

Research into non-criminal psychopathy

Psychopaths in Suits

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The construct of psychopathy, dating back over two centuries – if we include as its precursor the *manie sans délire* category first coined by Philippe Pinel – has traditionally been used to refer to individuals who end up on the wrong side of the law. The majority of recent research into the subject continues to present psychopathy in a criminal context. This is not at all a chance association, given that the set of symptoms of this disorder naturally leads the individual towards conflict with society or directly to crime, with a concurrent absence of traits that would normally restrain aberrant behavior. The link between psychopathy and criminality has been demonstrated by numerous empirical studies. It has been shown that psychopaths start their criminal activities early, and are more likely to re-offend at an earlier age and significantly more frequently than non-psychopathic criminals; the crimes they commit are diverse and feature needless brutality and sadism, as well as instrumental and predatory aggression. The once-popular notion that the construct of psychopathy is of little use in courtroom and penitentiary settings is now a thing of the past. That view was not entirely unfounded: as a result of the tendency to proliferate concepts, expand their meaning,

and formulate diverse classifications, which was prevalent until the 1950s, the construct of psychopathy was then seen as covering phenomena extending not only beyond its current definition, but also beyond current definitions of other personality disorders. Due to this ambiguity, and in an attempt to avoid the stigmatization of the term itself, psychopathy as a personality disorder is not included in any current diagnostic classifications (DSM-IV-TR, ICD-10). The problem of the relationships between the construct of psychopathy and the diagnostic standards for the disorder continues to stir controversy among clinicians and researchers.

Two factors

The current definition of psychopathy, formulated by Robert D. Hare, is a response to the formulation/creation of such categories as sociopathic personality and antisocial personality disorder, which focus almost exclusively on criteria covering easily observed antisocial behavior. Psychometric analysis of psychopathy criteria following Hervey M. Cleckley's classical clinical concept formulates a 20 point psychopathy checklist (personality traits and specific behaviors), which is now used to diagnose the disorder. Factor analysis has shown



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that most symptoms can be grouped into two correlated yet separate factors. Factor 1, defined as “interpersonal/affective personality,” includes items assessing emotional and interpersonal features of psychopathy: glibness and superficial charm, grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying, cunning/manipulative behavior, lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect (genuine emotion is shallow and short-lived), callousness/lack of empathy, and failure to accept responsibility for one's own actions. Factor 2, defined as “social deviation,” comprises traits defining the individual's impulsive, antisocial, and unstable lifestyle: need for stimulation and proneness to boredom, parasitic lifestyle, poor behavioral control and early behavioral problems, a lack of realistic long-term goals, impulsivity, irresponsibility, juvenile delinquency, revocations of conditional releases from detention, and criminal versatility. The list is completed by traits which are not correlated with either factor: promiscuous sexual behavior, and many short-term marital relationships.

High status

Isolating these two factors has thrown new light on previous clinical observations of psychopathy. One outcome has been Cesare Lombroso's “hidden criminal” theory, according to which psychopathy

is not just limited to the criminal population, but it may form the basis of success in non-criminal spheres. Researchers such as Hervey M. Cleckley and Kurt Schneider have also noted psychopathic personality traits in individuals who are extremely successful in politics, business, and other professional fields. They do not equate psychopathy with deviant behavior, and suggest that it can only be diagnosed in very few antisocial individuals. They believe that individuals with psychopathic personalities only become criminals if certain of their personality traits are accompanied by the appropriate environmental factors; as such not all would become criminals, in particular if they come from higher social classes and their high intelligence allows them to become successful through non-criminal means. Cleckley also noted that it was precisely the symptoms of the disorder that allowed certain psychopaths he studied to fool and take advantage of hospital staff, other patients, or their family members, as well as to attain high professional positions. However, as far as emotional and interpersonal traits were concerned, he did not note this group being significantly different from those psychopaths who find themselves in prison or psychiatric hospital. He believed that the main difference

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between the two groups was the former's greater ability to make an impression of normality, presenting a semblance of good mental health.

Industrial psychopath

In recent years there has been growing interest in individuals with affective and interpersonal personality factors who do not exhibit serious, openly apparent antisocial behavior; as a result the issue of psychopathy has shifted outside the realm of clinical and criminal psychology, capturing the attention of industrial and organizational psychologists. The notion of an "industrial" or "corporate psychopath" has been proposed to describe non-criminal psychopaths who function within the business world. Analysis of this phenomenon fits in with the research trend that extends beyond the study of desirable traits, described as the "bright side," and also concerns the "dark side" – dysfunctional personality aspects contributing to counterproductive behavior in the work environment. By referring to factors first described by Robert D. Hare, authors of contemporary analyses have been demonstrating that both sides are present in criminal psychopaths. However, the typical profile of non-psychopathic criminals is characterized by high levels of Factor 2 (antisocial behavior) concurrent with generally low results for Factor 1 (affective and interpersonal traits). The profile of an industrial psychopath is generally the opposite, with average results for deviant lifestyle (Factor 2)

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and extremely high results in the personality components (Factor 1).

Behind a mask of sanity

Contemporary analysis suggests that non-criminal psychopaths are successful at gaining employment, and in fact prosper in organizations for prolonged periods without revealing their true nature. They are able to accurately gauge an organization and its employees, successfully deal with potential adversaries, circumnavigate undetected round internal politics or codes of conduct, and manipulate their subordinates, co-workers and bosses. Furthermore, they rarely find themselves subject to disciplinary dismissal or other forms of employment termination. The behavior of the psychopath, concealing his true nature behind a "mask of sanity," not only arouses no suspicion, but it is often regarded as attractive and beneficial from both individual and organizational perspectives. Their behavior is often regarded as evidence of traits which are sought-after in employment, in particular in senior positions, which have a broad scope of action and less clearly-defined duties, as well as helping them keep their jobs and climb the career ladder. People who work in recruitment, whose judgments are guided by intuition and the impression made by candidates, frequently find themselves defenseless when faced with an industrial psychopath with an amiable manner and superficial charisma, able to adapt their image to the needs and expectations not only of the position but also the interviewer. The ease with which psychopaths are able to gain insight into others' mentalities and recognize their needs and weak points allows them to deftly manipulate the impression they make on others, to seem attractive to the right person at the right time. Their skill at joining in conversations and speaking their mind (in reality stemming from a lack of social inhibitions), and their flamboyant style, quasi-specialist jargon and self-confidence (in fact compensating for their superficial understanding of the subject at hand) allow them to manipulate others effectively. Interestingly, the attractiveness of non-criminal psychopaths may stem not only from a false image they project, but also from traits they do actually possess as symptoms of the disorder. Some

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of those traits may be mistakenly identified as beneficial to the company or complying with their demands: inflated self-esteem may be perceived as “self-confidence,” a deficit of emotions as “strength” or “emotional control,” manipulation as “being convincing,” and a lack of remorse as an “ability to make difficult decisions.”

Psychopathic fiction

Paul Babiak, one of the most renowned researchers of industrial psychopathy, points to the significance of “psychopathic fiction” – fictitious images prepared especially for individual people, allowing the psychopath to manipulate others to the point that they agree to any requests and demands, however inappropriate. As a result those people frequently help the psychopaths with their work to the extent of almost entirely taking over their duties. Psychopathic fiction is constructed not just on the basis of assessing the traits and desires of the individuals the psychopath deals with, but also in relation to the expectations of organizations. As such bosses perceive them as honest and trustworthy employees, as enthusiastic leaders who should be included in the organization’s plans for success. And so psychopaths try to create the perception that they have two especially valuable traits: competence and loyalty.

Psychopathic traits allow psychopaths to manage their image proficiently, and to manipulate their co-workers and bosses with incredible skill, allowing them to lead parasitic and non-productive lifestyles. Such manipulation guarantees certain advantages (promotion, power, profit), as well as providing exhilaration stemming from playing the game and controlling others. Moreover, psychopaths do not care in the slightest about the damage they cause to

others. Their emotional detachment and lack of empathy and remorse make psychopaths ruthless in exploiting their victims; as well as attacking vulnerable individuals, they often target those in positions of power, since they provide a challenge and satisfy their desire for excitement. It is striking that some of the victims exploited and abandoned may crave to have the psychopath back in their lives, missing the relationship and not accepting that in reality it never actually existed.

Even when this abuse does not constitute an actual crime, it carries costs borne by individual victims, as well as frequent damage to status and financial losses – direct or indirect – borne by organizations (for example as a result of reduced staff morale or the loss of valuable employees).

Without consequences

It has been observed that even when psychopaths’ activities are regarded as destructive, they frequently go unreported. The victims, relieved that they have been freed from the psychopath’s clutches, do not report them for fear of negative repercussions of criminal proceedings or simply out of shame. Organizations are equally not keen on publicizing the fact that they have been taken advantage of, not wishing to risk tarnishing their reputation. As a result psychopaths rarely bear the consequences of their physical, emotional, and financial abuse. ■

Further reading:

- Hare, R. (1993). *Without conscience : the disturbing world of the psychopaths among us*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Babiak, P. and Hare, R. (2006). *Snakes in suits : when psychopaths go to work*. New York: Regan Books.
- Groth J. (2010). *Oblicza psychopatii. Obraz kliniczny i kategorie diagnostyczne* [Faces of psychopathy – clinical overview and diagnostic categories]. Warsaw: Scholar.