

SPRINGER BRIEFS IN PSYCHOLOGY
BEHAVIORAL CRIMINOLOGY

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Working with Psychopathy Lifting the Mask

 Springer

SpringerBriefs in Psychology

SpringerBriefs in Behavioral Criminology

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ISSN 2192-8363 ISSN 2192-8371 (electronic)
SpringerBriefs in Psychology
ISSN 2194-1866 ISSN 2194-1874 (electronic)
SpringerBriefs in Behavioral Criminology
ISBN 978-3-030-84024-2 ISBN 978-3-030-84025-9 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84025-9>

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Preface

Popular cultural media such as movies, television, and books commonly characterize psychopaths as murderous monsters. They are often portrayed as intriguing and easy to recognize. In reality, an individual with psychopathic traits is much more complex and nuanced. Psychopaths can be criminals, but they may also be students, patients, clients, coworkers, or even CEOs. Murderous or not, they frequently prey on the people around them.

Psychopathy is a serious personality disorder and is represented by a specific cluster of characteristics. Although it is not an official diagnosis, it is included as a “specifier” of antisocial personality disorder in the American Psychiatric Association’s (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM-5). According to Dr. Robert D. Hare, one of the foremost experts on psychopaths and the developer of the most widely used assessment instrument in the identification of a psychopathy (PCL; Hare 1991), psychopaths tend to be callous, remorseless, and lacking in empathy. They are glib and superficial, manipulative, impulsive, and antisocial (Hare & Neumann, 2008). It is estimated that 1% of the general male population are psychopaths; however, these percentages increase based on contextual factors. For example, approximately 15–20% of the prison population meet Hare’s criteria for psychopathy (Häkkinen-Nyholm & Hare, 2009). Psychopaths pose a real threat to society and are often found within the criminal justice system. However, this does not mean that all individuals with psychopathic traits are criminals. More recent literature indicates that psychopathic traits can exist on a continuum, and individuals with psychopathic traits may not necessarily exhibit the same severity of symptoms (Skeem, Polaschek, Patrick & Lilienfeld, 2011). Furthermore, just because an individual meets the generally accepted threshold for psychopathy does not mean they will exhibit criminal behaviors. These considerations have incited debate in recent literature regarding the inclusion of criminality in the factorial structure of psychopathy. Some experts argue for a two-, three-, or four-factor model of psychopathy (Skeem & Cooke, 2010). By removing criminal behavior as a key component for psychopathy, researchers can examine psychopathic traits within a general population. These individuals are found in all areas of society and regularly lead successful lives.

Current evidence suggests that psychopathy is a lifelong disorder and has a biological basis. A combination of genetic and environmental influences contributes to these traits and their manifestations in an individual (MacDonald & Iacono, 2006). Characteristics may be identified early in childhood, particularly callous-unemotional traits. It is important to understand theories and development when attempting to recognize psychopaths. Hare's Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare) is the most used psychological assessment in the identification of psychopathic individuals. It has 20 items and utilizes a semi-structured interview to produce scores on a three-point scale. Out of a maximum score of 40, the label of psychopathy is usually given to those who score above 30. There are many uses of this assessment and versions, including a screening version and a youth version. Although the PCL-R should only be administered by an experienced clinician, understanding the traits identified in the assessment is helpful in recognizing a psychopath.

The primary aim of this brief is to further explore the research on psychopaths in different settings and everyday life. Psychopaths are often predatory by nature but may appear normal to laypersons. Individuals who work in health professions, forensic occupations, education, and corporate environments are likely to encounter someone with psychopathic traits at some point in their careers. Psychopaths have little difficulty blending into everyday situations. When working in a setting where one might encounter an individual with psychopathic characteristics – whether that person is a colleague, client, supervisor, or boss – it is important to be able to identify them, understand the implications, and navigate any necessary interactions.

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Contents

1	Introduction to Psychopathy	1
1.1	What Is Psychopathy?	1
1.2	Why Are There Psychopaths?	2
1.3	Primary Versus Secondary Psychopathy	4
1.4	Psychopathy, Sociopathy, and Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD)	6
1.5	Nature of Psychopathy	8
1.6	Factor Structure	9
1.7	Successful Psychopaths	10
	References	11
2	Recognizing a Psychopath: Conceptual Confusion	17
2.1	Psychopathy Checklist – Revised: PCL-R	19
2.1.1	Overview	19
2.1.2	Development and Original Validation	20
2.1.3	Revision and Subsequent Validations	20
2.1.4	Limitations and Concerns	22
2.2	Levenson Self-Report of Psychopathy: LSRP	23
2.2.1	Overview	23
2.2.2	Development and Original Validation	23
2.2.3	Limitations, Concerns, and an Expanded Measure?	26
2.3	Psychopathic Personality Inventory – Revised: PPI-R	27
2.3.1	Overview	27
2.3.2	Development and Original Validation	27
2.3.3	Revision and Subsequent Validations	29
2.3.4	The Fearless Dominance Debate	30
2.3.5	Limitations and Concerns	31
2.4	Triarchic Psychopathy Measure: TriPM	31
2.4.1	Overview	31
2.4.2	Development and Original Validation	32
2.4.3	Subsequent Validations	33

2.4.4	Alternative Factor Structures	34
2.4.5	Limitations and Concerns	35
2.5	Elemental Psychopathy Assessment: EPA	35
2.5.1	Overview	35
2.5.2	Development and Initial Validation	36
2.5.3	Subsequent Validations	36
2.5.4	Limitations and Concerns	38
2.6	Chapter Conclusion	40
	References	41
3	Health Professions	49
3.1	Introduction	49
3.2	Psychopathy in the DSM	50
3.3	Psychopathy Versus Antisocial Personality Disorder	50
3.4	Psychopathic Traits in Patients	51
3.5	Psychopathic Traits and Stigma	53
3.6	Interventions	54
3.7	Psychopathic Traits in Medical Professionals	55
3.7.1	Dr. James Fallon (Stromberg, 2013)	56
3.8	Summary	57
	References	58
4	Forensic	61
4.1	Introduction	61
4.2	Prevalence	62
4.3	Presentation	62
4.4	Psychopathic Traits in Female Offenders	63
4.5	Psychopathy and the Law	63
4.6	The Criminal Psychopath: What Law Enforcement Needs to Know	64
4.6.1	Victimization	65
4.6.2	Interviewing and Interrogating Individuals with Psychopathic Traits	65
4.7	Psychopathic Traits in a Correctional Setting	66
4.8	Lawyers and Judges	67
4.8.1	Ted Bundy (Rule, 2008)	68
4.8.2	Perceptions of the Justice System	69
4.8.3	Stigma and Labeling	69
4.9	Etiology and Treatment Considerations	70
4.10	Psychopathic Traits in Forensic Professionals	71
4.10.1	Psychopathic Traits in Law Enforcement Professionals	71
4.10.2	Police Officers with Psychopathic Traits: Two Case Studies	72
4.10.3	Psychopathic Traits in Lawyers	72
4.11	Summary	73
	References	74

5 Education 77

5.1 Introduction 77

5.2 Prevalence 78

5.3 Psychopathy in Children 78

5.3.1 Primary Versus Secondary Psychopathy 79

5.3.2 Parenting Can Play a Role 79

5.3.3 Psychopathy in the Classroom 80

5.3.4 Bullying 81

5.4 Psychopathy in Higher Education 81

5.4.1 Academic Majors 81

5.4.2 Academic and Cheating Behaviors 82

5.4.3 Psychopathic College Students and Aggression 83

5.4.4 Psychopathic College Students and Sexual Aggression 84

5.4.5 Psychopathic Leadership in Academic Settings 85

5.5 Summary 86

References 86

6 Corporate 91

6.1 Introduction 91

6.2 Prevalence 92

6.3 Theoretical Models 93

6.4 Assessment 94

6.5 Presentation 95

6.5.1 Dysfunctional Versus Psychopathic 95

6.5.2 Manipulation 96

6.5.3 Bullying 97

6.5.4 Violence 98

6.6 Myths and Common Misconceptions 98

6.6.1 Fictional Representations of Psychopathy 98

6.6.2 Myth of Financial Prowess 99

6.6.3 Impulsivity and Self-Control 99

6.6.4 Leadership 100

6.7 Adaptive Benefits 101

6.7.1 Psychopathic Subordinates 101

6.7.2 Financial and Entrepreneurial Success 101

6.7.3 Corporate Entry and Ascension 102

6.8 Gender Differences 103

6.8.1 Differential Expression 103

6.8.2 Differential Advantages for Men and Women 103

6.8.3 Case Study: Elizabeth Holmes 104

6.9 Summary 105

References 106

Index 111

Chapter 1

Introduction to Psychopathy



1.1 What Is Psychopathy?

Philippe Pinel (1806/1962) may have first introduced the idea of what would become our modern-day understanding of psychopathy, which he labeled *manie sans delire* (insanity without delirium). He described an individual who did not suffer from any apparent clouding of the mind but was prone to dramatic episodes of impulsivity, recklessness, and aggression. A half century later, Julius Koch (1888) introduced the disease-oriented term “psychopathic” to convey the idea that the condition had a strong heritable basis, recently supported by twin and family studies. From these theoretical and anecdotal beginnings, a more empirical based examination of the construct was instigated by Cleckley. Cleckley (1941) in his seminal book *Mask of Sanity* further elaborated the psychopathic construct, describing an individual with superficial charm, lack of remorse, insincerity, lack of insight, and fantastic and objectionable behavior. Since then, an ever-growing body of research has deepened our understanding of psychopathy.

Hare (1985) further refined and operationalized the nature of a psychopath, characterized by glib and superficial charm, grandiose self-worth, pathological lying, manipulative style, lack of empathy, and parasitic lifestyle (freeloader), leading to his development of the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL). The purpose of the PCL was to identify individuals who met the criteria to be classified as a psychopath using a cutoff score (30 out of 40). Thus, a taxonic structure was assumed, meaning psychopaths were conceptualized as qualitatively distinct from non-psychopaths, rather than being characterized by extreme scores on a psychopathic personality continuum.

While the idea of psychopathy as a taxon has led to much controversy over the years, the PCL was a superb instrument having a profound impact on the field. The PCL was both parsimoniously and exhaustively constructed from a behavioral standpoint, encompassing most of the known behaviors of a psychopath at the time. As an aside, the taxon versus continuum dispute is not confined to researchers in the

field of psychopathy, this debate is ongoing for most of the disorders classified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). In fact, the consideration of mental disorders as a categorical entity (taxon) versus an extreme expression of continuously distributed traits is one of the longest standing debates among psychologists. Although a few diagnostic entities, like schizophrenia (Golden & Meehl, 1979), may be distributed as a discrete latent class, representing a typological difference from normal personality, psychopathy appears to represent more of a quantitative shift in normal personality.

Briefly, Meehl and colleagues provided a framework for taxometric analysis, providing 13 interconnected procedures (Meehl, 1999; Meehl & Yonce, 1994; Waller & Meehl, 1998). These procedures were developed to find abrupt changes (e.g., slopes, covariances) in the structure of the data, which would indicate a taxonic structure or latent subgroups in a distribution of scores. These abrupt changes are not adequately supported from the taxometric analyses of psychopathy (Sellbom & Drislane, 2020).

1.2 Why Are There Psychopaths?

There is abundant literature providing various descriptions of psychopathy, but why are there psychopaths? Although the answer is not the premise for this brief, it is important to touch on some of the theory related to why psychopaths exist in society today. Before we address the more specific occupational based adaptive and maladaptive characteristics associated with psychopathy, a short exploration of the “ultimate explanation” for the existence of psychopathy is warranted. Understanding the ultimate explanation or evolved function of a behavior or trait is the main aim of evolutionary psychologists. Could it be that the traits associated with psychopathy are adaptive? This idea may seem paradoxical, since from an evolutionary perspective, much of our social behavior is grounded in acts of reciprocation and cooperation (Trivers, 1985). In fact, there is a large body of work in the field of evolutionary game theory that supports the emergence and stability of cooperation and reciprocation as critical for our survival. So why did the parasitic nature of psychopaths survive throughout the course of our evolution as a species?

It is possible that a small subset of individuals exhibiting parasitic characteristics emerged within the larger cooperative, reciprocation-based societal structure. This small subset of individuals (non-reciprocators) may have adapted to benefit in different ways from most individuals whose behaviors are based more on cooperation (Trivers, 1985). In other words, perhaps these non-reciprocating individuals learned how to “beat” the system, to take advantage of their naïve reciprocating counterparts. These freeloaders, as evolutionists sometimes refer to them, may have stumbled on an effective alternative adaptive strategy or a life history strategy with some traits even aiding reproductive survival success (Mealey, 1995).

Evolutionists like Mealey (2005a, b) explicitly refer to the non-reciprocation nature of psychopaths, while McGuire and Troisi (1998) explicate this