

EXPOSING THE VOICE OF TRUTH: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE OF JOHN LENNON

Author:

Deborah Fade

Faculty Sponsor:

David Venturo,

Department of English

ABSTRACT

It is a little known fact that John Lennon hated the sound of his voice. This fact belies the public John whose distinctive voice has been credited with defining the sixties generation by promoting a peaceful revolution and challenging authority with love. Yet, within the copious pages of Lennon biographies, a lesser-known contradictory image resides; that of a man plagued by insecurities and repressed childhood memories of abandonment and emotional abuse. People from John's innermost circle describe a troubled soul, whose erratic behavior could swing from violent outbursts to deep remorse. When analyzing his complex dual identity, indicators of mental illness emerge. John's long history of alcohol and drug abuse demonstrates a tendency to self-medicate, as well as escape a painful reality. His false bravado attempted to conceal his fragility, but John's cries for help filtered out through his music. This psychological profile delves into the complex life of John Lennon, suggesting a post-mortem diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder as per criteria established by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*. Deeper than a character sketch, this profile explores the psychology behind one man's aversion to the sound of his voice.

INTRODUCTION

If the eyes are windows to the soul, the voice is a visceral expression of its tenor. John Lennon's voice could be lilting or brutal: contrasting tones that parallel a complex persona. It commands as often as it confesses, generating an irresistible magnetism that transcends time. Yet, for all its star quality, John loathed the sound of that unique voice. As "Beatle Brunch" host Joe Johnson once remarked: "John hated his voice, and would often use electronic methods to modify, disguise it, or enhance it. He was always asking Beatles' producer George Martin to put something on his voice" (Kane 231). Martin, himself, has written: "I thought his voice was one of the all-time greats, but he was always asking me to distort or bend it in some way, to 'improve' it" (Martin 17). This is the paradox of a cultural legend whose bold stage presence masked a fragile self-identity. The public John Lennon was the stuff of myths, but the private man was plagued by insecurities that often surfaced either artistically through his lyrics, or by manifesting as verbal or physical violence. Linking eyewitness accounts of John's erratic behavior with an established list of psychological symptoms, detailed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, suggests that John may have struggled his entire life with a form of mental illness classified as Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD): "A pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) [criteria]" (663). Strong substantial evidence exists, in the form of first and secondhand accounts, connecting moments in John's life with eight of the nine BPD criteria outlined in the *DSM-5*.

EIGHT OF NINE CRITERIA

1. "Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment." This is, by far, the most pervasive theme of John's storied life. First, there was the actual abandonment of the young child by his parents. John's father, Alfred, spent much of his life at sea or in jail. Julia, John's mother, lived a bohemian lifestyle, refusing to settle into a traditional marriage. When John was only five, Julia willingly left him in the permanent care of her austere, childless sister Mimi who, along with her husband George, became John's

unofficial adoptive parents. Mimi provided the structure and George provided the love, until his sudden death left John alone with Mimi: a woman incapable of expressing compassion. John was already scarred from his parents' rejection and would spend the rest of his life demanding the undivided attention of those he loved and trusted. From their early days in the clubs of Liverpool and Hamburg, through the crazed years of Beatlemania, John and his Beatles buddies were inseparable. They worked together, lived together, and even vacationed together (Stark 150). When John married Cynthia, she became an added source of security. Cynthia Lennon recalls: "He wanted me with him for as much of the time as possible" (Lennon 26). John's fear of being abandoned was so intense that when faced with the loss of a loved one, his reactions ranged from hysterical laughter to angry blowouts. According to Pauline Sutcliff, when her brother Stuart developed a deep connection to Astrid Kirchherr and a subsequent return to his beloved art, John panicked as his best friend slipped from his grip. One evening, without warning, John blew up in a sudden fit of alcohol-induced rage and pummeled Stuart to the ground. Pauline was convinced that this "beating was all about Stuart telling John he was leaving the group" (Kane 51). In another example of John's instability, Astrid relates that upon learning from her of the sudden death of Stuart Sutcliffe, the Beatles' first bassist and John's closest friend, "John went into hysterics. We couldn't make out...whether he was laughing or crying because he did everything at once" (Lewisohn 603). Fear of alienation even pours from his psyche through his voice in songs such as "If I Fell," "I'm a Loser," "Nowhere Man," and of course in his lyrical plea for "Help." These artistic confessions concur with Sutcliffe's observation that John "submerged his innermost feelings...preferring to analyze his depression in song and writing" (Kane 51).

2. "A pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation." This partly stems from learned behavior; Aunt Mimi was prone to treat John this way, although publicly she beamed proudly over her Johnny. Cynthia Lennon writes: "[Mimi] constantly hounded and oppressed him. He often complained that she never left him alone and found fault with everything he did...Years later, when he was world-famous and wealthy, he was still trying to earn her approval and she was telling him off" (Lennon 61). Unfortunately, John picked up this cruel habit from Mimi. The DSM-5 further explains that people with BPD "may idealize potential caregivers or lovers at the first or second meeting, demand to spend a lot of time together, and share the most intimate details early in a relationship" (664). This is typified in John's intimate relationship with Stuart. In her book, *The Beatles' Shadow, Stuart Sutcliffe and His Lonely Hearts Club*, Pauline Sutcliffe reminisces on how John felt safe around her brother and let his guard down early on in their friendship. Yet, when Stuart eventually fell in love with Astrid, a dejected John suddenly turned against him. John also behaved this way with Brian Epstein. Although John had initially shown complete respect and appreciation of his manager, John later used his knowledge of Brian's homosexuality to tease and humiliate him (Riley 216). During Wenner's *Rolling Stone* interview, he further denigrated Brian's persona by stating that "Brian was a nice guy, but he knew what he was doing, he robbed us [the Beatles]" (63). There is still another correlation between this diagnostic feature and John's habit of emotional abuse toward Cynthia, his long-suffering first wife. When Cynthia's focus shifted from doting on John to nurturing their infant son, John reacted like a neglected child, rebelling in adolescent fashion by surrounding himself with an entourage of hippie followers and "dropping out" with the help of LSD. In anticipation of a perceived abandonment, this time by his wife who, he feared, had replaced him with their son Julian, John began to push Cynthia, and their marriage further away, eventually alienating his own wife and child. She was left literally to catch up with the Beatles' entourage on more than one occasion. When it happened in Miami, John responded coldly by scolding her not to "be so bloody slow" (Lennon 180).

3. "Identity disturbance: markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self." Elaborating on this criterion, the DSM-5 claims that: "These individuals may show worse performance in unstructured work or school situations" (664). Without structure in his life, John was prone to depression. This pattern was repeated again and again in his life. Mimi had provided a regimented structure for the young John; Brian Epstein reined in the rebellious teen rocker, giving John's band a sense of organization and direction; and, despite accusations of Yoko Ono "controlling" the adult John,

he intuitively knew he needed her to hush his inner demons. Yoko became John's lover, wife, and mother figure, an Oedipal composite of Julia and Mimi, the most influential women of John's past. Regarding his unstable self-image, in an excerpt from his book, *John Lennon: The Life*, Philip Norman relays Dr. Arthur Janov's first impressions of John: "he was just one big ball of pain. This was someone the whole world adored, and it didn't change a thing. At the center of all that fame and wealth and adulation was just a lonely little kid" (640). That "lonely kid" element remained embedded in John's psyche beneath the various self-constructed facades he adopted. From the edgy Teddy Boy (macho/leather/Marlon Brando), to the Romantic poet-artist (feminine/velvet/Oscar Wilde), John was always at odds with his duality and made sure that he was the first to mock his previous incarnations. This is evident in his *Rolling Stone* interview with Wenner; John laughed about having seen a portrayal of the "walrus" as "a big capitalist that ate all the fuckin' oysters" (88) in a film adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*. He jokingly transferred his symbolic walrus identity to Paul through the lyrics of "Glass Onion:" "Well, here's another clue for you all / the walrus was Paul (Lennon-McCartney). But the truly symbolic shedding of this identity occurs in the lyrics of "God," as John sings: "I was the Walrus / but now I'm John" (Lennon).

4. "Impulsivity in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging (e.g., spending, sex, substance abuse, reckless driving, binge eating)." Assorted addictions numbed the emotional pain of John's traumatic childhood. In *Lennon Remembers*, the published transcript of his famous 1970 interview with *Rolling Stone* editor Jann S. Wenner, John admits, "I've always needed a drug to survive" (57). Alcoholism was a common theme in the Lennon family history, from his father's reputation as a "happy drunk" (Lewisohn 23) to his paternal grandfather's death from liver disease, which Riley translates as "the era's polite euphemism for advanced alcoholism" (7). After the tragic accident that killed his mother, John began to drink heavily. He also turned to the bottle during his estrangement from Yoko while on his legendary "lost weekend" in Los Angeles with May Pang and his posse of unstable characters from the music industry: Phil Spector, Harry Nilsson, Keith Moon, and even Ringo Starr, who was struggling with his own alcohol addiction. John's drug addiction began in Hamburg with Preludin, the amphetamine that helped him sustain an unnatural pace of endless performing. He then developed a preference for marijuana thanks to Bob Dylan, and stumbled upon LSD after having been secretly "turned on" to it by a London dentist in 1965. He was obsessed with LSD for years until he tried heroin soon after hooking up with Yoko. John seems also to have had an addiction to sex, although it's difficult to decipher whether this was a true addiction, or just macho John living up to the rock star stereotype. He maintained various extramarital affairs throughout his life, including the one with May Pang that, according to Pang, continued for years after John had reunited with Yoko ("The Real John Lennon").

Research has yet to produce examples in John Lennon's life that correlate with the *DSM-5*'s fifth criterion: "**Recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or threats, or self-mutilating behavior.**" In March of 1971, during a radio interview conducted shortly after the release of *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, British DJ Kenny Everett asked John if he ever considered committing suicide. Without hesitation John replied: "Oh, yes. As a teenager, even, I think everybody sort of thinks about it. I don't remember standing on the edge of a cliff, I've never been that near. But I've considered it" ("Radio Interviews"). Another reference to suicidal ideation can be found in the lyrics of "Yer Blues" which was written by John during the Rishikesh retreat. In this song, John opines: "I feel so suicidal just like Dylan's Mr. Jones," and "Feel so suicidal even hate my rock 'n' roll" (Lennon-McCartney). While both of these instances reference the contemplation of suicide, there is no documented evidence of John ever acting upon these urges.

6. "Affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood (e.g., intense episodic dysphoria, irritability, or anxiety usually lasting a few hours and only rarely more than a few days)." One could cite John's entire "Primal Scream album," *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, as a chronicle of John's "intense episodic dysphoria" during that phase of his life. When Janov met John for the first time, he was startled by the intensity of John's emotional devastation: "The level of his pain was enormous...as much as I've ever seen. He was almost completely nonfunctional. He couldn't leave the house; he could hardly leave his room. He had no defenses, he was decompensating [falling apart]" (Norman 639-40). Nevertheless, John had the remarkable ability to channel his suffering through his songwriting. On his first solo album,

John continued the trend he'd started on the *White Album* recordings, favoring a more stripped-down, less produced sound. His vocals on this album range from melodic to savage, echoing his unstable psychological state. John appears to have overcome his insecurities regarding his voice; he did not distort his vocals on these tracks. Yet when he returned to the studio to record *Rock 'n' Roll*, *Some Time in New York City*, *Walls and Bridges*, and *Mind Games*, John's anxiety reappeared (Kane 231).

7. **"Chronic feelings of emptiness."** John continually struggled to fill the void in his life that appeared when his mother died. Just as he had begun to know her, Julia vanished forever. Henceforth, John spent his life trying to replace the loss of his mother's eclectic spirit by drawing other avant-garde individuals close to him. In *Lennon Remembers*, John repeats his desire to be loved, again and again. He opines over the difference between "real love" and a bed full of groupies (Wenner 59); yet, he was known unintentionally to push away those who genuinely loved him in spite of his faults. Nothing and no one could permanently satisfy his longing; John was the archetypical, suffering artiste. John endured a vicious cycle of self-sabotage: bandaging his wound, and then ripping the bandage off before the wound had properly healed.

8. **"Inappropriate, intense anger or difficulty controlling anger (e.g., frequent displays of temper, constant anger, recurrent physical fights)."** Geoff Emerick summed up this aspect of John's complexity in his book, *Here, There and Everywhere*. Reflecting on John's Jeekyll and Hyde tendencies, Emerick writes: "...if you caught him at a bad moment, he could be biting and nasty: you could see the anger written all over his face. The problem was that you never knew exactly which John you'd encounter at any given moment, because his mood could change quite suddenly. Fortunately, it could change back just as quickly, so if you knew he was grumpy, the best course of action was to stay out of his way for a while, until he became approachable again" (99). There is an overwhelming supply of reports, similar to Emerick's, that have surfaced in the years following John's death. Pauline Sutcliffe's recollection of John's attack on her brother is just one of many. May Pang believes that John's behavior stemmed from a cultural conditioning of male superiority. She was another victim of John's abuse and noticed his pattern of rage followed by remorse. On one occasion, he "threw her across a room" (Kane 78-9). While on tour in 1964, road manager Mal Evans fell victim to John's temper. Larry Kane recalls Mal sitting next to him on a plane with tears streaming down his face. When Kane questioned him, Mal responded: "John got kind of cross with me...just said I should go fuck off. No reason, ya' know. But I love the man. John is a powerful force. Sometimes he's rough, if you know what I mean, man. But there's no greater person that I know" (Kane 199). John's mood swings were not always irrational, but tended to be excessive. As his first wife, Cynthia knew John's fury all too well: "There was an air of danger about John...Not only was he passionately jealous but he could turn on me in an instant, belittling or berating me, shooting accusations, cutting remarks or acid wisecracks at me that left me hurt, frustrated and in tears" (Lennon 27). As a practicing psychologist, Pauline Sutcliffe has her own unofficial diagnosis for John's condition: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. John's lack of boundaries and limits are what led her to this theory (Sutcliffe 85). Perhaps, the most disturbing casualties of John's erratic temper are his own two sons: Julian and Sean. In recent years, both men have exposed their own emotional trauma and the stigma that will always remain attached to personal memories of their famous father. There are many published examples of John exploding at Julian, including a time when John savagely screamed at his then sixteen year-old son: "I can't stand the way you fucking laugh" (Lennon 266)! In an incident years prior to that one, John got impatient with the dinner table antics of a then three-year-old Julian, yelling at him for "eating messily" (Lennon 171). A similar but even more injurious episode occurred between John and Sean when he was only four years old; apparently, the child was not handling his fork and knife properly while cutting steak. Sean recalls: "He did wind up yelling at me very, very loudly to the point where he damaged my ear, and I had to go to the doctor" (Norman 812). Again, a remorseful John apologized profusely while hugging his crying son. From the miscellaneous recorded accounts of Mimi's disdain for poor manners and her classist idiosyncrasies, it is not difficult to visualize Mimi reprimanding her fidgety young nephew in the very same way at her own dinner table. It is highly likely that John was merely imitating the only parental behavior he had ever known, sadly passing a legacy of emotional abuse onto his own sons.

9. “Transient, stress-related paranoid ideation or severe dissociative symptoms.” This diagnostic criterion relates to a specific series of events in John’s life, described in further detail below, and parallels this exact formula as per the *DSM-5*: “These episodes occur most frequently in response to a real or imagined abandonment. Symptoms tend to be transient, lasting minutes or hours. The real or perceived return of the caregiver’s nurturance may result in a remission of symptoms” (664). During John’s antiwar activist period in the early seventies, his support of radicals like Jerry Rubin earned him a place on the FBI’s list of “dangerous radicals” (Riley 550). John became convinced that his phones were being tapped and he was being followed. Many of his suspicions were justified; however, because of his heightened anxiety, he began spending more of his waking moments drunk, which only exacerbated his paranoia. On the night of Nixon’s reelection, at a party thrown by Jerry Rubin’s campaign supporters, John’s demons took the wheel, and he proceeded to cheat on Yoko with another woman in the very next room. Yoko endured the public humiliation of John’s latest indiscretion, but had grown weary of his endless cycle of screw-ups followed by apologies. In less than a year, she had initiated a separation from John sending him off with their personal assistant, May Pang, and “let him run wild to get his zipper problem out of his system” (Riley 569). In his Lennon biography, Tim Riley further explains that while this type of arrangement is alien to traditional American sensibilities, it is a common cultural practice within Japan’s aristocratic society (568). While Pang insists that John had fallen in love with her during those eighteen months he was estranged from Yoko, John did return to his wife when she was ready to accept him back into their home (“The Real John Lennon”). She was his source of strength and knew best how to tame his wildness without smothering his creativity.

CONCLUSION

When we reevaluate the dichotomous legend of John Lennon within the context of a Borderline Personality Disorder diagnosis, we must simultaneously consider the effects of the patient’s mental illness on his closest family and friends. It is widely known that victims of domestic abuse often remain with their abuser because they feel trapped or powerless to leave. In the case of BPD, however, most people intimately involved with the BPD patient, stay because of a belief that if they try a little harder, they might be able to “cure” the person. In the case of John Lennon, people found it very difficult to discount him as an abusive monster and abandon him; but living with a BPD patient is exhausting and can be compared to walking constantly on eggshells. Cynthia Lennon confessed that both she and Julian were conditioned to behave this way when they detected an imminent mood shift while in his presence (Lennon 171). In most cases, the spouse and children of someone suffering from BPD are psychologically damaged in one way or another, from living in a stressful environment. Both Sean and Julian exhibit emotional scars inflicted by a father who never developed the patience needed to nurture emotionally healthy children.

According to the *DSM-5*, individuals diagnosed with BPD “who engage in therapeutic intervention often show improvement beginning sometime during the first year” (665). Research also confirms that over the course of ten years, half of these patients no longer exhibit the criteria discussed. Pauline Sutcliffe is convinced that John could have been helped through “good, sound, orthodox intervention” rather than the extreme alternative methods he chose to follow, like Primal Scream Therapy and self-medicating with alcohol and drugs (Sutcliffe 86). Many may feel that posthumously diagnosing John Lennon with a mental illness is pointless, but there are at least a couple of reasons why this is a valid endeavor.

First, it could help those he hurt deeply by giving them an explanation why he did the cruel things that he did to them. They were not to blame for his outbursts and no matter how hard they tried to tiptoe around him, if John was in his emotional state, anything could have triggered him. BPD individuals can sniff out weakness, as John was known for doing, and use it as ammunition during moments of imagined vulnerability. What they are actually doing is projecting their own insecurities on their closest victim. It takes overwhelming patience, emotional strength, and solid self-confidence to endure the barrage of emotional abuse a BPD individual carelessly spews at those in his or her vicinity. This is why Yoko, more than anyone else in John’s life, was able to handle living with him. It is also why he needed her so desperately. As Larry Kane remarks, “And though we lost Lennon at too early an age, Yoko should be given credit for saving his life up to that point” (Kane 81).

Secondly, while the world should continue to appreciate John for his artistic, comedic, and philosophical talents, we must stop perpetuating the image of him as a martyred hero. John himself would not have approved of it. Yet, unfortunately, many of us would rather continue believing the grand illusion than facing the music. John himself knew this to be true and spoke these very words in his last recorded interview with Jonathan Cott: "The agreed upon illusion is what we live in. The hardest thing is facing yourself. It's easier to shout 'revolution' and 'power to the people' than it is to look at yourself and try and find out what's real inside you and what isn't, when you pull the wool over your own eyes, your own hypocrisy" ("John Lennon: The Last Interview").

Within those very words, spoken just days before that famous voice was forever silenced, lies the essence of John's inner turmoil. He spent his life denying his inner voice because it was too painful to hear. This is the very core of John's insecurities, and the psychological reason why he was uncomfortable with the sound of his own naked voice. The vocals that inspired a generation had been electronically enhanced to imitate the Dalai Lama chanting from a mountaintop, or to sound as if they were being transmitted from the moon. The inner voice that John Lennon worked so hard to obscure belonged to that lonely kid who just wanted to be loved.

WORKS CITED

- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-V-TR*. 5th ed., Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013. Print.
- Emerick, Geoff and Howard Massey. *Here, There and Everywhere*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006. Print.
- "John Lennon: The Last Interview." Interview by Jonathan Cott. *iTunes Podcast*. Rolling Stone, 5 Dec. 1980. Web. 28 Apr. 2014.
- Kane, Larry. *Lennon Revealed*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005. Print.
- Lennon, Cynthia. *John*. New York: Random House, 2005. Print.
- Lennon. "God." Lyrics. *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*. Lennon Music, 1970.
- Lennon-McCartney. "Yer Blues." Lyrics. *White Album*. Northern Songs, 1968.
- . "Glass Onion." Lyrics. *White Album*. Northern Songs. 1968.
- Lewisohn, Mark. *The Beatles: All These Years, Vol. 1., Tune In*. New York: Random House, 2013. Print.
- Martin, George. *With a Little Help from My Friends: The Making of Sgt. Pepper*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1994. Print.
- Philip, Norman. *John Lennon: The Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. Print.
- "Radio Interviews." *ntlworld.com*. n.p., April 2014. Web. 26 April 2014.
- Riley, Tim. *Lennon: The Man, the Myth, the Music – The Definitive Life*. New York: Hyperion, 2011. Print.
- Stark, Steven D. *Meet the Beatles*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005. Print.
- Sutcliffe, Pauline. *The Beatles' Shadow Stuart Sutcliffe and his Lonely Hearts Club*. London: Pan Macmillan, 2001.
- The Real John Lennon*. Dir. Richard Denton. Perf. John Lennon, Cynthia Lennon, May Pang. 2000. *YouTube*. 17 July 2007. Web. 28 Apr. 2014.
- Wenner, Jann S. *Lennon Remembers*. New York: New Left Books, 2000. Print.