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The Comfort of Madness: How Society's Need to Pathologize Violence Undermines Justice and Stigmatizes Mental Illness

Victor Petreca, PhD, DNP, RN, PMHNP-BC

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Corresponding author: Victor G. Petreca
Boston College William F. Connell School of Nursing
Maloney Hall 374A
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, 02467
Email: victor.petreca@bc.edu

Abstract

This conceptual analysis examines society's reflexive attribution of violent crime to mental illness, a phenomenon that profoundly shapes forensic nursing practice. Through composite case studies, the paper explores how psychological defense mechanisms, media dynamics, and diagnostic politics converge to create false narratives about the relationship between mental illness and violence. The analysis reveals that society's rush to pathologize criminal behavior serves multiple defensive functions: protecting just-world beliefs, maintaining psychological distance from human capacity for harm, and avoiding uncomfortable questions about systemic issues. The misapplication of trauma research, diagnostic hierarchies favoring "sympathetic" conditions, and the neuroscience mystique further distort forensic assessment. Evidence consistently demonstrates that individuals with serious mental illness are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence, and that personality pathology, substance use, and ordinary human motivations are more common drivers of criminal behavior than psychiatric illness. For forensic nurses operating at the intersection of healthcare, law enforcement, and public sentiment, these societal patterns create unique challenges in maintaining diagnostic integrity while facing pressure from attorneys, families, media, and institutional stakeholders. The paper provides frameworks for forensic nurses to navigate these pressures through "diagnostic courage"—the willingness to deliver accurate assessments despite conflicting preferred narratives. By understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying society's pathological need to pathologize, forensic nurses can better advocate for accurate understanding of both violence and mental illness, ultimately serving justice while protecting the dignity of those with genuine psychiatric conditions.

Keywords: violence attribution, psychiatric stigma, diagnostic misuse, forensic nursing, criminal responsibility, societal denial

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As Jean Renoir observed in his 1939 film *The Rules of the Game*, "You see, in this world, there is one awful thing, and that is that everyone has his reasons." This insight encapsulates a disturbing truth about human violence: perpetrators rarely see themselves as evil. Instead, they view their actions as justified responses to circumstances (Sandberg & Presser, 2015; Topalli et al., 2020). Society resists accepting that ordinary people can reason their way to atrocity, as this threatens comforting beliefs about human nature (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017). When faced with extreme acts—a mother drowning her children, a mass shooter targeting innocents, or premeditated murder for profit—we instinctively seek psychiatric explanations (McGinty et al., 2016; Pescosolido et al., 2019). The perpetrator must be "crazy," "psychotic," or mentally ill. This impulse to pathologize shields us from Renoir's disturbing insight by sustaining the illusion that only the mentally ill commit such acts (Hartung et al., 2019; Stuart, 2018). We desperately want to believe monstrous behavior stems from madness. The alternative—that someone with intact reasoning committed the act while feeling justified—is far more terrifying (Cohen, 2013).

The phenomenon of desperately wanting to believe that someone performing a monstrous act only stems from mental illness reflects a cultural defense mechanism that protects our psychological equilibrium at significant cost (Jonas et al., 2014; Jost, 2020; Kahan, 2015). By attributing violence to mental illness, we create artificial boundaries between "us" and "them," maintaining the fiction that only the psychiatrically impaired could commit such acts (Corrigan & Al-Khouja, 2018). We transform the perpetrator into the "other"—fundamentally different from normal people—avoiding confrontation with our own capacity for harm (Rottman et al., 2014). This collective denial shapes media coverage, public discourse, legal proceedings, and policy decisions, fundamentally distorting our understanding of both violence and mental illness.

The consequences are profound. Research demonstrates that individuals with serious mental illness are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence (Ghiasi et al., 2025; Peterson et al., 2014). When violence does occur among those with mental illness, it is typically mediated by factors that predict violence in the general population: substance use, antisocial traits, and environmental stressors (Whiting et al., 2021; Zhang & Firdaus, 2024). Yet public discourse, media coverage, and the legal system continue promoting the false narrative that mental illness drives violent crime (Stuart, 2006; Metzl & MacLeish, 2015).

For mental health professionals in forensic settings—particularly psychiatric forensic nurses, forensic psychiatrists, and other clinicians assessing individuals accused of violent crimes—the pattern of promoting the false narrative that mental illness drives violent crime creates unique challenges. Operating at the intersection of healthcare, law enforcement, and public sentiment, they witness firsthand how society's search for psychiatric explanations shapes their work. These professionals face pressure to provide diagnoses that satisfy public understanding, mitigate criminal responsibility, or support legal strategies, all while maintaining diagnostic integrity (American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, 2005; International Association of Forensic Nurses, 2023).

This paper critically examines society's need to pathologize, a phenomenon profoundly shaping forensic nursing practice. The analysis explores how the rush to psychiatric explanations serves defensive functions, from maintaining just-world beliefs to avoiding uncomfortable discussions about human nature. Particular focus is placed on the modern trauma narrative that transforms perpetrators into victims through stories of childhood suffering and psychiatric distress, diminishing their moral and legal responsibility for violent acts. For forensic nurses navigating these cultural pressures while maintaining diagnostic integrity, understanding these patterns is essential. This analysis examines how societal forces manifest in clinical encounters and equips forensic nurses with the proposed framework of "diagnostic courage," the willingness to deliver accurate assessments despite conflicting preferred narratives (Gutheil, 2009; Mason et al., 2008; Neal & Grisso, 2014), while improving both clinical practice and justice outcomes.

Methods

This conceptual analysis employs composite case examples to critically examine how society's reflexive attribution of criminal behavior to mental illness impacts forensic nursing practice. Case-based methodology serves as an effective approach for exploring complex diagnostic phenomena and uncovering thematic patterns within forensic settings (Ellis et al., 2024; Harding et al., 2023; Paudel et al., 2020; Tomova et al., 2021). By synthesizing clinical observations and professional experiences, this analysis illuminates the cultural dynamics underlying diagnostic misattribution and its consequences for both clinical practice and public understanding.

Selection Criteria and Analysis

Three illustrative cases were developed to represent recurring challenges observed in forensic psychiatric settings. These composites were constructed to highlight: (1) media-driven diagnostic assumptions following violent crimes, (2) psychological comfort derived from pathologizing disturbing behavior, and (3) differential stigmatization between psychiatric and substance use disorders.

Each vignette draws from authentic clinical encounters while incorporating extensive protective modifications to ensure confidentiality. Given the high-profile nature of many forensic cases, alterations included changing demographics, circumstances, combining elements from multiple cases, and adjusting timelines. Despite these modifications, core psychological dynamics, diagnostic challenges, and societal response patterns remain true to clinical experience, allowing meaningful analysis while maintaining ethical standards.

Case Studies

Vignette 1: The Young Shooter

Following a mass shooting at a local shopping center that left three dead and two wounded, media coverage immediately speculated about the perpetrator's mental health. Within hours, cable news featured panels of "experts" discussing possible depression, anxiety disorders, and autism spectrum conditions that might explain why a "troubled young man" could commit such an act. Social media amplified these speculations, analyzing the shooter's "dead eyes" in photographs and offering amateur diagnoses.

The forensic evaluation revealed a dramatically different picture. Tyler Matthews, a 19-year-old college student, had no documented history of mental illness. His academic records showed consistent performance, and family interviews revealed no prior mental health concerns.

However, psychological testing uncovered a long-standing pattern of narcissistic and antisocial traits that had been dismissed as "typical teenage behavior" or "just his personality."

Tyler had methodically planned the attack over six months, purchasing weapons legally, studying previous mass shootings, and selecting his target based on maximum media impact. His digital footprint revealed extensive engagement with violence-glorifying online communities and a 17-page manifesto revealing grandiose fantasies of fame and callous disregard for others' suffering. He described his victims as "NPCs" (non-player characters) and expressed excitement about achieving "legendary status."

Clinical interviews conducted over several weeks painted a picture of someone with intact reality testing but profoundly disturbed values. Tyler demonstrated no evidence of psychosis, depression, or any other major mental illness. When asked about his motivations, he calmly explained that he felt "disrespected" by society and wanted to "make them pay attention." He showed no remorse, instead expressing frustration that his "kill count" was not higher.

Psychological testing confirmed diagnoses of narcissistic personality disorder with antisocial features. Yet media coverage continued framing the incident as a "mental health tragedy," calling for better campus counseling services while ignoring personality pathology, weapon access, online radicalization, and cultural factors glorifying violence.

Following arrest, Tyler was housed in the county jail's forensic mental health unit for court-ordered competency evaluation. The psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner (PMHNP) assigned as evaluator, with over a decade of forensic experience, conducted comprehensive assessments over a two-week period. Tyler demonstrated clear understanding of charges and ability to assist counsel. Despite this detailed report documenting Tyler's competency and absence of major mental illness, the PMHNP faced persistent challenges. The defense team repeatedly requested he "reconsider" his findings, suggesting he might have "missed" symptoms. Media outlets contacted his office daily, pressing for statements about Tyler's "psychiatric condition" and "treatment plan."

Vignette 2: The Trauma Defense

When Jennifer Walsh, a 28-year-old mother with no criminal history, drowned her two young children in the family bathtub, the community struggled to comprehend. Media coverage immediately focused on her "traumatic childhood," discussing how she'd been physically abused by her alcoholic father and witnessed severe domestic violence. Local news ran a multi-part series titled "From Victim to Perpetrator: The Cycle of Violence," featuring trauma experts who had never evaluated Jennifer.

The forensic evaluation revealed a more complex reality. Jennifer had experienced significant childhood trauma, including documented physical abuse resulting in child protective services involvement. However, she had demonstrated remarkable resilience, graduating from college, maintaining steady employment as a dental hygienist, and by all accounts being a devoted mother for years. Friends described her as "put together" and "the last person you'd expect" to harm her children.

The murders coincided with a specific stressor: Jennifer's discovery that her lover of six months was unwilling to accept her children. Text messages revealed his ultimatum: "It's them or me." Forensic examination of her internet history showed she had researched methods of killing that would appear accidental, viewed life insurance websites, and searched for "how to start over

in a new state." She had taken out life insurance policies on both children three weeks before their deaths.

During initial interviews, Jennifer presented as tearful and disorganized, emphasizing her abuse history and claiming it had "broken something inside her." She used attorney-coached phrases like "I wasn't myself" and "the trauma took over." However, detailed assessment revealed calculated planning inconsistent with trauma-related impulsivity or dissociation. When confronted with evidence of premeditation, her demeanor shifted. She admitted to conscious deliberation about eliminating obstacles to her new relationship, stating coldly, "I couldn't see another way out."

The defense team continued emphasizing Jennifer's trauma history, hiring experts to testify about Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD) as defined in the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD-11) (World Health Organization, 2019) to reference Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) criteria from the DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022), despite clinical findings that didn't support this diagnosis. They commissioned a PET scan, highlighting areas of "abnormal activity" that one expert claimed showed "trauma-related brain changes," though independent neurologists found the scan unremarkable. Media coverage portrayed her as both victim and perpetrator, with headlines like "Cycle of Abuse Continues" obscuring her calculated choices.

During pretrial detention, nursing staff documented striking inconsistencies in Jennifer's presentation. When defense attorneys or their experts visited, she appeared disoriented and fragile, frequently referencing trauma history and claiming memory gaps. However, during routine nursing assessments and unit activities, she demonstrated organized thinking, clear memory, and appropriate engagement. The nursing notes, compiled across three shifts over several months, revealed she could provide detailed accounts of daily events when not in the presence of legal personnel. This comprehensive documentation offered a perspective often missing from formal psychiatric evaluations.

Vignette 3: The Convenient Episode

Marcus Johnson, a 32-year-old construction worker arrested for assault during a methamphetamine-fueled altercation that left two people hospitalized, insisted his violence resulted from "bipolar rage." During his initial forensic assessment, he described the incident as a "manic episode," claiming he "blacked out" and "wasn't himself." His family eagerly supported this narrative, his mother providing a detailed history of "mood swings" dating back to adolescence.

Comprehensive assessment revealed a starkly different clinical picture. Marcus had no documented history of manic or depressive episodes meeting *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR) criteria (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022). His "mood swings" consisted entirely of irritability during stimulant use and withdrawal. Violence occurred exclusively during methamphetamine intoxication, with a clear pattern: drug use led to paranoid ideation, which led to confrontations, which escalated to violence. Between periods of substance use, his mood remained stable, and he maintained employment and relationships without difficulty.

When presented with the DSM-5-TR diagnosis of stimulant use disorder (APA, 2022), severe, with stimulant-induced mood episodes, Marcus rejected it vehemently. "I'm not a meth head," he stated. "I have bipolar disorder. My cousin has it too." He insisted his drug use was

"self-medication for bipolar," despite acknowledging he'd never sought mental health treatment during sober periods. His attorney pushed for emphasis on mood disorders, recognizing that judges and juries view bipolar disorder more sympathetically than addiction.

During Marcus's court-mandated substance abuse monitoring program, the forensic nurse case manager documented clear patterns across his four-month participation. Marcus only displayed what he called "manic symptoms"—agitation, grandiosity, pressured speech—when drug screens were positive for methamphetamine. During check-ins following negative drug tests, he consistently presented as calm and organized. When asked to specify dates of alleged manic episodes, Marcus could never identify periods that didn't coincide with documented substance use. Despite this pattern documented across multiple sources, Marcus continued insisting he needed psychiatric treatment for bipolar disorder.

His family's investment in the bipolar narrative revealed deeper dynamics. His mother stated she'd "rather have a son with mental illness than a drug addict," reflecting societal hierarchies of acceptable diagnoses. She produced internet articles about bipolar disorder, highlighting symptoms matching Marcus's behavior while ignoring the clear connection to substance use. The defense team attempted to introduce testimony from a psychiatrist who had diagnosed bipolar disorder after a single 45-minute evaluation conducted while Marcus was in withdrawal.

Discussion and Clinical Implications

Analysis of these cases reveals several critical themes regarding society's rush to pathologize violence. The patterns observed reflect deeper psychological, social, and cultural dynamics that shape how we understand and respond to criminal behavior.

Psychological Mechanisms of Distancing

The rush to psychiatric explanations for criminal behavior serves profound psychological functions that protect our existential security and worldview. At the most fundamental level, confronting human capacity for calculated violence threatens our basic assumptions about reality and our place within it. Terror management theory (Solomon, 2020) provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon: awareness of human potential for violence creates existential anxiety that must be managed through psychological defenses. When we label perpetrators as "mentally ill," we engage in what psychologists term "othering"—creating psychological distance that shields us from recognizing our own potential for harm. This process serves multiple functions (Haslam, 2006; Kvaale et al., 2013). First, it preserves our belief in human goodness by suggesting that only the psychiatrically impaired could commit heinous acts. Second, it maintains our sense of personal safety by implying we could identify and avoid dangerous individuals through recognition of mental illness symptoms. Third, it protects our just-world beliefs by providing a quasi-medical explanation for otherwise incomprehensible acts (Rüsch et al., 2010).

The fundamental attribution error (Ross & Nisbett, 2011) further explains this phenomenon. When observing others' behaviors, we tend to overemphasize dispositional factors (internal characteristics like mental illness) while underestimating situational and volitional factors (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Malle, 2011; Webster & Saucier, 2015). This cognitive bias leads us to seek internal, pathological explanations for violence rather than acknowledging the complex interplay of choice, circumstance, and character that typically underlies criminal acts (Bonta & Andrews, 2023; Caspi & Moffitt, 2006; Ward & Fortune, 2013). Consider how this manifested in the Tyler Matthews case. Despite clear evidence of methodical planning and

ideological motivation, media narratives persistently sought psychiatric explanations. This reflects what Haidt (2012) terms "motivated reasoning"—the tendency to search for evidence supporting preferred conclusions while dismissing contradictory information. The preferred conclusion, that mass shooters must be mentally ill, offers psychological comfort by suggesting such acts are aberrations rather than expressions of human potential (Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Newman & Fox, 2009; Silva, 2022).

The just-world hypothesis (Lerner, 1980) provides another lens for understanding this phenomenon. This cognitive bias compels us to believe the world is fundamentally fair—that bad things happen to bad people and good things to good people. When confronted with senseless violence, attributing it to mental illness preserves this belief system by suggesting the perpetrator was "sick" rather than deciding—whether deliberately or impulsively—to cause harm. This maintains our illusion of living in a predictable, morally ordered universe where violence has identifiable, treatable causes. System justification theory (Jost et al., 2004) adds another layer of understanding. People are motivated to defend and justify existing social systems, even when those systems may be flawed. By attributing violence to individual pathology rather than systemic issues—such as easy access to weapons, cultural glorification of violence, or social inequality—we avoid uncomfortable questions about necessary societal changes.

For forensic nurses, recognizing these psychological mechanisms is crucial. They help explain why families, attorneys, media, and even healthcare colleagues may resist accurate diagnoses that do not pathologize criminal behavior. However, forensic nurses must also maintain clarity about a fundamental principle: understanding the factors that contribute to violence—whether mental illness, personality pathology, or situational circumstances—explains but does not excuse harmful acts (Birks & Douglas, 2018). A mass shooter remains dangerous regardless of their diagnostic classification (Douglas et al., 2013), and victims suffer equally whether their attacker was psychotic or simply rage-filled (Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). Understanding these dynamics allows forensic nurses to anticipate resistance and develop strategies for presenting uncomfortable truths in ways that acknowledge underlying psychological needs while maintaining both diagnostic integrity and appropriate recognition of the harm caused.

The Trauma-to-Violence Pipeline Myth

The misapplication of trauma research in forensic settings represents one of the most problematic trends in contemporary criminal justice. While adverse childhood experiences clearly impact life outcomes (Felitti et al., 2019), the relationship between trauma and violence is far more complex than popular narratives suggest. The "cycle of violence" hypothesis has been significantly overstated, with longitudinal data showing most individuals with documented severe abuse do not become violent offenders. Widom, Czaja, and Dutton's (2014) 30-year prospective study provides compelling evidence against simplistic trauma-violence narratives. Their research found both the maltreated group and matched controls reported remarkably high rates of IPV perpetration—approximately 75% in both groups, challenging the notion that childhood trauma leads directly to adult violence. The pathway from trauma to violence is neither direct nor inevitable, with protective factors such as supportive relationships and community resources playing crucial mediating roles (Danese & Widom, 2020). The actual increase in violence risk, while statistically significant, remains modest—far smaller than media portrayals suggest.

This distortion has important forensic implications. The forensic misapplication of trauma research creates narratives that paradoxically both excuse criminal behavior through trauma explanations while increasing surveillance of trauma survivors (Jones & Willmot, 2022). These

narratives satisfy our need for explanatory causes while preserving perpetrator humanity by casting them as victims, yet they fundamentally misrepresent the trauma-violence relationship. The Jennifer Walsh case exemplifies these dynamics—her genuine trauma history became a tool for obscuring calculated choices, with defense experts selectively interpreting research to support predetermined conclusions. This represents what Lilienfeld (2017) calls "psychobabble"—using psychological terminology to create illusions of scientific explanation where none exists. Terms like "trauma response" are applied broadly without attention to diagnostic criteria or empirical support.

Ironically, research on post-traumatic growth demonstrates many trauma survivors experience positive psychological changes, including enhanced personal relationships and greater strength (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Wu et al., 2019). This evidence challenges deterministic narratives by showing trauma can lead to prosocial rather than antisocial outcomes. By overemphasizing trauma as causal in violence, we both excuse perpetrators and unfairly stigmatize survivors—creating a double injustice. For forensic nurses, these misapplications present significant challenges. True trauma-informed practice recognizes trauma's impact while maintaining appropriate boundaries regarding responsibility and consequences (Miller & Najavits, 2012; Saunders et al., 2023). Understanding trauma's effects does not negate the need for accountability (van der Kolk, 2014). While neuroimaging shows trauma-associated brain changes (Teicher et al., 2016), these findings do not establish direct causal links to violent behavior or diminished responsibility.

The challenge for forensic professionals is maintaining clinical precision in distinguishing genuine trauma responses from the appropriation of trauma language to avoid responsibility. While broadening trauma awareness has benefits, it can lead to conceptual creep where normal life difficulties are pathologized and used to explain criminal behavior (Haslam, 2016). Ultimately, the trauma-violence pipeline myth serves our collective need for comforting explanations. By recognizing relationship complexity and resisting oversimplified narratives, forensic nurses can contribute to more accurate understanding benefiting both justice and genuine trauma survivors.

Media Psychology and Moral Panic

Media coverage fundamentally distorts public understanding of mental illness and violence through predictable patterns that serve commercial and psychological needs (Corrigan & Al-Khouja, 2018; McGinty et al., 2016). Availability heuristics explain why dramatic cases involving mental illness receive disproportionate coverage, making them more memorable than statistics showing weak mental illness-violence correlations and leading to severe risk overestimation (Pescosolido et al., 2019; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).

The 24-hour news cycle exacerbates these problems through competitive pressure for immediate coverage, leading to speculation and simplified narratives when verified information is unavailable (Fox et al., 2021). The phrase "history of mental health issues" becomes a catch-all explanation applied without precision. This has evolved into what Yaksic (2025) terms the "Serial Murder Entertainment Complex," where criminal research transforms into entertainment, fundamentally distorting public understanding.

Research demonstrates a vicious cycle: news stories linking mental illness to violence increase stigma, while treatment-focused stories reduce it (McGinty et al., 2016). Sensationalized coverage reinforces false associations, increases stigma, and shapes future coverage. The Tyler

Matthews case exemplifies this pattern, with speculative early coverage creating persistent narrative frames despite contradictory evidence. Media constructs mental illness as a "folk devil"—a simplistic scapegoat for complex societal failures (Cohen, 2019). This framing renders chaotic events comprehensible while deflecting scrutiny from systemic issues. Social media intensifies these effects through algorithms favoring sensational content, echo chambers reinforcing biases, and viral amateur "diagnoses" that influence public narratives and institutional responses (Brady et al., 2020; Del Vicario et al., 2016).

For forensic nurses, media dynamics present both challenges and opportunities. They must navigate intense scrutiny while maintaining professional boundaries. However, they can also serve as expert voices, providing accurate information about the relationship between mental illness and violence. Effective media engagement involves proactive education rather than merely reactive correction, working with journalism schools, providing resources for accurate reporting, and developing relationships with responsible journalists.

Diagnostic Politics in Forensic Settings

The forensic environment transforms psychiatric diagnosis from a clinical tool into a site of contested meaning where multiple stakeholders pursue divergent interests. Douard and Schultz (2012) describe "diagnostic bargaining" as the strategic use of psychiatric diagnoses shaped by clinical, legal, institutional, and cultural factors. This process reveals how psychiatric categories become instruments of power, used to advance particular narratives about responsibility, punishment, and justice (Meynen, 2019; Pickersgill, 2019).

Defense attorneys seek diagnoses that might mitigate criminal responsibility or generate jury sympathy. Prosecutors resist psychiatric explanations that could excuse criminal behavior, sometimes pressuring evaluators to minimize mental health findings. Judges, influenced by their own beliefs about mental illness and responsibility, may favor certain diagnostic narratives over others (Gowensmith et al., 2017; Perlin, 2017; Redding & Murrie, 2007). Families advocate for diagnoses that preserve their loved one's dignity or their own sense of family identity. Media outlets seek dramatic diagnostic explanations that fit predetermined narrative frames (Yaksic, 2025).

Within this adversarial context, forensic evaluators face what Slovenko (2009) calls "diagnosis under fire"—the challenge of maintaining scientific integrity while navigating intense external pressures. The result is often what he terms "adversarial diagnostics," where psychiatric categories become tools for legal strategy rather than accurate clinical description. This politicization undermines the scientific credibility of forensic assessment while contributing to public confusion about mental illness and criminal responsibility.

The case studies reveal how diagnostic hierarchies operate in forensic settings. Certain diagnoses carry strategic advantages: bipolar disorder and PTSD evoke more sympathy than substance use disorders or personality disorders. This hierarchy reflects broader social attitudes but becomes codified through legal precedent and institutional practice. Marcus Johnson's insistence on a bipolar diagnosis over substance use disorder exemplifies this dynamic—he intuitively understood which label would generate more favorable treatment.

These hierarchies have profound implications. They influence not only legal outcomes but also treatment recommendations, resource allocation, and public policy (Melton et al., 2018). When personality disorders are underdiagnosed in favor of more "sympathetic" conditions, appropriate interventions are delayed or misdirected. When substance use disorders are

minimized in favor of psychiatric explanations, the primary driver of violent behavior goes unaddressed (Skeem et al., 2014). The adversarial nature of legal proceedings creates specific diagnostic challenges. Unlike clinical settings where diagnosis guides treatment, forensic diagnosis often determines legal outcomes—freedom versus incarceration, treatment versus punishment (Packer & Grisso, 2011). This high-stakes context incentivizes both malingering (feigning symptoms for legal advantage) and minimization (denying symptoms to avoid negative consequences) (Rogers & Bender, 2018). Forensic evaluators must navigate these competing pressures while maintaining diagnostic accuracy. The politics of diagnosis extend beyond individual cases to shape institutional practices. Forensic facilities may develop informal preferences for certain diagnoses based on funding streams, treatment capabilities, or institutional philosophies. Court systems may favor evaluators known for particular diagnostic patterns. These systemic biases create feedback loops that reinforce certain diagnostic narratives while marginalizing others (Murrie et al., 2013).

For forensic nurses, navigating diagnostic politics requires what might be termed "diagnostic courage"— the professional fortitude to prioritize accuracy over convenience. This involves understanding the various pressures affecting diagnostic decisions, recognizing personal biases, developing strategies for maintaining objectivity, communicating findings effectively, and documenting decisions thoroughly (Gutheil, 2009; Mason et al., 2008; Neal & Grisso, 2014). Forensic nurses must also recognize how their own position within institutional hierarchies affects diagnostic practice. Power dynamics between different professional groups, institutional policies about controversial diagnoses, and resource constraints all shape diagnostic possibilities. Understanding these structural factors helps forensic nurses advocate effectively for accurate assessment while navigating institutional realities.

The Neuroscience Seduction

The increasing prominence of neuroscientific evidence in forensic contexts presents both promise and peril. Weisberg et al. (2015) describe the "neuroscience mystique"—a bias that leads people to overvalue brain-based explanations, even when they add no real explanatory power. This cognitive bias has concerning implications in legal settings, where correlational neuroscience findings may be misinterpreted as causal evidence of diminished responsibility.

The Jennifer Walsh case illustrates this dynamic. Her defense team commissioned PET scanning not for diagnostic clarity but because brain images carry persuasive power beyond their scientific merit. This reflects the seductive allure of neuroscience explanations, where colorful brain scans can overwhelm more relevant psychological evidence (Weisberg et al., 2008; Weisberg et al., 2015). Farah (2023) warns against "neo-phrenological" interpretations of neuroimaging data. While neuroimaging can identify structural abnormalities, the leap from brain differences to legal conclusions about responsibility requires numerous inferential steps. The fundamental challenge lies in the relationship between brain states and legal responsibility. All behavior involves the brain—this is trivially true. The legally relevant questions concern agency, control, and rational understanding. As Morse (2023) argues, neuroscience can inform these questions but cannot definitively answer them. Consider the "psychopath's brain" narrative. While researchers have identified brain differences in individuals with antisocial traits, including reduced amygdala volume (Raine, 2019), these group-level differences do not establish individual incapacity. Many individuals with similar brain patterns never engage in violence. As Kiehl and Hoffman (2011) note, understanding the neural basis of antisocial behavior is valuable for developing interventions but does not resolve questions of criminal responsibility.

Navigating these challenges requires neuroscience literacy—understanding neuroimaging limitations, recognizing the difference between group-level findings and individual assessment, and communicating effectively about neuroscience to legal audiences. Responsible advocacy means neither dismissing nor overstating neuroscientific evidence, recognizing it as one tool among many for understanding behavior, valuable when properly contextualized but dangerous when oversimplified or misapplied.

Implications for Forensic Nursing Practice

Forensic nurses occupy a unique position to challenge society's comfortable lies about mental illness and violence. Their clinical expertise, combined with regular exposure to the realities of criminal behavior, positions them as crucial advocates for accurate understanding.

First, forensic nurses must maintain rigorous diagnostic standards despite pressure to pathologize criminal behavior. This requires distinguishing between genuine mental illness and the personality pathology that more commonly drives violence (Black et al., 2010; Whiting et al., 2021). When attorneys, families, or media outlets push for psychiatric explanations that do not align with clinical evidence, nurses must articulate their clinical reasoning clearly while resisting these pressures.

Second, education remains essential. Forensic nurses should actively educate colleagues, legal professionals, and the public about the actual relationship between mental illness and violence. Key points include: individuals with serious mental illness are more likely to be victims than perpetrators (Peterson et al., 2014); personality disorders are more prevalent in forensic populations than psychotic disorders (Fazel et al., 2016); and most violence stems from ordinary motivations rather than psychiatric symptoms (Skeem et al., 2020).

Third, media advocacy offers opportunities to counter harmful narratives. Forensic nurses can serve as expert sources, write opinion pieces challenging sensationalized coverage, and collaborate on responsible reporting guidelines. The goal is shifting public discourse from reflexive pathologizing toward nuanced understanding of criminal behavior. While managing external pressures, forensic nurses must navigate ethical complexities in diagnostic practice. This includes recognizing when defendants seek psychiatric diagnoses for secondary gain and maintaining integrity despite pressure to support particular diagnostic narratives (Gutheil, 2009). Peer consultation and institutional support are essential for managing the moral distress that can arise from confronting the gap between clinical reality and societal expectations (Mason et al., 2008).

Finally, forensic nurses should contribute to systemic change through research and scholarship. Their direct experience positions them as credible voices in challenging prevailing myths. By publishing case studies, conducting research on violence predictors, and engaging in professional discourse, they can build evidence that counters false narratives about mental illness and violence (Price & Baker, 2012). This scholarly contribution advances both justice and mental health advocacy.

These recommendations ask forensic nurses to bridge clinical reality and public understanding—a role requiring not just expertise but moral courage. By maintaining diagnostic integrity, educating stakeholders, and contributing to evidence-based discourse, forensic nurses can help society move beyond comfortable myths toward honest understanding of criminal behavior. In doing so, they ensure that future cases like those of Tyler Matthews, Jennifer Walsh,

and Marcus Johnson are understood not through the lens of comforting psychiatric explanations, but through the more challenging recognition of human agency and choice.

Conclusion

Society's rush to attribute violent crime to mental illness reflects deep psychological needs—to distance ourselves from disturbing acts and preserve illusions of safety through medicalization. Yet this defensive posture exacts a tremendous cost.

The comfortable lie that mental illness drives violence allows us to avoid harder truths: personality pathology relates more strongly to criminal behavior than psychiatric disease, childhood trauma does not excuse adult violence, and ordinary people can commit terrible acts given sufficient motivation. Forensic nurses stand at the forefront of this necessary reckoning. Their clinical expertise and direct experience position them to challenge false narratives while promoting accurate understanding. Though the task requires confronting societal defense mechanisms and media narratives, the stakes—justice, public safety, and the dignity of those with mental illness—are too high for comfortable lies.

The most terrifying recognition may be that there are no monsters—only humans capable of heinous acts while believing themselves justified. This truth offers no easy comfort, but it represents the starting point for genuine understanding. We owe it to victims, those with mental illness, and society itself to move beyond comfortable lies toward difficult truths.

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