

# A Developmental Psychopathology interpretation of Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein'

## Equifinality

A fundamental concept in developmental psychopathology is that of 'equifinality' which encompasses the multiplicity of genetic, biological, psychological and social risk factors, which in varying combinations can result in the same adverse outcomes of externalizing, behavioural problems.

*Several potential risk factors are implicated in the emergence of antisocial behaviour leading to murder. The genetic, neurological and biological implications of composing a body of amalgamated corpses hold infinite negative possibilities for development. Rejection 'at birth' from one's creator combined with severe peer rejection experienced from each interaction magnifies social and environmental factors associated with normal development and morality.*

## Comorbidity

Behavioural problems manifest as internalizing or externalizing behaviours are typically comorbid, i.e. individuals have more than one concurrent or consecutive disorder. Comorbidity rates are very high for children and adults. It is thought that neurological or psychological deficits may underpin more than one disorder, resulting in the presentation of symptoms for multiple disorders. One important neurological deficit is mood dysregulation, which is a central component of behavioural problems in children and adults and has the potential to explicate symptom overlap in internalizing and externalizing disorders. Mood regulation is likely to manifest differentially across developmental stages, becoming more sophisticated with increased cognitive ability and regulatory experience. Mood dysregulation can manifest as frustration and externalizing behaviours in youth, and as internalizing behaviours at later developmental stages.

*In the novel both Victor and the monster present several symptoms of both internalizing and externalizing behaviours. Both characters appear mentally disturbed and both resort to premeditated aggressive behaviours as a result of internal mental struggles which may be psychological or genetic.*

## Age of onset

The age at which maladapted behaviours begin to emerge is a central factor in developmental psychopathology, with early onset indicating greater severity of problematic behaviour and predicting increased likelihood of continuity to adulthood. Early onset is the strongest predictor of stability, extremity and recidivistic offending, victim-oriented crimes typically committed by lone offenders.

*Age of onset seems particularly important in the relationship between Victor and his creation. Victor rejects the monster immediately as he "saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open". On his first encounter with other people, the monster is attacked and "grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons", and finally having formed a unidirectional relationship with the French family in the woods, he is again attacked and beaten. With only three occasions of interactions with other people, the monster is sufficiently angered to begin his revenge on those who have hurt him.*

Developmental psychopathology is a psychological framework for understanding **biological, psychological and social** mechanisms underpinning the course and development of problematic behaviours that begin in childhood. Behaviours are broadly conceptualized as 'externalizing' (negative behaviours directed towards others, typically aggressive in nature, e.g. antisocial behaviour) or 'internalizing' (negative cognitions and behaviours directed towards the self, e.g. depression).

*"But my enthusiasm was checked by my anxiety, and I appeared rather like one doomed by slavery... Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree."*

*"I was their plaything and their idol, and something better – their child, the innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by Heaven, whom to bring up to good, and whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery, according as they fulfilled their duties towards me."*

## Reciprocity

The central tenet of developmental psychopathology is that maladapted behaviours emerge from reciprocal interactions within relationships (typically between primary caregiver and child). Intrinsic to these reciprocal, or bidirectional relationships, is an interplay of negativity in which negative behaviours increases the likelihood responding negative behaviours which continues with detrimental consequences for both members of the dyad.



Poor mental health (e.g. depression) of caregivers negatively impacts the development of children. Thus the psychological state of the mother (creator) is an important antecedent to childhood antisocial behaviours.

*The mental health problems experienced by Victor while he is creating the monster, "sometimes I grew alarmed at the wreck I perceived that I had become", impacts the relationship between the monster and his creator. Victor was likely suffering mental health problems when life had been given to the monster, affecting his responses to the creation. This in turn impacted the monster's responses to people making him antisocial and aggressive towards others. Reciprocity of the monster's actions compelled Victor to further mental health problems and to seek revenge for the murders.*

*The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature... I had desired with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room"*

## Attachment

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1970) is one of the most widely recognised psychological frameworks for understanding social development. Attachment forms in infancy through the interactions between the primary caregiver and infant, fostering the social tools necessary to understand and interact in the social world. Failure to form an appropriately secure emotional bond with caregivers in infancy increases the child's risk for interpersonal difficulties including: psychopathic like behaviour, negativity towards others, and failure to adopt social and moral codes. Children diagnosed with attachment disorders are likely to have experienced severe abuse, neglect or maltreatment.

*The immediate neglect of the child from creator and everyone else fostered his negativity, failure to comply to moral and social codes of conduct, and provides a developmental pathway to his murderous actions that lacked remorse and guilt.*

## Psychopathy

Adult psychopaths have a distinct profile of **cognitive and emotional deficits**:

- interpersonal (narcissism, superficiality and manipulative);
- affective (lack of empathy and guilt, callous, irresponsible);
- lifestyle (impulsive, stimulation-seeking, parasitic reliance on others);
- antisocial (criminality, delinquency and recidivism)\* not a prerequisite of 'psychopathic personality'

*Victor Frankenstein fits the psychopathic personality profile: He is narcissistic in his striving to accomplish God-like creations; exhibits a lack of empathy towards the rejected creation; and flees from responsibility for his undertaking. Finally he seeks to find and murder his own creation.*

Children with psychopathic behaviours are diagnosed with Conduct Disorder (CD) with **Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits**. Children presenting with CU traits are a subgroup with particularly severe and stable CD. Cognitive and emotional deficits include:

- inability to recognise fear in others;
- lack of remorse and guilt;
- with a lack of anxiety and emotional reactivity;
- believing positive outcomes will prevail from aggressive behaviours;
- predatory antisocial behaviour inclined towards premeditated, proactive aggression.

*The monster can be conceptualized as the child with CU traits, with deficits in executive function leading to a reduced capacity for empathy, guilt or remorse for his victims, and emotional under-arousal leading to proactive and premeditated acts of aggression.*

## Maltreated/Neglected Children

Maltreatment of children is a primary risk factor for increased antisocial behaviour. Children who have been abused or neglected have an increased likelihood of internalizing and externalizing disorders in childhood and into adulthood, with those suffering the most deleterious home environments at greatest risk.

*This concept is reflected in the novel, in which the creator's negative reactions to the monster are reciprocated with negative reactions of the monster towards others. In turn, the murderous intentions of the monster have deleterious consequences for the creator.*

Gustave Moreau, 1865