



Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences Section – 2005

I19 Did Robert Stroud Suffer From Asperger's Disorder?

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn the basic diagnostic characteristics of Asperger's Disorder; and will also learn about the potential relation between autism spectrum psychopathology and criminal violent behavior.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by introducing neuro-psychiatric-developmental approaches in the evaluation of individuals who present with high functioning autism associated with serious violent behaviors.

Robert Stroud, better known as "the Birdman of Alcatraz," became one of the most famous prison inmates in the United States during the twentieth century. He was initially incarcerated when he was 19 years of age after killing a man. He remained incarcerated for the rest of his life. In 1962, one year before his death, the major motion picture "Birdman of Alcatraz" helped consolidate his image as a man whose life and personality highlighted the evolution, complexities, and contradictions of the penal system in the United States. However, the portrayal of Stroud by the media and the justice system and psychiatry has led to a confusing and distorted appreciation of this complex, enigmatic, and tragic figure. Psychiatrists have fared no better in this regard by providing conflicting diagnoses ranging from psychosis to a psychopathic personality. Even the term "Birdman of Alcatraz" has unfortunately served to further confuse Stroud's life. In fact, most of Stroud's work in the field of ornithology took place during his stay in the federal penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas.

In this presentation, a psychiatric diagnostic analysis of Robert Stroud will be provided by using information limited to published sources of information, including internet based information. In this presentation the authors will use a neuro-psychiatric developmental model, a paradigm that takes into account five areas. These components include the following: 1) neuro-psychiatric developmental components, 2) psychopathy, 3) psychopathological aggression, 4) sexual psychopathology, and 5) lifetime stressors. With regard to the neuro-psychiatric developmental component, Stroud qualified for DSM-IV-TR Asperger's Disorder, a form of high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder. Autism Spectrum Disorders have strong neuro-psychiatric and genetic bases.

With regard to qualitative impairments in social interaction, Stroud manifested a serious failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level. While he had a well-developed capacity to approach others, his interactions with them were superficial and often manipulative in nature. His conversations with others were strongly characterized by one-way communication in which Stroud engaged in a monologue and the other person was for the most part relegated to listening. Essentially, he was not interested in the other person's mental life unless it directly related to his own immediate experience. Therefore, he manifested a serious lack of social and emotional reciprocity.

With respect to restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, he manifested an encompassing preoccupation with several highly restricted patterns of interest that were abnormal either in both intensity and focus. This is highlighted by his interest in avian biology and medicine, an interest that brought him fame and lasting recognition. However, this very same interest came with a level of pathological rigidity and difficulties in recognizing his limitations. Moreover, this interest was associated with a lack of care for his own self and a disregard for the humanity of others. He recognized that he had a great appreciation for birds but not for humankind. He displayed hypochondriacal symptoms. For example, he adhered to unusual diets and demanded bizarre treatments for imagined illnesses. At the same time, he had little respect for the medical background of the prison medical staff. He manifested an impressive ability to deconstruct physical objects for which he had a focused interest. This gift brought a remarkable ability to describe avian anatomy. His explorations of the gross anatomy of canaries and similar birds continue to command the respect of contemporary ornithological experts. He had an impressive aptitude in the mathematical and engineering areas. He was mechanically gifted.

His autistic disturbance caused clinically significant impairment in social areas primarily because he was unable to interact with other human beings in a balanced give-and-take manner, and because he gravitated to interactions with birds or felt most comfortable with subjects that involved analytic precision and description and that did not tax his serious deficits with empathy when dealing with others. His inability to accept other points of view led to serious interpersonal conflicts and may have been partially responsible for his lethal attack on a prison guard. There was no clinically significant general delay in language abilities. His cognitive development was associated with age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behavior and substantial



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curiosity with his environment. Although Stroud once pled not guilty by reason of insanity in the homicide case involving the prison guard, there was little evidence that he ever suffered from a major mental disorder.

On Axis II of his psychiatric diagnosis, Stroud qualified for a Personality Disorder NOS (not otherwise specified) with Schizoid, Schizotypal and Narcissistic Personality Disorder traits. Schizoid Personality Disorder is often indistinguishable from Asperger's Disorder. He also qualified for a Paranoid Personality Disorder. Since childhood, he had displayed a significant number of psychopathic traits. He tended to be rigid as well as persistent in his thinking and behavior and frequently could not discern at what point his relentless persistence had ceased to be of any value in coping with life's challenges. Rather, he would frequently retaliate against those who disagreed with him by becoming verbally hostile, manipulative and even violent when his world view was challenged. In addition, he had a longstanding sexual attraction to prepubescent and barely pubescent males. There is also evidence that he enjoyed a life of coercive sexual fantasies. However, there is no evidence that he ever sexually attacked other people. He was the victim of sexual abuse when he was a child, though when asked he denied that this experience had been stressful or otherwise negative. His life in prison was, not surprisingly, associated with numerous serious stressors. However, both his personality and the prison system, contributed to his highly stressful life experiences. A neuro-psychiatric developmental analysis of Robert Stroud reveals that optimal understanding of his crimes and intellectual accomplishments must take into account his autistic as well as his psychopathic psychopathology.

Autism, Violence, Forensic Psychiatry