

Psychopathy

An Important Forensic Concept for the 21st Century

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Over the years, Hollywood has provided many examples of psychopaths. As a result, psychopaths often are identified as scary people who look frightening or have other off-putting characteristics. In reality, a psychopath can be anyone—a neighbor, coworker, or homeless person. Each of these seemingly harmless people may prey continually on others around them.

Psychopathy and Personality Disorder

The term *psychopathy* refers to a personality disorder that includes a cluster of interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and antisocial traits and behaviors.¹ These involve deception; manipulation; irresponsibility; impulsivity; stimulation seeking; poor behavioral controls; shallow affect; lack of empathy, guilt, or remorse; sexual promiscuity; callous disregard for the rights of others; and unethical and antisocial behaviors.²

Psychopathy is the most dangerous of the personality disorders. To understand it, one must know some fundamental principles about personality. Individuals' personalities represent who they are; they result from genetics and upbringing and reflect how persons view the world and think the world views them. Personalities dictate how people interact with others and how they cope with problems, both real and imagined. Individuals' personalities develop and evolve until approximately their late 20s, after which they are well-hardwired in place, unable to be altered.

Traits and Characteristics

Psychopathy is apparent in a specific cluster of traits and characteristics (see table 1). These traits, ultimately, define adult psychopathy and begin to manifest themselves in early childhood.³ The lifelong expression of this disorder is a product of complex interactions between biological and temperamental predispositions and social forces—in other words, the ways in which nature and nurture shape and define each other.⁴

Many psychopaths exhibit a profound lack of remorse for their aggressive actions, both violent and nonviolent, along with a corresponding lack of empathy for their victims. This central psychopathic concept enables them to act in a cold-blooded manner, using those around them as pawns to achieve goals and satisfy needs and desires, whether sexual, financial, physical, or emotional. Most psychopaths are grandiose, selfish sensation seekers who lack a moral compass—a conscience—and go through life taking what they want. They do not accept responsibility for their actions and find a way to shift the blame to someone or something else.

Chameleons and Predators

In general, psychopaths are glib and charming, and they use these attributes to manipulate others into trusting and believing in them. This may lead to people giving them money, voting them into office, or, possibly, being murdered by them. Because of their interpersonal prowess, most psychopaths can present themselves favorably on a first impression, and many function successfully in society.

Many of the attitudes and behaviors of psychopaths have a distinct predatory quality to them. Psychopaths see others as either competitive predators or prey. To understand how psychopaths achieve their goals, it is important to see them as classic predators. For instance, they surf the Internet looking for attractive persons to con or, even, murder and target retirees to charm them out of their life savings for a high-risk investment scam, later blaming them for being too trusting. Most psychopaths are skilled at camouflage through deception and

manipulation, as well as stalking and locating areas where there is an endless supply of victims.⁵ The psychopath is an intraspecies predator, and peoples' visceral reaction to them—"they made the hair stand up on my neck"—is an early warning system driven by fear of being prey to a predator.⁶

The psychopath's egocentricity and need for power and control are the perfect ingredients for a lifetime of antisocial and criminal activity. The ease with which a psychopath can engage in violence holds significance for society and law enforcement. Often, psychopaths are shameless in their actions against others, whether it is murdering someone in a calculated, cold-blooded manner, manipulating law enforcement during an interview, or claiming remorse for actions, but blaming the victim for the crime. This particularly proves true in cases involving sexual offenders who are psychopathic.

If psychopaths commit a homicide, their killing likely will be planned and purposeful, not the result of a loss of emotional control; their motive more commonly will involve sadistic gratification.⁷ When faced with overwhelming evidence of their guilt, they frequently will claim they lost control or were in a rage when committing the act of violence. In fact, their violence often is emotionless, calculated, and completely controlled.⁸ If psychopaths commit a serious crime with another individual (almost always a nonpsychopath), they often will avoid culpability by using the other individual to take the blame for the offense. Evidence suggests that this particular strategy is even more evident in serious multiple-perpetrator offences committed by a psychopathic youth with a nonpsychopathic partner.⁹

Myth Busting

Many misconceptions about psychopaths can lead to mistakes in investigations, interviews, and court proceedings. Psychopaths are both male and female, but more men are psychopaths than women. They represent all races, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some are intelligent, while others possess average or below-average intelligence. They come from both single- and two-parent households and may themselves be married with children.

“Psychopaths can be adept at imitating emotions that they believe will mitigate their punishment.”

Psychopaths understand right from wrong. They know they are subject to society's rules, but willingly disregard them to pursue their own interests. They also are not out of touch with reality. They rarely become psychotic unless they also have a separate mental illness or use powerful drugs, such as stimulants. These hallmarks of genuine mental illness might be proposed during a criminal defense, but they often are successfully challenged at trial. Although usually manageable, psychopathy is not curable.

Presence In Society

Many psychopaths have little difficulty joining the ranks of business, politics, law enforcement, government, and academia.¹⁰ They exist in all lines of work, from executive to blue-collar professions. However, psychopathy often is misread, misdiagnosed, minimized, or explained away by professionals whose jobs require regular interaction with psychopaths, namely in the mental health, judicial, and law enforcement communities. When these professionals encounter psychopathy in the course of their work, their reaction and response to the psychopath may be too little and too late. Their lack of information can lead to serious consequences, ranging from mishandling the strategy for interviews and interrogations to believing a psychopath's complete fabrications as seemingly plausible explanations.

Assessment Tool

Following on approximately 40 years of empirical research, the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, or PCL-R, has emerged as an ideal tool for the assessment of this personality disorder. Specific scoring criteria rate each of 20 items on a

3-point scale (0, 1, 2) according to the extent that it applies to a given individual. This test allows for a maximum score of 40; a score of 30 designates someone as a psychopath. The average nonpsychopath will score around 5 or 6 on this test. White-collar or corporate psychopaths likely will score lower—in the middle 20s—and sexually deviant psychopaths will tend to score higher.¹¹

Table 1: Traits and Characteristics of Psychopathy

Interpersonal	Affective	Lifestyle	Antisocial
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Glib and superficial charm ■ Grandiose sense of self worth ■ Pathological lying ■ Conning and manipulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of remorse/guilt ■ Shallow affect ■ Callous lack of empathy ■ Failure to accept responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Stimulation seeking ■ Impulsivity ■ Irresponsible ■ Parasitic orientation ■ Lack of realistic goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Poor behavior controls ■ Early behavior problems ■ Juvenile delinquency ■ Revocation of conditional release ■ Criminal versatility

Robert D. Hare, *Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, ON: Multi-Health Systems, 2003).

Psychopaths differ from each other, and their condition can vary in severity. Current research suggests a continuum of psychopathy ranging from those who are highly psychopathic to persons who have the same number or fewer traits in a milder form. A clinical assessment of psychopathy is based on the person having the full cluster of psychopathic traits—at least to some degree—based on a pattern of lifetime behaviors.

Many psychopaths are not violent. However, those who display violence and sexual deviance are generally more dangerous than other offenders, and their likelihood of reoffending may be significantly higher.¹² Psychopaths tend to have longer, more varied, and more serious criminal histories and, overall, are more consistently violent than nonpsychopaths. Their use of violence appears to be less situational and more directed toward particular goals than the type of violence displayed by nonpsychopaths.¹³ It is estimated that approximately 1 percent of the general male population are psychopaths, and 15 to 20 percent of the prison population are psychopathic.¹⁴

Given the risk that psychopathic offenders pose for society, their ability to potentially manipulate the authorities poses concern. Psychopathic killers more likely will deny charges brought against them, and some indication exists that they are able to manipulate the criminal justice system to receive reduced sentences and appeal sentences to a higher court.¹⁵ Also, psychopathic sex offenders are 2.43 times more likely to be released than their nonpsychopathic counterparts, while psychopathic offenders charged with other crimes are 2.79 times more likely to be released.¹⁶ Their acting ability can enable them to frequently manipulate and persuade members of a parole board to release them approximately 2.5 times faster than other offenders up for parole, despite their longer list of offenses and elevated risk.¹⁷ Psychopaths can be adept at imitating emotions that they believe will mitigate their punishment.¹⁸

Research suggests that the linguistic patterns of psychopaths are unique compared with the patterns of nonpsychopaths. Their stylistic differences reflect how they view the world around them, as well as their profound emotional deficit and detachment from emotional events.¹⁹ However, psychopaths' lack of feeling and bonding to others allows them to have clarity in observing the behavior of their prey. They do not get caught in or bogged down by the anxieties and emotions that other people experience in social situations.

Victims

The reactions of psychopaths to the damage they inflict most likely will be cool indifference and a sense of power, pleasure, or smug satisfaction, rather than

regret or concern. Most people closely associated with a psychopath may know something is wrong with that person, but have no idea as to the depth of the pathology. They frequently will blame themselves for all of the problems they have had with a psychopath, whether at work, in a relationship, or within a family. After interacting with psychopaths, most people are stunned by these individuals' ruthlessness, callousness, and denial or minimization of the damage they have caused.

Conclusion

Psychopathy is not a diagnosis. About one-third of individuals in prison deemed "antisocial personality disorder," the current official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) diagnosis for the chronically antisocial, will meet the criteria for severe psychopathy. In DSM's upcoming fifth edition, psychopathy will become one of five dimensions for describing a personality disorder, receiving the official diagnostic blessing of American psychiatry after approximately one-half century of research.

Understanding the minds of psychopaths and their personality and behavioral traits allows authorities to design strategies that more likely will work with them. Psychopaths' manipulative nature can make it difficult for officers to obtain accurate information from them unless the law enforcement interviewer has been educated in specific strategies for questioning a psychopath. Professionals working in law enforcement, corrections, and other security-related professions must understand psychopathy and its implications.

Psychopathy has been described as the single most important clinical construct in the criminal justice system.²⁰ More recently, it is considered "the most important forensic concept of the early 21st century."²¹ Because of its relevance to law enforcement, corrections, the courts, and others working in related fields, the need to understand psychopathy cannot be overstated. This includes knowing how to identify psychopaths, the damage they can cause, and how to deal with them more effectively.

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Endnotes

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