

# 'I bu Delaila ji aguba': Revisiting the perception of sociopaths in an African community

**Author:**Paulinus O. Agbo<sup>1,2</sup> **Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Religion & Cultural Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka; and Humanities Unit, School of General Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of Religion Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**Paulinus Agbo,  
paulinus.agbo@unn.edu.ng**Research Project Registration:****Project Leader:** Jaco Beyers **Project Number:** 2440237**Description:**

The author is participating in the research project, 'Religion, Theology and Education', directed by Prof. Dr Jaco Beyers, Head of Department Religion Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

**Dates:**

Received: 29 July 2022

Accepted: 18 Oct. 2022

Published: 25 Jan. 2023

**How to cite this article:**

Agbo, P.O., 2023, "'I bu Delaila ji aguba": Revisiting the perception of sociopaths in an African community', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a7973. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.7973>

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Reports of increasing family violence abound in Nigeria. Although studies have implicated cultural constructs as the basis for this trend, this study specifically contemplated the nexus between the increased violence and Anti-Social Personality Disorder (ASPD). The purpose of this study was to connect these abusive and violent behaviours in their specific contexts as evidence of ASPD. The study was hinged on autoethnographic research which I systematically analysed as lived experiences with a sociopath. Data for the analyses was drawn from purposively sampled participants (n=70) of victims of family violent abuse. Thematic, interpretative analytical approach and the theories of sociopathy, particularly Hare, Psychopathy Checklist-revised (PCL-R) were used to analyse the data from my personal experiences, and the interviews. The results indicated that only five participants representing 7.14% of the purposively selected population, admitted knowing sociopaths as conscienceless murderers and serial killers. The majority of participants (90%) contemplated sociopaths in religious terms (as incarnated evil beings). Only 2.86% rightly expressed their understanding of sociopathy and related personality disorders in a much-informed manner. Although the results of this study contrast with conventional propositions on ASPD, they revealed how religious belief and superstition among Nigerians frame the conversation on sociopathy and other variants of ASPD. Findings suggested that the growing superstitious beliefs on the causes, nature and remedy to ASPD particularly those associated with sociopathy provide the space for people living with these behavioural conditions (particularly violent sociopaths) to continue abusing unsuspecting individuals in the society.

**Contribution:** The finding of this study specifically challenged the faith-based misconceptions associated with ASPD. Therefore, it is expected that the new insight on ASPD, particularly sociopathy ushers in proper understanding and ways of dealing with the morally insane.

**Keywords:** sociopaths; indigenous community; Delilah; Igbo; personality disorder; abuse; violence.

## Introduction

My mental health situation seemed to deteriorate. I was becoming a drunk. Most regrettably, I was also nursing the thought of suicide. Thoughts of running away to an unknown destination were recurring subconsciously and uncontrollably. I felt there was one final moment and opportunity to address my mental confusion. I followed my instinct to move out of my house in Nsukka to another location in a nearby city of Enugu. I had officially written to my superiors to be transferred from Nsukka campus of the University of Nigeria, to Enugu. I felt that this was a smart move, at least, to move away from the perceived source of my immediate worries. A few days after settling in Enugu, I received a call from a man at the Nsukka Police Station that someone had reported a case against me; I was urgently needed to be at the aforesaid station. This call worsened my situation. I was in a serious dilemma on how to end my worries or continue with the recurrent dramatic relationship. At that point, I did not have enough money for issues with the police or litigation. However, about 30 min later, I received another call from the police, but this time from an officer that claimed that I once taught him in the university. He convinced me to report to the police. This was to avoid the embarrassment of arresting me publicly as every arrangement had been made to that effect. I heeded his advice. But I had other plans. I managed to file for a divorce at Énúgú Èzikè High Court. The next day, I reported to the

**Copyright:** © 2023. The Author. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Police Chief with an evidence of the process. Without this approach, I would have, perhaps, been thrown into the police cell, and 'beaten by the inmates or the police' (cf. Ulo 2021).

At the police station, the Area Commander Police boss tried to rescue the marriage from collapsing irretrievably by inviting me and my partner named Jack Peace (JP) (for the purpose of this article) to his office. As we entered the room, a few other police officers were there. When JP was given the opportunity to speak, I was calm as she smartly and eloquently presented her facts. She claimed that I abandoned my family and ran to Enugu with another woman. She also accused me of starving our children by not sending money for their upkeep nor paying their school fees. I had involved a lawyer, who had advised me to attend the meeting with evidence and receipt of any amount of money I had spent on her or on our two innocent children. I did as the lawyer directed. I had hardly rounded off my speech on the remote and immediate causes of the violence and misunderstanding between me and JP, when one of the officers shouted at JP: *I bu Delaila ji Aguba, e nwere m udi gi ulo!, You are Delilah<sup>1</sup> with a Razor, I have your kind in my house!* Pinched by this statement from this officer, JP aggressively challenged him. Nonetheless, through the intervention of the police, normality was restored almost immediately. JP and I were later asked to go out and settle our differences by the mediators. As we left the office, JP did not look back until I lost sight of her. At this point, I was not surprised at JP's attitude.

During the time I was considering the topic for this article, I remembered the insightful expression of one of the mediators at the police station, that is, '*I bu Delailah ji Aguba*' and hence included it. This metaphoric expression is consistent with the cognomens and appellations for people with: (1) manipulative tendencies; (2) a lack of conscience, empathy and remorse and; (3) the notion that others are objects to be used and manipulated. Among the Igbo, the prevailing opinions of the people, as I discovered, indicate that every human experience (including antisocial behaviours) is interpreted through a religious prism. This coincides with Mbiti's (1969:1) proposition that Africans are notoriously religious. The stories I heard each time I narrated my experiences with JP to my extended family members, friends or strangers point at JP being possessed by *agwu* [deity] spirit, and *o si na agburu<sup>2</sup>* (something *hereditary*). The only remedy is through sacrifice(s) to a deity or exorcism in the church. Truly, my knowledge of the theories of superstitious belief (Karmakar & Chattopadhyay 2021) increased the penchant I had for further inquiries on the real nature, causes and peculiarities of JP's personality. In my curiosity, I used the keywords as 'quick to anger, controlling; bossy, lack of emotion, lack of

1. Delilah with a razor sharp object. This is a metaphor for narcissistic betrayal. Drawn from the Old Testament's Samson and Delilah's story of strength, power and betrayal (see Gerson 2011; Jdg 16), the idea is commonly used to describe the treachery of a morally unstable woman.

2. Agburu (hereditary) in this sense is not biological per se. It could be explained as a kind of invocation of evil upon a family for *nso ani* [wrongdoing or abomination] committed, of which every generation is punished with *agwu* [antisocial behaviour].

remorse, fearless, aggressiveness and/or anger, intelligent, manipulative, lying, and selfish' to search for JP's personality in different search engines especially the Google Scholar. Over 90% of the results indicate 'a Mental Health Disorder' (MHD) (Andrea, Alexandria & Adrian 2013; McGirr & Turecki 2007) and, 'Antisocial Personality Disorder {ASPD}' (De Brito & Hodgins 2009; Friedman et al. 2021). For the next 2 or 3 years after this discovery, I reviewed works on MHD and ASPD with focus on *sociopathy* and *psychopathy* variants. Works of Robert D. Hare and other scholars of psychopathy and/or sociopathy (Babiak 2007; Bailey 1995; Hare & Neuman 2009) particularly the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-revised (PCL-R) (Hare 1998:99), and the Screening Version of the Psychopathy checklist-Revised (PCL: SV) (Cooke et al. 1999) were reviewed and used to interrogate my lived experiences with JP. Several other sociopathic standardised checklists (Vahia 2013; Yoon, Eher & Mokros 2021) that I consulted, attest to a seemingly personality disorder in JP. This contrasts with the prevailing belief of the purposively selected participants (70) of this study in Nsúkká southeast Nigeria among whom I lived. Nsúkká is a Local Government Area in Enugu state, a town in the Local Government Area, a cultural zone that includes the Local Government and other parts of Enugu State, and an Igbo dialect spoken in the cultural zone (Uwaegbute 2022:5). The region comprises 88 rural communities and the Nsukka Urban centre, which is referred to as university town, because of the presence of the University of Nigeria (Madu 2007:111). In this article, Nsúkká is referred to as a town in the local government where the University of Nigeria Nsúkká is situated. The participants for this study were purposively selected from the adherents of the two dominant religions in the area (Christianity and African Traditional Religion) and people with different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The results indicated that only 5 participants representing 7.14% of the targeted and selected population admitted knowing sociopaths or psychopaths as conscienceless murderers and serial killers. This coincides with the erroneous presumption that sociopaths are only in the category of 'Ted Bundy and other mass murderers or serial killers' (Levin 2005). The majority of participants (90%) presume sociopaths and/or psychopaths as incarnated evil beings. Only 2.86% rightly expressed their understanding of sociopathy and related personality disorders in a much-informed manner. Although these results are testaments to the widespread misrepresentation and incongruent identification of sociopaths and/or psychopaths among the Igbo, the puzzle for me was how to present my lived experiences with JP and the findings on sociopathy as a scientific discourse. I followed the technique of anonymising data (Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger 2015) by giving pseudonyms to my respondents. The autoethnographic method I adopted in this study does not only support anonymisation of data but also the use of first-person narrative technique to negotiate cultural constructs and informed theories and findings related to the lived experiences engaged by the author. Technically speaking, autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that

seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis 2004; Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). I drew from the principal provisions of the method and the theories of sociopathy and/or psychopathy, Stockholm Syndrome, Grey Rock Syndrome, etc., to provide evidence that my experience with JP is beyond the suggested model of functionalistic theory of the family. The findings show that ASPD expressed through sociopathy, most likely explains the dramatic and constant disregard for the rights of others, lying and deception, impulsiveness, aggression, violence, and manipulation, that characterised my interaction with JP. This contrasts with the common belief among the autochthonous Igbo and perhaps other indigenous societies around the world with increasing beliefs and superstitions in interpreting human occurrences including ASPD. The findings of this research will help victims of sociopathic abuse to correctly identify sociopaths, the remote and the immediate motivation of the abuse, and include informed or expert knowledge in dealing with sociopaths.

## Sociopath: From incongruent labelling to proper identification

Reference was usually made to me as an intelligent person around my community. Many people usually bring their academic questions, thinking that I had solutions and sometimes expecting me to perform some kind of magic. Within me, I constantly nursed the feeling of a lack of knowledge and limitations in answering those academic and experience-based questions. The term *sociopath* is one of those subjects that I had no knowledge about in spite of my holding a doctorate degree. I had read through human personality. I knew the distinctions between the sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic and melancholic. And I presumed that these are mere temperament peculiarities. Although I was conversant with the idea of the *American psycho*, I thought it was a label for serial killers and murderers as depicted in movies.

I stumbled on the concept *sociopath* as I searched for solutions to the difficult relationship with JP. What actually is *sociopath*? Why did it take me long to know this concept? What is its rendering in Igbo – the language widely spoken in the area of this study? Is it a Western concept, because every example shown in different studies I carried out about sociopaths is associated with foreign names and not African names? Scholarly works describe sociopaths as those people suffering from Antisocial Personality Disorders (ASPD) (Black 2013). Other clusters of ASPD like narcissists and psychopaths share similar characteristics with sociopaths. There are lots of overlap among narcissists, sociopaths and psychopaths. This could be expressed through their boldness, meanness, impulsivity, disinhibition, manipulateness, remorselessness, emotionless behaviours, etc. For the narcissist, scheming, showering compliments, forging friendships and otherwise manipulating others are ultimately geared towards the ego and the expansion of

self-importance (Plumptre 2021:1). Unlike narcissists, sociopaths and psychopaths act primarily for their own personal gain and amusement (Perez 2012). Although the terms *sociopath* and *psychopath* are often used interchangeably, there appears to be some hesitance by researchers in the many disciplines comprising criminology to continue this trend (Pemmet 2013:458). The clear line of distinction between the two terms lies on the fact that Duignam (n.p.):

[A]lthough both biological and environmental factors play a role in the development of psychopathy and sociopathy, it is generally agreed that psychopathy is chiefly a genetic or inherited condition notably related to the underdevelopment of parts of the brain responsible for emotional regulation and impulse control. (p.2)

In addition to this postulation, the most important causes of sociopathy are connected to ‘attachment disorder’, physical or emotional abuse or severe trauma experienced during childhood (Perez 2012). ‘The emergence of enduring antisocial personality changes in previously normal individuals, or *acquired sociopathy*, has consistently been reported in patients with bilateral injuries of the ventromedial prefrontal cortex’ (Mendez et al. 2005; Oliveira-Souza et al. 2019:1). In other words, physical damage or trauma to certain parts of the brain could lead to behavioural disorder expressed through *acquired sociopathy*. While those suffering from the aforesaid conditions have no regard for other people’s emotions, psychopaths in particular often pretend to care (Purse 2020).

A sociopath, as I learnt from informed sources, (see e.g. Black 2013; Cleckley 1951; Hare 1991), is a person with a persistent pattern of socially irresponsible, exploitative, and remorseless behaviour which may include: (1) impulsivity and a tendency to engage in risky behaviour; (2) inability to form stable or healthy relationships; (3) ignoring responsibilities at work, school, to friends and family; (4) using their charm and intelligence to exploit or manipulate others for personal gain or pleasure; (5) recurrent outburst of anger, promiscuity, aggression and violence. There is no trace of intellectual impairment, delusions or hallucination among these people with moral insanity; they are insane in conduct but not in ideas (Sollid 2016). As early as 1837, Prichard as cited by Sollid (2016) described people suffering from ASPD including sociopathy as those suffering from:

[...M]oral insanity or madness consisting in a morbid perversion of natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect or knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination. (p. 6)

While a normal individual could exhibit one or more of the above features in certain situations, it is important that the standardised checklists for diagnosing psychopathy and/or sociopathy be used by psychiatrists and mental health professionals in identifying sociopaths and/or psychopaths. With my new understanding of the process of

identification, training in aspects of sociology of behaviour and most importantly the guidance from mental health professionals within Nigeria, JP's behaviour is viewed more as sociopathic than psychopathic. Even though a better diagnosis of sociopath and/or psychopath ought to have been through brain imaging procedure (Anderson & Kiehl 2014), this study relied on the aforementioned processes owing to the refusal of JP to yield to this kind of test and the financial implication of such test. Most importantly, I agree with Sollid (2016), in his thesis; A 'high-functioning sociopath'? *Sherlock Holmes (psycho) analysed*, that the exercise of evaluating and diagnosing someone's psychological condition is a very serious matter, and not something anyone without proper education and training should propose to do. Like Sollid, I must therefore insist that this exercise of analysing JP's behaviour in terms of personality disorders be regarded as a humble proposition.

A study by a renowned psychologist, Martha Stout found that one in 25 (4%) of Americans is a sociopath (Onyeugbo 2019; Stout 2005). The demography of sociopaths in the United States of America (USA) shows its worrying trend. There seems to be a high probability of living or interacting with one or more sociopaths, as people interact in the same space. No study appears to have attempted to profile a statistical representation of sociopaths in Nigeria as did Stout in her seminal work, *The Sociopath nextdoor: The ruthless versus the rest of us*. Considering the kind of trauma children experience in Nigeria through poverty and deprivation, abandonment, abuse in families, schools and churches (Ede & Kalu 2018; Ewhrudjakpor n.d.; King 2014), being labelled as witches or wizards (Secker 2012) etc., it is likely that Nigeria 'breeds' more sociopaths than the USA. The increasing incidence of banditry, kidnapping, violent crisis, child labour, ritual murder, and their attendant effects on the psyche of children are the catalysts that probably lead to more sociopaths in Nigeria.

Despite the high projected population of sociopaths in Nigeria, there is no appropriate translation and rendering of this behavioural type in Igbo and perhaps other Nigerian languages. Among the Igbo, deviants (*akariogori*) and people with moral questions like sociopaths are believed to be under spiritual manipulation. They are *ndi agwu ji* [possessed by *agwu* deity], *ndi iberibe* [utterly stupid], and *ehurehu; efulefu* [never-do-well; 'wasteful']. The aforesaid belief correlates with the idea that *nd' maa* [spirit and/or supernatural beings] control human activities in this physical or ephemeral world. It is this thinking that probably influenced my earlier poor understanding of sociopath. I thought, like most others in my community, that people with sociopathic tendencies would adopt normal behaviour through prayers, exorcism and sacrifices. Away from this, intelligent sociopaths who have 'positively' used their skills into gaining prominence and power, command cult followership and are eulogised as *ogbu agu* [lion's killer], *omeka agu* [one who behaves like a lion], *ike obodo* [defender of the community] et cetara.

## On the chequered experience with JP: The nexus with sociopathy

JP and I became friends on Facebook around February 2011. We regularly spoke on phone and other social media platforms. At a point, JP came across as an interesting person, charming and full of irresistible ideas. For the next 2 years (2011–2013), we constantly chatted and exchanged pleasantries using video calls. The period offered an opportunity for intimacy. We quickly became very good friends. JP visited my house in August 2013. By October, she was pregnant and plans were made for marriage. We got married on 29 November 2013. Everything happened so fast and dramatically that it seemed we were acting out a movie script. On 15 November, 2 weeks to the marriage celebration, JP called on phone and sought for some kind of information about me. She subtly requested for my Facebook password. I thought it was strange. However, I obliged her on the condition that she would send hers to me as well. Conventional ethical considerations were jettisoned as I accessed her private messages. Tears rolled down uncontrollably as I read through the contents of her chats. It was the first time an idea of the personality of JP dawned on me. Someone's private messages may not be exclusively used in a generic sense to appropriately judge a person's behavior; yet, hers revealed some kind of pathological lying and/or deceitful, impulsive, an unimaginable penchant for risky behaviour, and so on.

One particular incident caught my attention from the private messages. That appeared to be among JP's top secret lifestyles. When I approached her for further explanation, I got the first startling anger outburst. She blamed it on what she termed 'childlike attitude' of asking her about what she had done in the past. Surprisingly, she expressed her disapproval of the marriage celebration on 29 November. Her verbal attack and stance on the cancellation of the marriage forced me to seek a peaceful resolution. Despite the fact that I begged her for forgiveness, I sensed that there were faulty lines about JP's personality.

There were many concerns about my relationship with JP prior to the event of 29 November that were not properly handled. As I would later understand, it is emotionally dangerous to continue a relationship when there are red flags – signs that one partner cannot forge a healthy relationship (Gould 2021). The feeling of being manipulated into marriage, the rushed marriage plans, the lies and the risky behaviours as found in the private message, the initial superficial charm, and the blame-game could be regarded as 'yellow flags; unhealthy signs that eventually lead to red flags' (Hayduck 2017). These could as well be instances of red flags in some situations. Incidentally, these behaviours and similar others are the hallmark of sociopaths (Stout 2005).

As JP and I were dancing to the traditional music during the marriage event of 29 November, Ms. K (someone JP had earlier introduced to me as her best friend) courageously

said to both of us: 'Young man, you are very unlucky to find this woman'.

As Ms. K left the scene, JP explained that it was only jealousy that could cause that kind of outburst. I became worried at the turn of events. At the end of the celebration, JP's behaviour became worse towards me. She could not talk to me any longer. She violently hit me several times within a short period of time we stayed together as a family. I later discovered the source of her enormous anger and why this sudden unveiling of the vicious behaviour was possible. As I would later find out, many sociopaths use violence and emotional abuse as an acceptable way of dealing with problems (Peterman & Dixon 2011). With little provocation, she would act so weird and aggressively. On one occasion, she scooped hot oil with a small spoon and threw it on my face. She held my manhood so painfully as I was struggling to break away from her anger outburst. What surprised me was how she was putting up a smiling face while I was in pain. Like sociopaths would usually do (Stout 2020), I became afraid of her. Although I reasoned that the violence and mood swing could be as a result of her pregnancy, this continued right after the birth of our first child. I did not know what I would do right or wrong to please her. Mental confusion enveloped me. In contrast, JP had said that her love for me drove all her actions in the relationship. In all those situations, JP expressed how she loved me and how nobody could love me like her. This is consistent with the theory of *gaslighting* which explains why sociopaths exhaust their victims to the point where they are unable to fight back (Arabi 2019). I meantime lost all my friends. She gave me reason to leave each of them. If that did not happen, I would experience more aggression at home.

The only thing I could remember doing wrong was reading through her private messages. Why have I not been forgiven after more than 1 year? Sociopaths are notorious for unforgiveness, revenge, mood swing, silent treatment interspersed with period of normality (Jonason & Webster 2012) and so on. What bothers sociopaths are the twin constructs of *exposure* and *losing control of their victims*. Exposing a sociopath's bad behaviour could lead to a heightened rage or, what Hayase (2016) referred to as punishment, which may include violence to the victim. And this could rightly explain JP's violent and anger outburst in the face of seemingly unprovoked attitude from me. I waited in vain for JP to return to her loving ways prior to the marriage. The term *love bomb* is used to describe how sociopaths feign being in love to get at their victims (Hayase 2016). I strongly believe this was the case with JP's attitude as she became so emotionally detached, cold and manipulative like sociopaths. By this time, our first child was about 2 years old. I sensed that our relationship quickly transited from the 'idealize to devaluation and discard pattern of sociopathic relationship' (Hayase 2016).

On one occasion, I drove JP and our child in a car through the town, playing the song of a popular Nigerian musician named Fela. Upon my refusal to turn down the volume on

the car radio as ordered by JP, she swiftly turned the steering wheels towards my right. She sat on the passenger's seat. The car dangerously veered to the nearby bush. Providence saved everyone, including JP, as the car crashed with minimal damage. I was terrified. Risky behaviour like this is what some sociopaths thrive on (Allan n.d.). After that incident, I reviewed my relationship with JP: (1) sexually, it was only a gift, money and 'blind obedience' from me that motivated her; (2) she seems not to be interested in the marriage, yet she wanted to give birth to more children; (3) she could kill me since I feared her a lot and; (4) she was the 'king of the house' that came back home sometimes drunk anytime she liked. What I could not understand was why I was protecting her, not exposing her, not telling anybody what I was going through! The knowledge through the theory of Stockholm Syndrome or *trauma bonding*, gives a clue as to why victims of sociopathic abuse, often empathic people, keep protecting their abusers in spite of the obvious abusive situations that they are going through (Logan 2018).

By 2017, about 4 years into the turbulent union, I decided to quit the marriage. But the great puzzle was how I would leave our two children with someone I felt was prone to anger and violence. Perhaps to punish me emotionally, she changed school for the children two times within 1 month before finally removing them entirely from school. Because of my experiences with JP, I erroneously nursed the idea to end the lives of the two children and mine too. But I had questions for myself: How would I run away from JP's vicious attacks and leave behind the children that never asked me to bring them to the world? Why would these children suffer for my bad choices as I selfishly abandon them with that kind of violent person? These and many other queries influenced my resolve to terminate all our pains in a strange way. My emotional compass was overwhelmingly stretched by this thought. Luckily also, I remembered my research skill of balance and reviewing the pros and cons of any engagement. I read through scholarly works and 'suspect sites' on suicide and homicide. This exercise led me to look for the root cause of my crises-ridden home, instead. Every query on my experiences with JP led me towards personality disorder particularly, sociopathy. JP matches 19 from the 20 PCL-R traits of personality and behaviour assessment. I purposefully triggered her to confirm the effectiveness of the theories I read through the works on sociopath as I secretly recorded her anger outbursts. She declared her hatred towards me. She said she would make sure I do not have access to the children if there was a divorce. She threatened to kill me if I chose divorce. In another instance, I applied the principles of Grey Rock Syndrome as a decoy in protection of myself and the children from the recurrent violence and emotional abuse. I had the belief that once children are raised by a high-functioning sociopath, their mental health would not be guaranteed to be protected without some kind of trauma (cf. Peterson n.d.). I understood that although sociopaths may not be good at taking proper care of their own children, they would try all their best to take custody during divorce and use the children as a source of their own selfish gain (Nightshade 2013).

## On the perception of sociopaths among Ñsúkká Igbo

I intensified my curiosity to learn about sociopath after my breakthrough in finding the possible motivation of JP's behaviour. For more than 2 years, I reviewed mainly seminal and emerging literature on sociopathy. I tried to assess the perception of this behavioural type (sociopathy) among the people of the community I lived with. Firstly, I related my experience with JP, and consequently asked follow-up questions to the respondents to identify or describe the cause of JP's behaviour and possibly the behaviour of other women like JP. Secondly, the respondents were asked to identify the possible solutions to the problem.

As reasoned by Onah (pers. comm., 16 December 2020), Ozioko (pers. Comm., 10 May 2020), and Ishiwu (pers. comm., 03 April 2021) 'women who behave like JP are *nd' nwere di az' ebo* [those who have spirit husbands], and *nd' otu mammy wota* [those possessed with mermaid spirit]. There is a tenacious belief in 'spirit spouse and mermaid spirit' across different cultures: Igbo, Aboriginal Australians, native Americans, and so on (Obisakin 2002; Okwuosa et al. 2021; Vitebsky 2001). Among the Ñsúkká community of Igbo extraction, this belief is firm. Although the views of Onah, Ozioko and Ishiwu were captured in this article, the position of several other respondents agrees with theirs. Although with specific variants, some sort of esoteric or spiritual machinations are believed to be responsible for behaviours like the JP's. Odo (pers. comm., 12 January 2022), for example detailed the making of people who habitually treat their loved ones including their partners, and children disdainfully, without conscience, and unremorsefully. He argued that many of the women who act like JP are chosen by a deity to be *ézhwànyì* [female traditional healer and/or diviner and/or priestess]. Possessed by the deity, such women would continue to torment everybody including themselves until they discover the reason for their questionable behaviour. The only remedy is to accept the call as a priestess of the deity even if the person is a Christian. Omeke (pers. comm., 20 February 2022) corroborated Odo's position on the manifestation of strange behaviour when a supernatural being or deity chooses a person as a servant or agent. According to him:

[E]ven among the Catholics, when God chooses a person to be a Reverend father, and he refuses to obey the call, he would continue to fail in whatever he is doing until he accepts the vocation. (n.p.)

Notwithstanding the fact that these appear to be a subjective and unverified claim, further investigation shows how this belief is common among the people in the study area.

The respondents that drew strong connection between the variables of spirit husband, mermaid spirit on one hand, and behaviour consistent with a lack of conscience, violence, on the other hand, suggested spiritual solution to the problem. Asadu (pers. comm., 20 February 2022), Ezugwu (pers. comm., 03 February 2022), Attamah (pers. comm., 20 September 2021),

and Attah (pers. comm., 20 September 2021) are of the opinion that the observance of ritual ordinances and sacrifices of cleansing in churches or traditional shrines, tends to normalise the behaviour of people who are like JP. Having observed that the religiosity of the people in the study area is very high (Uwaegbute 2022), it is not surprising to notice how most of the respondents including Asadu, Ezugwu and Attamah link the causes and diagnosis of people suffering from the behavioural condition exhibited by JP with supernatural constructs.

'When a person marries another person's wife, or is possessed with the spirit of witchcraft, the marriage will be characterized by crises like what you just explained to me' (Okoye, pers. comm., 02 February 2021). The aforesaid assertion was the reply to the question I asked Okoye on the possible reason for JP's behaviour. For him, every woman or man has been spiritually married to a right person. Exhibiting violent behaviour, and acting wickedly towards someone's partner is a sign that the spiritual order of marriage was truncated. Asogwa (pers. comm., 02 August 2020) supported Okoye by adding that when a violent woman or man who habitually acts without a conscience meets her or his right man or woman, she or he will be transformed to a responsible individual with no trace of bad behaviour. That *Ekwensu* [devil] or *amosu* or *mgbashi* [witch] are blamed for serious bad behaviour is common among the Igbo and perhaps other indigenous cultures. This belief might have guided Ekpere's (pers. comm., 09 December 2020) response that '*Ekwensu na ndi amosu/mgbashi, ji JP na ndi ozo na eme ka ya n' oru* [JP and those behaving like her are the instruments of the devil and witches].

I found among the respondents that are more learned (Ugwuanyi, pers. comm., 12 April 2019; Igwe, pers. comm., 07 March 2021; Onyishi, pers. comm., 07 March 2021 etc.) that issues of nature and nurture might have been responsible for JP's behaviour and all others in that category. They specifically mentioned genetics, ignorance, childlessness, a lack of patience with the partner and a general lack of basic necessity as conditions that fuelled JP's behaviour. Other reason adduced was my poor social behaviour that might have triggered JP's violent reaction.

None of the participants in the above category linked sociopath or other variant of personality disorders with the behavioural type that I explained to them. In fact, the word *sociopath* was not even known to them until I mentioned it.

In contrast to the above viewpoints, Ozioko (pers. comm., 12 January 2022), and Agbo (pers. comm., 12 January 2022) drew a possible link between the behavioural description of JP and personality disorder. They spoke on the overlap that exists between the different personality behavioural types. They mentioned that such behaviours are found among sociopaths, psychopaths, narcissists and others with varying behavioural disorders. The possible solutions they recommended are consistent with the prevailing theories of

sociopathy and other variants of behavioural disorders. Their responses are not surprising considering their expertise in the discipline of psychology. Apart from the participants that are trained psychologists, all others have exhibited a level of a lack of proper identification or labelling of people with behavioural disorder particularly sociopathy. Religious belief, as I discovered, chiefly influenced the popular view on sociopathy and other variants of MHD and ASPD.

## Discussion and conclusion

Data for this study suggest an obvious widespread misinformation, poor identification and incongruent labelling of MHD and ASPD which include sociopathy among the autochthonous Igbo society of Nigeria. With examples from Nsóká Igbo, the article provided evidence on how religious beliefs frame the perception of sociopathy and related personality disorder in societies with high level of religiosity. Different metaphoric expressions and related cognomens, such as:

- *I bu Delailah ji Aguba* – a reminder of the evil role played by Delilah in betraying Samson by cutting his hair with razor or a sharp object (see e.g. Reiss 2014)
- *O bu onye agwu*
- *O si na agburu*
- *Nd' nwere di az' ebo*
- *Ndi otu mammy wota* are the prevailing thought on women that exhibit behaviours consistent with personality disorder.

These results contrast the informed and scholarly findings and theories on ASPD particularly sociopathy. Those who show significant and consistent features as impulsivity, manipulative tendencies, a lack of remorse, a lack of conscience, disregard for the rights of others, criminality and violence, lying, promiscuity (see e.g. Stout 2020) may be suffering from ASPD which includes sociopathy. This line of thinking was never imagined among the greater per cent (90%) of the participants of this study. Instead, religious beliefs were subjectively trusted as a convincing theory for women with behaviours that characterise ASPD. The observation that the level of religiosity in a particular society correlates with the rate of using faith-based ideas in interpreting natural occurrences has been noted (Uwaegebute 2022). It is therefore not surprising to see the pattern of thinking of the respondents in the study area as findings have indicated its autochthonous, indigenous and high religiosity statuses.

Apart from the opinions of the majority of the respondents, this study establishes that those whose behaviours are consistent with the total disregard for the rights of others, impulsivity, and the attendant related behaviours are likely suffering from MHD or ASPD including sociopathy. The first meeting with JP is one of the many instantiations of meeting someone with a behaviour connected to ASPD. Such people could as well find their victims in the school, church, hotel, family and so on. They could be someone's father, mother, child, friend, acquaintance and so

on (Neiger 2016:162). 'They are human beings who look like everyone else; so well camouflaged that their true nature may have gone unrecognized for years or even decades' (Stout 2020). Intelligent sociopaths can manipulate everyone including trained mental health professionals. Sociopaths and others suffering from ASPD or MHD may not have chosen to live with the disorder. Nonetheless, victims and potential victims among the Igbo and other societies with a lack of understanding of sociopaths ought to learn not only the existence of this abusive character but on how to protect themselves from their verbal, emotional and physical abuse.

Knowing about this behavioural type and the antics of sociopaths will greatly help victims to apply the right approach in dealing with the situation and protecting themselves from the abuse of the sociopath which can lead to murder or homicide. In some situations, imbibing no contact with a sociopath, or using the principle provisions of the theory of *Grey Rock Syndrome* as decoy could help a victim experience a temporal or permanent relief from the violence of a sociopath. Also, imperative is for the potential victims of sociopathic abuse in Igbo and other similar societies to be aware of these manipulative individuals to avoid forming a relationship with them if there is an opportunity to do so. Citing Professor Hare, Stout (2020) noted, to defeat a sociopath, you must understand the nature of *human predators*. The increasing poor awareness associated with sociopathy among the Igbo and other related societies, if not reversed will only lead to a continuous abuse of the empathic and unsuspecting individuals who are generally the targets of sociopaths. This abuse could cause psychological damage to the victims, making them not to properly function in the society or even cause their deaths. For a society to develop, it needs the synergy and the contribution of the able-bodied individuals, people who are mentally sound and are alive as workforce. Considering the projected number of sociopaths in Igbo and probably other indigenous groups, it will be disastrous to ignore the increasing pains, confusion, loss and deaths caused by them.

The research questions for this study centred on the assessment of the behaviour of JP and the gender it represents. Therefore, this study is specifically focused on the perception of female sociopaths among the Igbo. An investigation of sociopaths among the opposite gender in Igbo or other related societies should be encouraged. Other research findings indicated that the number of sociopaths among men is greater than among women in certain societies (Black 2013). It will be interesting to observe how the findings, for example, could be used to negotiate the activities of sociopaths among the Igbo and other indigenous societies.

In conclusion, although the data for this study implicates a prevalent faith-based interpretation of the causes of behaviours that characterise sociopaths, scholarly theses and evidence from mental health experts suggest otherwise. Going by the informed findings on sociopaths, this article makes a case that the widespread misinformation on the sociopaths and other ASPD among the Igbo and other

indigenous communities, is the basis that sociopaths have leveraged as a means to deal with their victims. Therefore, there is the need to properly identify sociopaths and their behaviours so as to stop their abuse of innocent people in society.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

### Authors' contributions

P.O.A. is the sole author of this article.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

## References

- Allen, V. n.d., *Covetous sociopathy: Implications for organizational leadership*, viewed 19 May 2021, from [https://web.archive.org/web/20180507173134id\\_/https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/conferences/virtual/2012/pdfs/9com.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20180507173134id_/https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/conferences/virtual/2012/pdfs/9com.pdf).
- Anderson, N. & Kiehl, K., 2014, *The psychopath magnetized: Insights from brain imaging*, viewed 10 December 2020, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4034374>.
- Andrea, L., Alexandria, K. & Adrian, R., 2013, 'Antisocial personality disorder: A current review', *Current Psychiatry Reports* 15(12), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-013-0427-7>
- Arabi, S., 2019, *7 Gaslighting phrases malignant narcissists, sociopaths and psychopaths use to silence you, translated*, viewed 18 May 2021, from <https://psychcentral.com/blog/recovering-narcissist/2019/03/7-gaslighting-phrases-malignant-narcissists-sociopaths-and-psychopaths-use-translated>.
- Babiak, P., 2007, 'From darkness into the light: Psychopathy in industrial and organizational psychology', in H. Hervé & J.C. Yuille (eds.), *The psychopath: Theory, research, and practice*, pp. 411–428, Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Bailey, K., 1995, 'The sociopath: Cheater or warrior hawk?', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 18(3), 542–543. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00039613>
- Black, D., 2013, *Bad boys, bad men: Confronting antisocial personality disorder (Sociopathy)*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Cleckley, H., 1951, 'The mask of sanity', *Postgraduate Medicine* 9(3), 193–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00325481.1951.11694097>
- Cooke, D., Michie, C., Hart, S. & Hare, R., 1999, 'Evaluating the screening version of the Hare psychopathy checklist – Revised (PCL:SV): An item response theory analysis', *Psychological Assessment* 11(1), 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.11.1.3>
- De Brito, S. & Hodgins, S., 2009, 'Antisocial personality disorder', in M. McMurran & R. Howard (eds.), *Personality, personality disorder and violence: An evidence based approach*, pp. 133–153, Wiley-Blackwell, New York, NY.
- Duignan, B., n.d., *What's the difference between a psychopath and a sociopath? And how do both differ from Narcissists?* viewed 3 February 2021, from <https://www.britannica.com/story/whats-the-difference-between-a-psychopath-and-a-sociopath-and-how-do-both-differ-from-narcissists>.
- Ede, V. & Kalu, D., 2018, 'Child abuse in Nigeria: Responses of Christian churches and the way out', *International Journal for Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Field* 4(4), 46–53.
- Ellis, C., 2004, *The ethnographic 1: A methodological novel about autoethnography*, AltaMira, Walnut Creek.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. & Bochner, A., 2011, 'Autoethnography: An overview', *Historical Research* 36(4), 273–290.
- Ewruhjakpor, C., n.d., 'Poverty and the prevalence of mental health disorders in Nigeria', *Journal of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology in Practice* 1(1–2), 1–17.
- Friedman, N., Rhee, S., Ross, J., Corley, R. & Hewitt, J., 2021, 'Genetic and environmental relations of executive functions to antisocial personality disorder symptoms and psychopathy', *International Journal of Psychophysiology* 163(1), 67–78. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpsycho.2018.12.007>
- Gerson, S., 2011, 'The myth of Samson: Omnipotence, alienation and destructive narcissism', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 12(1), 89–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2011.559435>
- Gould, W., 2021, *10 red flags in relationships are red flags a reason to walk away from someone?*, viewed 6 June 2021, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/10-red-flags-in-relationships-5194592>.
- Hare, R., 1991, *The Hare psychopathy checklist revised*, Multi-Health system, Toronto.
- Hare, R., 1998, 'The Hare PCL-R: Some issues concerning its use and misuse', *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 3(1), 99–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8333.1998.tb00353.x>
- Hare, R. & Neuman, C., 2009, 'Psychopathy: Assessment and forensic implications', *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 54(12), 791–802. <https://doi.org/10.1177/070674370905401202>
- Hayase, N., 2016, *Lifting the veil of psychopathic intrusion in everyday life*, viewed 4 August 2021, from <https://dissentvoice.org/2016/01/lifting-the-veil-of-psychopathic-intrusion-in-everyday-life/>.
- Hayduck, D., 2017, 'Intimate partner violence: Facilitating the recognition of yellow flags as early indicators of red', *Journal of Health Education Teaching* 8(1), 33–39.
- Jonason, P. & Webster, G., 2012, 'A protean approach to social influence: Dark Triad personalities and social influence tactics', *Personality and Individual Differences* 52(4), 521–526. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.11.023>
- Karmakar, A. & Chattopadhyay, C., 2021, 'The manifestation superstition in terms of COVID19', *Journal of Egypt/Egyptology* 18(1), 4054–4060.
- King, A., 2014, 'Childhood physical abuse and sociopathy: Is this link magnified among firstborn children?', *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 23(9), 963–981. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2014.953718>
- Levin, W., 2005, *Cultural commentary: Ted, Terrell and Angie and the limits of sociopathy*, viewed 2 February 2021, from [https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1148&context=br\\_rev](https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1148&context=br_rev).
- Logan, M., 2018, 'Stockholm syndrome: Held hostage by the one you love', *Violence and Gender* 5(2), 67–69. <https://doi.org/10.1089/vio.2017.0076>
- Madu, I., 2007, 'The underlying factors of rural development patterns in the Nsukka region of Southeastern Nigeria', *Journal of Rural and Community Development* 2(1), 110–122.
- Mbiti, J., 1969, *African religions and philosophy*, Heinemann, London.
- McGirr, A. & Turecki, G., 2007, 'The relationship of impulsive aggressiveness to suicidality and other depression-linked behaviors', *Current Psychiatry Report* 9(6), 460–466. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-007-0062-2>
- Mendez, M., Chen, A., Shapira, J. & Miller B., 2005, 'Acquired sociopath and frontotemporal dementia', *Dementia and Geriatric Cognitive Disorders* 20(2–3), 99–104. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000086474>
- Neiger, D., 2016, 'The empathy trap', *Journal of the Australian Traditional-Medicine Society* 22(3), 162–163.
- Nightshade, S., 2013, *A victim's guide: Surviving a narcissist/sociopath*, Xlibris LLC, Indiana.
- Obisakin, L., 2002, *Dislodging Demons: A systematic approach to deliverance ministration*, Thomas Nelson Inc, Cadment.
- Okwuosa, L., Iheanacho, A., Ekwueme, S. & Uroko, F., 2021, 'Mammy water and her women's cult during the Nigeria-Biafra War in Oguta', *Civil War* 23(4), 570–587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2021.1995681>
- Oliveira-Souza, R., Paranhos, T., Moll, J. & Grafman, J., 2019, 'Gender and hemispheric. Asymmetries in acquired sociopathy', *Frontiers in Psychology* 10, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00346>
- Onyeugbo, E., 2019, *The incidence of sociopathy in Nigeria: Negligence and impact of religion*, viewed 6 June 2021, from <https://medium.com/@erereony/the-incidence-of-sociopathy-in-nigeria-negligence-and-impact-of-religion-3abf4e75164f>.
- Pemmet, J., 2013, 'Psychopathy versus sociopathy: Why the distinction has become crucial', *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 18(5), 458–461. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2013.07.001>
- Peterman, L. & Dixon, C., 2011, 'Domestic violence between same-sex partners: Implications for counseling', *Journal of Counseling and Development* 81(1), 40–47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2003.tb00223.x>

- Peterson, T. n.d., *Sociopathic parents and their effects on children*, viewed 10 January 2022, from <https://www.healthypace.com/personality-disorders/sociopath/sociopathic-parents-and-their-effects-on-children>.
- Perez, P., 2012, 'The etiology of psychopath: A neuropsychological perspective', *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 17(1), 519–522. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2012.07.006>
- Plumtre, E., 2021, *What's the difference between a narcissist and a sociopath?* viewed 5 June 2021, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-difference-between-a-narcissist-and-a-sociopath-5181518>.
- Purse, M., 2020, *How sociopaths are different from psychopaths: Both are forms of antisocial personality disorder*, viewed 1 August 2021, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-sociopath-380184>.
- Reiss, M., 2014, 'Samson: The only Nazarite in the Hebrew Bible and his women!', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: An International Journal of Nordic Theology* 28(1), 133–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09018328.2014.926700>
- Saunders, B., Kitzinger J. & Kitzinger, C., 2015, 'Anonymising interview data: Challenges and compromise in practice', *Journal of Qualitative Research* 15(5), 616–632. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114550439>
- Secker, E., 2012, 'Witchcraft stigmatization in Nigeria: Challenges and successes in the implementation of child rights', *International Social Work* 56(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872812459065>
- Sollid, R., 2016, *A 'high-functioning sociopath'? Sherlock Holmes (psycho) analysed*, viewed 5 June 2021, from [https://www.academia.edu/26143187/A\\_high\\_functioning\\_sociopath\\_Sherlock\\_Holmes\\_psycho\\_analysed](https://www.academia.edu/26143187/A_high_functioning_sociopath_Sherlock_Holmes_psycho_analysed).
- Stout, M., 2005, *The sociopath nextdoor: The ruthless versus the rest of us*, MJF Books, New York, NY.
- Stout, M., 2020, *Outsmarting the sociopath next door: How to protect yourself against a ruthless manipulator*, Harmony Books, New York, NY.
- Ulo, E., 2021, 'Police brutality and human rights abuse: A study of the end SARS protest in Nigeria', *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies* 4(2), 179–193.
- Uwaegbute, K., 2022, "It is God that does everything, including winning football trophies": Exploring thanksgiving ceremonies by Liverpool F.C supporters club in a Nigerian Town', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221076104>
- Vahia, V., 2013, 'Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders 5: A quick glance', *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 55(3), 220–223. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.117131>
- Vitebsky, P., 2001, *Shamanism*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Yoon, D., Eher, R. & Mokros, A., 2021, 'Incremental validity of the psychopathy checklist-revised above and beyond the diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder regarding recidivism in sexual offenders', *Journal of Criminal Justice* 80, 101780. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2020.101780>