

# Superficial Charm

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Glib and superficial charm is "the tendency to be smooth, engaging, charming, slick, and verbally facile."

The phrase often appears in lists of attributes of psychopathic personalities, such as in Hervey Cleckley's *The Mask of Sanity* and Robert Hare's *Hare Psychopathy Checklist*.

## Early history

Classical rhetoric had early singled out the critical category of 'a superficial charm; his words sounded well enough, but if you analysed them you found there was no solid matter'.

In the nineteenth century, George Eliot explored the darker side of the Victorian feminine ideal, concluding that 'there is no hardness like the hardness of a narrow mind polished into superficial charm...feminineness of manner' only.

## Psychopathic charm

Contemporary interest in superficial charm goes back to Checkley's classic study (1941) of the sociopath: it has since become generally accepted that 'psychopathy includes emotional shallowness, superficial charm (...) and disregard for the feelings of others'. According to Hare, "Psychopathic charm is not in the least shy, self-conscious, or afraid to say anything."

Subsequent studies have refined, but not perhaps fundamentally altered, Chekley's initial assessment. In the latest diagnostic review, 'although ostensibly similar to Checkley's "superficial charm and good intelligence" criterion, the "glibness and superficial charm" of the PCL-R (...) is in fact defined in a more deviant manner (i.e., reflecting an excessively talkative, slick, and insincere demeanor)'.

## Narcissism

The term also occurs in Hotchkiss' discussion of narcissists: "Their superficial charm can be enchanting." For such figures, 'those big romantic gestures that at first proved so alluring are in fact the whole deal, symptomatic of these men's need to show off and be the centre of attention'.

Narcissists can be 'skilful and charming manipulators', specialising in ' Entrapment: the luring of a victim in some beguiling way, such as by fake warmth and understanding, into suspending his self-protective behavior and compromising himself'. Closely related is the way 'some imposters have a great ability to make their victims fall in love with them, only to betray them afterwards. They are governed by the narcissistic need to prove to themselves that they are capable of being loved; they remain unsatisfied nonetheless, and take revenge for their dissatisfaction'.

## Social chameleons

'Those who are adept in social intelligence (...) the stuff of interpersonal polish, the necessary ingredients for charm, social success, even charisma' may yet only have 'a hollow social success - a popularity won at the cost of one's true satisfaction (...) social chameleons, champions at making a good first impression' but nothing more. 'To the extent that these traits lead to effective impression management, they are highly prized in certain professions, notably acting, trial law, sales, diplomacy, and politics'. But 'if these interpersonal abilities are not balanced by an astute sense of one's own needs', such superficial extraverts may 'end up as anchorless social chameleons'.

Similarly in the histrionic personality, 'the need for excitement and attention seeking, which leads to a superficial charm and interpersonal presence...further reinforces the dissociation and denial of the real or inner self from the public self, and the cycle continues'.

## Positive outcomes

'Potentially positive outcomes' have nonetheless been noted for the superficial charmer, including 'good conversation skills; lighthearted in social settings; fun and entertaining to be around; good at interacting with others; improved romantic opportunities; power to please'.

## Charm offensive

Charm offensive is a related concept meaning a publicity campaign, usually by politicians, that attempts to attract supporters by emphasizing their charisma or trustworthiness. The first recorded use of the expression is in the California newspaper The Fresno Bee Republican in October 1956.

## Literary analogues

F. Scott Fitzgerald - the 'poet of the meretricious' - explored the destructive consequences of excess charm in stories like "Magnetism". "'You can't control charm. It's simply got to be used. You've got to keep your hand in if you have it, and go through life attaching people to you that you don't want" (...) unconsciously promising a possible admission to the thousand delights and wonders that only he knew and could command'.

In dark fantasy, can be found the definition of the ' Charmal. Charismatic, charming person with no conscience. Charmals can see into others; they use their insight not to benefit people but to get what they want'.