

Superficial charm

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Superficial charm (or **glib charm**) is the tendency to be smooth, engaging, charming, slick and verbally facile.^[1]

The phrase often appears in lists of attributes of psychopathic personalities, such as in Hervey M. Cleckley's *The Mask of Sanity*,^[2] and Robert D. Hare's Hare Psychopathy Checklist.^[3]

Associated expressions are "charm offensive", "turning on the charm" and "superficial smile".

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Early history

Classical rhetoric had early singled out the critical category of the superficial charmer, whose merit was purely verbal, without underlying substance.^[4]

In the nineteenth century, George Eliot explored the darker side of the Victorian feminine ideal, concluding bleakly that there was little worse than the narrow minded kind of femininity sheltering behind an artificial charm of manner.^[5]

Psychopathic charm

Contemporary interest in superficial charm goes back to Hervey M. Cleckley's classic study (1941) of the sociopath: since his work it has become widely accepted that the sociopath/psychopath was characterised by superficial charm and a disregard for other people's feelings.^[6] According to Hare, "Psychopathic charm is not in the least shy, self-conscious, or afraid to say anything."^[7]

Subsequent studies have refined, but not perhaps fundamentally altered, Cleckley's initial assessment. In the latest diagnostic review, Cleckley's mix of intelligence and superficial charm has been redefined to reflect a more deviant demeanour, talkative, slick, and insincere.^[8] A distinction can also be drawn between a subtle, self-effacing kind of sociopathic charm,^[9] and a more expansive, exhilarating spontaneity which serves to give the sociopath a sort of animal magnetism.^[10]

In the workplace

The authors of the book *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* describe a five phase model of how a typical workplace psychopath climbs to and maintains power. In phase one (entry), the psychopath will use highly developed social

skills and charm to obtain employment into an organisation.^[11] Corporate psychopaths within organizations may be singled out for rapid promotion because of their polish, charm, and cool decisiveness.^[12]

Narcissism

The term also occurs in Hotchkiss' discussion of narcissists: "Their superficial charm can be enchanting."^[13] For such figures, however, there is no substance behind the romantic gestures, which only serve to feed the narcissist's own ego.^[14]

Narcissists are known as manipulative in a charming way, entrapping their victims through a façade of understanding into suspending their self-protective behaviour and lowering their personal boundaries.^[15] Closely related is the way impostors are able to make people fall in love with them to satisfy their narcissistic needs, without reciprocating in any real sense or returning their feelings.^[16]

Social chameleons

Social chameleons have been described as adept in social intelligence, able to make a charming good impression, yet at the price of their own true motivations.^[17] Their ability to manage impressions well often leads to success in areas like the theatre, salesmanship, or politics and diplomacy.^[18] But when lacking a sense of their own inner needs, such superficial extraverts may end up (despite their charm) as rootless chameleons, endlessly taking their social cues from other people.^[19]

Similarly, for the histrionic personality, the attention seeking through superficial charm may only reinforce the splitting of the real self from the public presentation in a vicious circle.^[20]

Positive outcomes

Superficial charmers, in their more benign manifestations, can produce a variety of positive results, their conversational skills providing light-hearted entertainment in social settings through their ability to please.^[21]

Charm offensive

A "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.^[22]

Literary analogues

F. Scott Fitzgerald explored the destructive consequences of excess charm in stories like "Magnetism", maintaining that charm, for those who had it, had a life of its own, demanding constant use to keep it in peak condition.^[23]

Criticism

Critics object that there are few objective criteria whereby to distinguish superficial from genuine charm; and that as part of the conventional niceties of politeness, we all regularly employ superficial charm in everyday life:^[24] conveying superficial solidarity and fictitious benevolence to all social interaction.^[25]

See also

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|-------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| ■ Charisma | ■ Flattery | ■ Love bombing |
| ■ Crocodile tears | ■ Idealization | ■ Psychological manipulation |
| ■ Emotional labor | ■ Impression management | ■ Psychopathy |
| ■ Femme fatale | ■ Ingratiation | ■ Superficiality |

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19. ^ Goleman, pp. 119–120.
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21. ^ Salekin, p. 414.
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Further reading

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External links

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| Psychological manipulation | Psychopathy | Social psychology

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