

What are the most effective ways that psychopaths fit into societies heavily influenced by emotional reactions and connections?

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Part I: Introduction

Director Oren Peli was talking about ghosts and demons at the time, but he could easily have been talking about psychopaths when he said, “You don't really know what they are or where they are. They're not very well understood. You don't know what they want from you. So it's the kind of thing you don't even know how to defend yourself against. Anything that's unknown and mysterious is very scary.” The highly dexterous psychopath is able to flawlessly fit into society using varying methods and techniques. Psychopaths use emotional manipulation and the human tendency to bond to take advantage of the emotional needs of those around them, allowing them to successfully fit into society. Blending in is what the psychopath does best and the way that they go about it is absolutely cunning.

Approximately one percent of the world population are psychopaths, and while that seems like a small number, it means that around seventy-four million people in the world are psychopaths, and this is a very low estimate. A psychopath is recognized as a person who is unable to feel emotions, resulting in the absence of empathy and regret. The psychopathic disorder is something that the scientific community still knows very little about, and unless a psychopath becomes incarcerated or faces a large high profile trial, it is almost impossible to distinguish a psychopath in the general population.

When people think of a psychopath the word sociopath is often thought of in conjunction, but in reality they are two different disorders. Considering that the two disorders both fall under what the scientific community recognizes as Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD), it is a fair assumption to make due to the fact that APD, psychopathy, and sociopathy are not a highly publicised disorders. They are very similar in behavioral traits and diagnostics, but

the one difference is that a person is born a psychopath, and they can over time become a sociopath. A person that is diagnosed a psychopath is born with the condition and only becomes violent when exposed to a traumatic trigger. A sociopath is born as a fully functioning person, and due to an environmental trigger such as abuse or watching a loved one violently die, they can over time condition themselves to stop feeling emotion, and like a psychopath, become violent due to some sort of trauma. Because the public is not well educated on these disorders, the common misconceptions will not soon be fixed.

Part II: History

Psychopathy has always been a disorder that researchers have been hesitant to become involved in due to the fact that, for a long time, working on it would often result in getting blacklisted in the research and scientific community. It was considered taboo to conduct research involving psychopaths based on the lack of knowledge that was available. Until recently, many claimed that psychopathy does not exist. The stigma in the research community began to drop away when Philippe Pine, considered to be the founding father of psychiatry, first became aware of psychopathic behaviors and described it as “*mania sans délire* (insanity without delirium)” (Lushing). Finally, in 1888 German psychiatrist Julius Koch coined the term “*psychopastiche*” which eventually evolved to become the English term “psychopath.” Koch was the first to recognize that to diagnose someone with psychopathy, he must look holistically at all aspects of a patient's life (Lushing). This holistic way of diagnosing psychopaths is still used in part today when it comes to attempting to diagnose psychopaths in the general population.

Psychopathy is one of the more challenging mental disorders to diagnose due to the manipulative nature of psychopaths. The PCL-R (Psychopathy Checklist-Revised) is the current standard for diagnosing psychopathy. This checklist was developed off of Cleckley's "*16 Key Characteristics*". This list consists of sixteen traits that psychopaths usually possess. Cleckley describes the characteristics as:

Superficial charm and good intelligence, absence of delusions and other signs of irrational thinking, absence of 'nervousness' or psychoneurotic manifestations, unreliability, untruthfulness and insincerity, lack of remorse or shame, inadequately motivated antisocial behavior, poor judgment, pathological egocentricity and incapacity to love, general poverty in major affective reactions, specific loss of insight, unresponsiveness in general interpersonal relationships, fantastic and uninviting behavior with drink and sometimes without, suicide rarely carried out, sex life impersonal and poorly integrated, failure to follow any life plan (Kirkman 156).

While not all characteristics have to present to diagnose a psychopath, these are the general guidelines for all of the tools used to diagnose psychopaths. The PCL-R is made up of questions that focus these traits on a person's choices, views of their life and their opinions on the behavior of others. Advances in technology have allowed researchers to create a chemical profile and map of a psychopath's brain. Diagnosing an incarcerated psychopath is a straightforward, well established process, but gaining access to large numbers of psychopaths has become one of the largest problem facing future progress in understanding psychopathy.

One of the largest difficulties that researchers are struggling with is studying the psychopaths that exist in the general population. Psychopaths often fall into three categories:

Violent psychopaths, non-violent psychopaths, and corporate psychopaths. The criminal population is, by far, the highest concentration of psychopaths with “15-25% of criminals [being] psychopaths” (Kirkman 1) so, studying violent criminal psychopaths has not proved to be a problem. The problem lies in the information that has been collected on non-violent psychopaths. Non-violent psychopaths are psychopaths that have integrated themselves into their communities and there is no real way of finding them and researching them. The only way that psychopaths pulled from the general population are studied is if they come forward themselves or if they are committed by a family member, but even these studies are not that reliable. Karpman described psychopaths as “the liar par excellence” and is acknowledged as being a “thoroughly unreliable informant regarding the account which they give of themselves, events, or their own behavior (Hare 1996)” (Kirkman 158). In most cases of psychopathy, before a diagnosis can be made, a clinical interview must occur, but due to the lack of honesty that most psychopaths exhibit, these clinical interviews can be hard to rely on. There is then the corporate psychopath, considered to be “a type of psychopath that exists who is not prone to violent, criminal behavior and who therefore operates relatively undetected and successfully in society” (Boddy 122). This type of psychopath is often easy to identify because they are in high profile, high power positions, and their decisions are made very publicly.

Part III: Summary of Past Research

Psychopaths, although often highly functioning members of their communities, are considered to be highly dangerous. While research suggests that not all psychopaths are violent, there is still a population of psychopaths that are physically, as well as mentally dangerous.

Some of the most famous and “successful” serial killers have been psychopaths. Some notable individuals include David Berkowitz, better known as Son of Sam, who killed six people in New York city, and Charles Manson, the famous cult leader who was responsible for the murder of six people. These men are perfect examples of how psychopaths can be dangerous in two different ways. David Berkowitz is a textbook example of a highly violent psychopath who committed violent crimes in response to his psychopathy, while Charles Manson is a classic example of the dangers of a psychopath who uses their intelligence and lack of guilt to manipulate people into doing their dirty work for them. While genetics are the cause for psychopathy, psychopaths are all different in the way that they exhibit their psychopathic qualities.

Psychopathy, while relying on some environmental traits to trigger certain characteristics, is a genetic condition. Past research suggests that psychopathy is a purely environmentally triggered disorder, researchers have come to a consensus that it is a biological predisposition (Kirkman 3). “Two main neural areas have been implicated in studies of the neurobiological basis of psychopathy: the amygdala and the orbitofrontal cortex” (Fox 5). The amygdala is an almond sized section of grey matter in the brain that controls emotions. A study showed that “non-clinically diagnosed individuals who scored high on an inventory of psychopathy-related traits showed lower than normal levels of amygdala activation to negatively valenced emotional expressions (Gordon 2004)” (Fox 10). This supports the theory that when there is low activity in the amygdala, emotions become less prevalent. Another brain function that causes psychopathy is a gene passed from parents called the MAO-A gene. This gene is passed from parents to their children and can also explain why most psychopathic killers are men:

“It's on the X chromosome. And so in this way you can only get it from your mother. And in fact this is probably why mostly men, boys, are psychopathic killers, or are very aggressive. Because a daughter can get one X from the father, one X from the mother, it's kind of diluted out. But for a son, he can only get the X chromosome from his mother” (Fallon).

Serotonin is one of the chemicals that the brain makes to feel emotion but when someone has the MAO-A gene, “in utero [their] brain is bathed in this, so [their] whole brain becomes insensitive to serotonin, so it doesn't work later on in life” (Fallon). Having this gene does not guarantee that you will become a violent psychopath, it has to be triggered by some other traumatic event. Something like experiencing trauma, being exposed to high levels of violence, or physical trauma to the orbitofrontal cortex can all trigger violent outbursts and patterns in people with the MAO-A gene (Fallon).

Many researchers have collectively agreed that “It is far more common to fall under the wheels of someone on the psychopathic spectrum, with enough of the charm, egoism, deceitfulness, aggression, manipulateness and lack of empathy to ride blithely over the heads of others — and just enough normalcy to avoid detection” (Zuger 3). Psychopaths often interact with society in a way where they appear to be a perfect human; “they appear to be alert friendly and easy to get along with and talk to. They look like they are of good ability and emotionally well-adjusted and reasonable... other researches confirm that psychopaths can present themselves as likable and personally attractive” (Boddy 3). The common misconception that all psychopaths are violent criminals is decidedly false. The reality is that, “whilst it may be tempting to assume that all psychopaths are recidivist criminals, the facts do not support this assertion. Not all

psychopaths are criminals and in fact some have no formal criminal record at all” (Kirkman 156).

Part IV: Findings and Analysis

The idea that all psychopaths are dangerous is an argument that remains controversial and widely debated. Certainly there is a population of psychopaths who are violent and dangerous, but there is also the majority group of psychopaths who are not dangerous. The type of psychopathy that psychopaths have, is heavily tied to the socio-economic status that they grew up with (Kirkman 158). Psychopaths who are highly functioning in society “would be promoted by a good socio-economic family background, good education and high intelligence” (Boddy 123). This helps show that there is a large community of psychopaths who are not physically dangerous. The goal of most psychopaths is not to commit crimes, but to fit into society and behave like a normal citizen. Psychopathy is a genetic condition that only becomes physical danger when a type of trauma occurs; “Researchers suggest that non-criminal psychopaths may have the same neuropsychological dysfunctions as criminal psychopaths do, resulting in a similar lack of empathy” (Boddy 123).

Of course psychopaths present dangers other than physical violence. Psychopaths lack any ability to experience emotion, including feeling fear or guilt. “Cushman, Young, and Greene found that evidence weighs in favor of intuition and emotion largely driving moral judgment” (Fox 11) validating the question: are psychopaths mentally dangerous? The idea of moral judgment brings up the concern that they will go to any length of emotional manipulation to disguise themselves in society. Psychopaths have been known to create almost a network of

protection for themselves by charming large groups of people into loving and supporting them. Psychopaths know how to “integrate themselves with people by telling them what they want to hear (Clarke 2007)” (Boddy 124). It is also suggested that their “followers can come to mirror the emotions and actions of their leaders at a subconscious level” (Boddy 125) creating the problem of a larger group of callous, manipulative people. These followings are often times recognized as cults, and at their center lies their leader, a psychopath using emotional manipulation to control a larger group of people.

An example of a cult following is former CEO of American Apparel, Dov Charney. After Charney was overthrown by American Apparel’s board, a group of corporate employees fought to get Charney back by rioting. Company employees referred to these women as “Dovs Girls”. Dovs girls were strategically placed throughout the entire company and were what employees described as, brainwashed by Charney to strengthen his power throughout the company. Even after multiple cases of sexual assault charges and almost everyone in the company agreeing that Charney created an uncomfortable, hostile, and inappropriately sexualized work environment, he continued to have the support of these girls, allowing him to stay at the head of the company long after he should have been removed (Wicker).

The psychopaths who fit into society undetected do so by using their manipulation skills to mirror a person who is capable of feeling emotion. According to Mahaffey and Marcus, “Research confirms that a psychopath can present themselves as a likable and personally attractive” (Boddy 123). They do this by telling people what they want to hear (Boddy 124). By telling people around them what they want to hear and manipulating other emotions, psychopaths are able to integrate themselves with those around them, without raising any suspicions.

According to Babiak “Their intelligence and well developed social skills permit them to present a façade of normalcy which enables them to get what they want” (Boddy 126).

Blending in becomes problematic when a psychopath exhibits traits of a violent psychopath. When a psychopath begins to act violently and more narcissistically they begin to become unlikeable and intimidating, therefore often isolating themselves from the community around them. So, psychopaths have the ability to completely blend in if they are non-violent functioning psychopaths, but if they become violent or highly narcissistic they cannot fool those around them into overlooking their psychopathic tendencies.

One of the more controversial topics in psychopathy is diagnosing children. Not only is it extremely hard to diagnose psychopathy in a child, because many of the traits linked to psychopaths are normal behaviors for young children, psychologists are uncomfortable with “the social cost of branding a young child a psychopath” (Kahn). Psychopaths, of any age, don't change the way they see themselves when they receive the diagnoses. When Psychologist James Fallon found out that he himself was a psychopath, he didn't care or react in an emotional way, proving even further that he was a psychopath (Ohikuare). While a diagnosis doesn't necessarily change the way a psychopath sees themselves, it does change the way the community looks at them. This can be harmful towards a psychopath's ability to function in their community, but also has an extreme effect on the psychopaths family members, especially those of a child. John Edens explains why diagnosing people, especially children, as psychopaths is perilous to the families; “Even if accurate, it's a ruinous diagnosis. No one is sympathetic to the mother of a psychopath” (Kahn). While many individuals diagnosed with a mental illness receive pity and

sympathy from the community, people often react with more fear than sympathy when a psychopathic diagnosis is made.

Due to a lack of information on psychopaths whom exist undetected in the general population, researchers have data that is almost exclusively collected from psychopaths who have been incarcerated. This in turn makes developing diagnostic tools practically impossible.

According to Hare:

In institutional settings, little emphasis has been placed upon the psychological constructs that underlie psychopathy. This means that relying on the criteria and diagnostic tools used in institutional settings, where antisocial and offending behavior is part of the overall process of assessment and diagnosis can result in people who have the personality characteristics of the psychopath but have not necessarily developed offending behavior, being diagnosed. (Kirkman 3).

Without having a tool that works on the general population, it is practically impossible to begin to explore diagnosing people who have not committed a crime. Hare states that because incarcerated psychopaths have skewed the diagnostics and public perception of a psychopath, they have become “The main obstacle which has seriously hinder attempts to access non incarcerated psychopaths” (Kirkman 3).

Part V: Conclusion

The word psychopath in westernized societies has taken on a very negative meaning, distorting most people's views on what it means to be a psychopath. Today, research has confirmed that a psychopathy diagnosis does not mean that a person is automatically a serial

killer. Some psychopaths will become violent killers, but there are also many who will become powerful CEO's and some that will simply blend themselves into society. While it is widely known that some psychopaths are dangerous, it is important to be equally aware that those psychopaths are only a small percentage of psychopaths in society. Most psychopaths are living as peaceful and functioning members of their communities and the stigma that is connected with the word psychopath is forcing them to bury themselves even deeper than ever before.

The United States specifically has an ornate fascination with the idea of serial killers, which thanks to the inaccurate media attention, is often linked to psychopaths and sociopaths. This obsession seems to manifest itself the most in television shows and movies. Even if the information that was presented in these shows and movies was accurate there would still be a skewed view of psychopaths, based on the fact that they only portray violent psychopaths, but these shows are made for entertainment so every aspect of psychopathy is exaggerated and presented as the norm for psychopathy. While there is no doubt some psychopaths are similar to the characters these forms of entertainment portray, there are very few of them in real life.

A psychopathic diagnosis is seen as a negative outcome, yet it is hard to miss the correlation in behavior between a psychopath and what a "successful" person living in The United States. As Americans we push ourselves and those around us to be cut-throat, and when someone is able to achieve a high status, we admire and praise them for their success. The link between some of these successful people and psychopaths are clear, with some traits including; narcissistic personalities, charismatic traits, and the need make money with disregard to others safety and well being. The traits that have become so "intimidating and wrong" in psychopaths are things that the average American is pushed towards becoming.

Without educating the general population of the negative stigma that psychopaths have received, the word psychopath will continue to be a word with a permanently negative association. In the beginning stages of categorization, psychopathy fell under the spectrum of autism (Zuger), yet the reaction to the word autism and psychopathy is drastically different. If everyday people, who are not directly affected by psychopathy, are not educated against the stigma that they are all blood thirsty killers and crazy people, the moment psychopathy begins to affect more people, the backlash will be severe. The more that is learned about psychopaths the more ways researchers will be able to reach the psychopaths existing in the general population, increasing the number of known psychopaths. If the panic that is attached to the word psychopath continues to exist, the public reaction to psychopaths is sure to be negative.

Psychopathy is a part of every society in the world and based on the fact that there is no cure, this won't change any time soon. Their absence from the majority of the world's consciousness validates that their ability to acculturate themselves into an ordinary life is a statement that holds true for non-violent and corporate psychopaths. Their manipulative nature allows them to connect with other people, who due to the fact that they are human, search constantly for emotional validation, something that the psychopath is adept to providing.

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