you into Joker’s experience of having the delusion, and even in the end people question what is real and not real.

For example, did he have grandiose delusions about him being loved by the people, or was that real? His erotic delusion about his neighbor being in love with him seemed to implode after he entered her apartment building.

People with psychiatric delusions only have them improve from months of antipsychotics. Delusions also contain conflicts about people coming after them (paranoia is the most common delusion). Was it possible that the police men were not real, that that was a delusion?

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What we do know is that Arthur Fleck realized the delusions were not real. This suffering was intense, realizing that the girl in the apartment was not someone that comforted him, didn't love him.

One thing I teach to residents who have psychotic patients is the importance of thinking about the meaning under the psychosis. For Arthur Fleck, the meaning (and where I would empathize if he were my patient) would be in his desire for a father, connection, admiration, love and meaning. This is felt not just by Arthur Fleck, but by all of us watching and immersed in his life. **If you are lonely, isolated, and desire connection, you are human.**

Did Joker have had schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder?

Usually in schizophrenia, the most common auditory hallucinations are things that are derogatory and insulting, but he seemed to have more positive fantasies or delusions with hallucinations that show his desires for power and connection. People with schizophrenia in a psychotic place hear things like "you are stupid" or "you are gay." Patients also sometimes believe they are someone powerful, either the devil, Mary (the mother of God), or Jesus. These delusions protect themselves from the sobering reality of being homeless.

It is hard to know where reality existed in this film. What is known is that he was on medications, and that at some point, the funding ran out and he was therefore forced to stop his medications. It is tragic that the people who most need help often don't have the resources to get them.

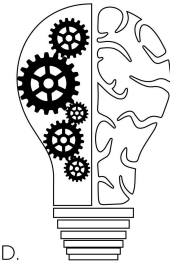
Finally, patients with schizophrenia are often more the victim of violence rather than the perpetrators of violence.

Did Joker have bipolar mood disorder?

Arthur Fleck did not have ramping up of his mood over weeks with increased rate of speech, and grandiosity. He did have some insomnia (remember the scene of him climbing into a fridge.) His mood remained fairly consistently depressed. The reasoning and logic to his actions, although irrational, maybe to some onlookers, had its own

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internal logic. For example, a manic patient might be sleeping 2 hours per night, and doing grandiose things while not sleeping. He showed a change in behavior, but was mostly depressed, always close to agony, and his desires for importance were chronic and not progressively different.

Did Joker have a forensic (non-psychiatric diagnosis?)

Largely, antisocial personality disorder, psychopathy, and sociopathy are not something that are treated by psychiatrists. There is no medication for it, and most with this disorder are not interested in help. If they see a psychiatrist, it is typically because they want something from them, like an opioid or xanax.

Was Joker a psychopath?

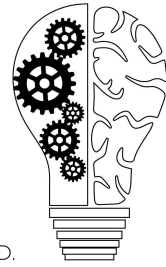
Psychopathy can be defined as:

- lacking affiliative attachments, empathy and fear
- calculated predatory aggression (strategic planning leading to violence)
- afterwards being remorseless
- demonstrated callous disregard for the rights and welfare of others.

It encompasses 2% of the male population and 1% of the female. Depending on environmental factors and choice, they can end up as drug lords and hitmen, or can be prosocial in jobs like bomb diffusers, test pilots, or in high-risk military jobs. He actually seemed to have empathy, and although not expressing guilt, it seemed more of a build up and reactionary. I don't think he lacked empathy. If anything, he wanted connection more than anything else, but seemed distant from obtaining it, likely because of his deep underlying depression, pseudobulbar affect, TBI, and off social skills. Usually, psychopaths have a long history of harm to animals and treating people as non-human objects to be used for their own gratification and needs. Interestingly, this was not the case with Joker.

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A famous quote from a psychopath: “I just like to kill...You feel the last bit of breath leaving their body. You are looking into their eyes. A person in that situation is God.”

A symptom of psychopathy was his inability to feel guilt after killing someone. Also, he seemed to be observing what people thought was funny, without knowing; he was mirroring them, he was not intuitive. I think both of these could be more from the TBI and not classic psychopathy.

Was Joker a sociopath?

Sociopaths are typically “baked” into being anti-social. Abuse and trauma may influence their later life ability to attach to others. They have higher-trait fear, more borderline traits and more mental disorders. Sociopaths usually have a childhood history of doing “bad” things from an early age, but interestingly, Joker had a later-life conversion into crime.

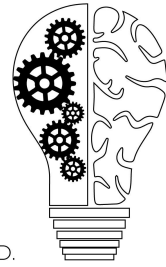
Was Joker responsible for his actions? YES!

I believe he lacked brain damage, developmental trauma, or mental illness that would deny him the human capacity of moral choice. Why? **Most of his life he chose to operate in the law.** Later, after his conversion to crime (which is unusual for psychopathy or sociopathy), he chose to side with the darker thoughts of his mind. His narrative justified his violence.

Every human has the capacity and internal wiring to do malevolent things, things that violate the rights and humanity of others. Some have come face to face with this shadow of our humanity, but not everyone successfully overcomes it. We have millions of years of genetic wiring for survival and violence. We also have tens of thousands of years of being part of a tribe, in which killing a tribe member would mean exile, but killing an outsider might be necessary to survive.

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His violence had more to do with his narrative, the beliefs he had about his life and how others violated him.

People who commit crimes that I have talked to (I spent 3.5 years as a “juvi” chaplain while in medical school) tend to believe that their actions are in some way justified. Taken out of context, they only look evil (killing three people on a subway, policemen getting attacked and Joker seems to not care, killing a talk show host) but with the perspective of the movie, drawing you in through empathy for his tragic life, there is a new, proposed reality that this is ok, some sort of justice that the law does not allow.

Attention

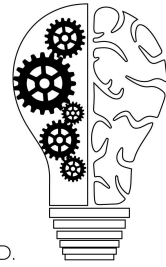
After killing the 3 rich men, he says, **“People finally see me,”** and, **“I was not sure if I existed, and people are starting to notice.”** He also commented that his social worker was not seeing him. She lacked empathy for his particular world. Violence became the way he received attention in a world where he walked around feeling like a ghost. He played the clown to gain attention and wanted to be a comedian to gain attention, but finally, in violence, he gained the attention he so clearly wanted. He liked being loved and admired—it even made him dance. Attention became the positive feedback that continued his violent path.

This movie’s story is also resonating with larger cultural narratives and experiences...

We are a nation with **mass shootings**. This is unique to our time, technology, access and motive. **If you feel hidden, like a ghost in our society, without access to connection or empathy, with a deep underlying rage at malevolent traumas done to you by other humans, this movie likely resonates with you on some deeper level.**

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The movie also spoke to the polarization of the rich and poor, the have and have nots. The movie presents Joker's solution, which is clearly violence, but it also presents the lack of resources, which might point to a hidden solution that missed by some people.

We largely are tribal creatures, people who were meant to be connected to about 50 others in a close community. The rate of loneliness has gone up exponentially in the last 10 years. People have fewer personal social interactions than ever. Social media paints a false picture of many peoples' great lives. People may look perfect, but we know that most pictures were heavily photoshopped. So envy, resentment and loneliness are at all time high, even with all the gifts technology gives.

Our needs are met by things distant from what we were made for. Sexual needs are met by porn. Hunting needs are met by violent video games and shows. Connection needs are met by social media (which only 4% of the time is really social) ([Puder 2019](#)). Things that used to give connection, like religious organizations, are on the decline in the US faster than ever before (about a 10% drop in the last 10 years) ([Pew Research Center](#)).

A developing cult classic

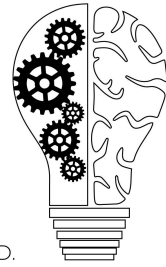
Many online are claiming to have watched the movie [10 times or more](#).

Spacechickennugget says: "at the end of the movie I really thought he was a hero. And he is, just not in the conventional way. He is the hero of the misunderstood, the forgotten, the oppressed by society. He's like the hero of the villains that were born just because of society being itself, an artificial selector that benefits the "normal ones" and condemns the "different ones." As a person who's been suffering of severe depression for many years, I really understood this."

"I'm so glad I didn't kill myself before seeing this movie. I would've missed out big time. Nothing else in life has compared."

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“About to go for my 9th time. Obviously I think it's groundbreaking, a masterpiece, and I am SO happy to be alive. It means a lot to me, more than I could say. It's like having part of me represented on the big screen and I never expected that, ever.”

“Hell yeah! I love these comments. I feel the exact same way. I'm going for a 14th time next week. I feel so privileged we get to be alive and see this masterpiece in theaters.”

A message to the Jokers out there:

If the film resonated with you on a personal level, and you saw some similarities between you and Joker, if you feel lonely, unheard, beat up, bullied, disconnected but wanting connection, you are not alone. This is how many of my patients feel. But they don't end or stop there.

Through therapy, we look to challenge narratives. Joker should have challenged his narrative at several points. Narratives are stories we assign to problems we are having—it's what we tell ourselves, the meaning we assign to our pain and different situations we are in.

Maybe a narrative Joker believed is, “I am only understood, known, talked about, idolized, loved, if I kill people. No one listens to me, but now they are starting to.” He became the voice for everyone else who felt similar.

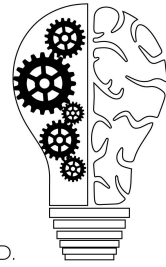
The 4 things common in mass shooters, according to a group “[The Violence Project](#)” that studied all of them since 1966 are:

1. History of early childhood abuse (neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, viewing domestic violence, severe bullying) leading to depression, anxiety and suicidality.
2. Identifiable crisis point in the weeks to months leading to the shooting (change in job status, relationship rejection, relationship loss) with often some sort of communication regarding the suicidal or homicidal thoughts.
3. Most studied past shooters and **looked for validation of their motivation**. They will also likely be famous, met with fascination, and they know that. They come in clusters due to the social contagion.

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4. They all have a plan, a place and a firearm. (80% got their weapons from family members, while workplace shooters used handguns they owned legally.)



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The problem with his narrative that murder will make things better is that chaos leads to more chaos, so that the very thing he was most tortured by, he became. Every crime he committed hurt countless others, caused countless other's pain.

A message about following Joker's narrative:

If you have anger from being isolated and alone, use that anger to overcome the obstacle of loneliness. Don't use it to give up and blow everything up. Anger is a healthy emotion that can help you overcome obstacles and move towards goals. Sometimes it is harder to take small steps than to blow up the whole process.

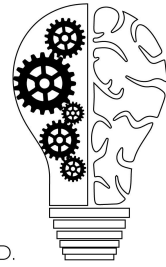
Building a wake behind you of harm and having angst and loneliness leading to violence is not the thing that will fulfill you and give you meaning. It only adds to the problem and leaves more chaos and pain, something you understand deeply.

Take the smallest step possible to find meaningful relationships. One small step Joker could have done is write a kind gratitude letter to his next door neighbor, thanking her for her small moments of kindness.

Learn about connection and empathy. Practice empathy for others and try to understand how they are experiencing life. If you are like Joker, this is what you yourself most desire, and maybe you can try to start to give it to others. Giving empathy and gratitude builds bonds. Consider that finding safe people might take time and a large amount of seeking, but they are out there. Joker connected with every kid, and his coworker, Gary. Maybe pursuing friendship with Gary would have been life giving to him and he would have felt seen, loved and heard.

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In conclusion

Every person needs connection. Fleck was not weird for that. Sometimes, especially in our social media society, connection can't be met, and we can feel lost and alone.

How can you change that? I would suggest a partial or day-treatment program, if you feel intense feelings of loneliness and depression. There are intensive programs that offer five days a week, 8 hours a day group psychotherapy options where you're connected to a therapist in a deep and meaningful way. I have seen incredible progress in patients that have joined group therapy. Within some of these groups, they offer societal connection. They teach how to experience empathy, how to work in a group, how to socialize and normalize social behaviors.

Working through trauma is tough, and to work through trauma, you're going to have to remember the trauma. Being with someone who is trained, and others who may have experienced that and can support you, is incredibly healing. The act of seeing that you are not alone is so incredibly powerful. There are skillful ways of helping people. It's not unfixable, not hopeless.

And as a psychotherapist, and I'd even speak for people I've interviewed on here, and my colleagues and friends, we deeply care about people. We want to help people. Some of us have felt deeply lonely at times, or went through difficult things in our childhoods. We understand connection—we are humans. We aren't cold doctors, and if you've ever encountered a therapist like Arthur Fleck did, please find another one, one who you feel connected to, who can help you.

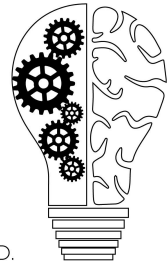
Loneliness is an epidemic—there are millions of people who feel deeply disconnected from society and each other. I hope through this podcast, like my series on therapeutic alliance, that I can strengthen your ability to connect with others.

Other episodes you might find value in:

THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE SERIES:

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[Therapeutic Alliance Part 5: Emotion](#)

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[Psychopathy with Michael A. Cummings M.D.](#)

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