

Psychopaths are among us—and why that isn't necessarily a bad thing

Psychopathy is thought to be present in approximately 1 percent of the general population. However, evidence suggests that these people are over represented in certain professions, many of which are leadership/management-based and can have a profound influence on our society. Should this be a cause for concern, or are people with psychopathic traits simply more capable of performing these roles?

What is a psychopath?

Psychopathy is defined as a personality disorder characterized by a lack of empathy, remorse, or guilt, and is often associated with repeated antisocial behavior. There are also other characteristics that are associated with psychopathy, such as a narcissistic personality, a manipulative nature and impulsivity. Studies of psychopathy are almost always within criminal populations, and therefore it is not surprising that many preconceived ideas of a psychopath are of a violent criminal. As of January 2019, searching the online database Pubmed for articles with the terms “*psychopathy*” AND “*violent crime*” returned 756 articles. In contrast, a search for “*psychopathy* AND *general population*” returned 363 articles, and articles specifically studying non-criminal populations by searching for “*psychopathy*” AND “*non-criminal*” were just 19. In support of this idea, many of the most publicized and sensational criminal cases reported in the media are perpetrated by psychopaths, since these are usually disturbing, shocking and attract a large interest. Examples of heinous crimes committed by psychopaths that have received large media attention include those committed by [Charles Manson](#), [Jeffrey Dahmer](#), and [Ian Brady](#). Together, the fact that studies of psychopathy are mostly concerned with criminality and that many sensational criminal cases reported by the media are perpetrated by psychopaths could influence what people associate with psychopathy.

However, psychopathy is also present in the general population, many of whom will never commit any violent criminal act. Using homicide rates as an approximation for violent crime, the average international homicide rate in 2015 was [5.3 murderers per 100,000 people \(<0.01 percent\)](#), which is far lower than the estimated 1 percent incidence of psychopathy. Thus, many violent criminals are psychopaths but not all psychopaths are violent criminals. It is difficult to say for certain how prevalent psychopathy is in general society, since most estimates of this are inferred from the criminal population. In addition, most people would never self-identify as a psychopath, due to its understandably negative association, and may not even consider themselves to be psychopathic. It is also difficult to identify psychopathic people as they are not always antisocial or violent. On the contrary, they can be superficially quite charming, possibly as a way to disguise their lack of empathy with others, or perhaps in order to manipulate and deceive.

How do we know who is a psychopath?

There is no black and white way of distinguishing a psychopath from a non-psychopath. Rather, there are people who exhibit certain personality traits that are associated with psychopathy: if somebody displays many of these traits, then they are classed as a psychopath. These are present in the [Hare Psychopathy-Checklist Revised \(PCL-R\)](#). Many of the questions on the checklist deal with personality and lifestyle, such

as being manipulative, irresponsible, sexually promiscuous, living a parasitic lifestyle, and only forming shallow relationships with others. Therefore, it is more informative to think of psychopathy as a spectrum that we are all on, where only those individuals with many psychopathic traits are classified as psychopathic. Indeed, most people exhibit one or more of these traits, and no single trait is diagnostic of psychopathy. Specifically, this checklist contains 20 questions concerning personality and lifestyle, each of which is given a score of 0, 1, or 2. Once completed, this would give a score between 0 and 40. Anyone reaching a score >30 would be considered as a psychopath.

Do certain professions favor people with psychopathic traits?

Lack of remorse for immoral decisions can certainly help climb a hierarchy in any profession. In roles that require a great deal of competitiveness, and in which you can benefit by exploiting others, it is clear that those without empathy have an advantage. Analogous to evolution, in which the selective pressure of an environment determines who survives, certain environments may provide a niche where ruthless individuals can prosper. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that during times of political instability, such as military coups, revolution, and rebellion, it is often a “psychopath” who prospers. Recent examples of this phenomenon in the 20th century include Joseph Stalin, Idi Amin, and Pol Pot; people who were willing to inflict unimaginable suffering on millions of others to achieve power, something that would be unthinkable to most people (1,2). This would suggest that in particular circumstances a psychopath would be more likely to succeed than a non-psychopath.

madness

Image not found or type unknown

Are psychopaths really more capable?

Can psychopathic people really perform certain roles better than non-psychopaths? Without empathy it would undoubtedly be much simpler for a psychopath to make decisions involving people in a time of crisis. Decisions involving people's lives or well being could be taken without any feeling or regret. This could be advantageous as these problems would be approached without compassion and in a purely logical way in order to reach the optimal solution. Personal relationships would be less likely to interfere with these decision-making processes, and in a way, decisions could be made in a more objective manner. Careers in emergency healthcare, rescue services, or frontline military duty would certainly benefit from people who can remain calm and focused in these life or death situations.

Additionally, psychopathic individuals often exhibit fearlessness and an immunity to stress, making them well suited to dealing with high-pressure or chaotic situations. For example, hectic careers that involve making multiple fast decisions, or which involve varied tasks and responsibilities, can be incredibly stressful. These positions are often avoided when the financial benefits of a bigger salary are perceived as not being worth the added pressure. This may in part explain why [management/leadership positions contain a higher proportion of people with psychopathic tendencies](#) than the general population.

The personality traits of psychopaths have been recognized as advantageous in certain situations. In fact, there are self-help books on the subject of psychopathy, such as "[The Good Psychopath's Guide to Success](#)

” in which certain characteristics of psychopaths are identified as being helpful to becoming more assertive, successful, and confident (3). The book suggests that traits of psychopaths can be used in certain situations to help you succeed in your personal and professional life. Of course, your natural tendency will limit how far you can modify your own behavior, and it is highly unlikely that an extremely empathic person would become completely uncaring and remorseless.

According to psychologist Kevin Dutton (one of the authors of the Good Psychopath's guide), the top 10 professions with [the highest rates of psychopathy include CEO, lawyer, media personality, salesperson, and surgeon](#). What makes these jobs so rich in psychopaths? Are these jobs attractive to the individuals themselves, or is the workplace environment selecting them because they are more capable than others? At first glance, both of these possibilities could be true. Some are highly stressful careers that involve making many difficult decisions regularly and quickly (such as CEO, surgeon). Others involve self-promotion, superficial charm and charisma, and would appeal to a narcissistic personality (such as media personality, salesperson, lawyer). The latter professions would suggest that it is the nature of the job that attracts psychopathic individuals, whereas the former professions would suggest it is their skills and personality that decide their career path. All in all, it is not surprising that these particular careers are over represented among psychopathic people.

Follow the latest news and policy debates on sustainable agriculture, biomedicine, and other ‘disruptive’ innovations. Subscribe to our newsletter.

[SIGN UP](#)

However, many traits associated with psychopathy according to the PCL-R would make a person highly unsuitable for most occupations. One trait that many psychopathic individuals share is impulsivity. In general, people with this characteristic do not think about the future consequences of their actions, but rather about the immediate gains. This impulsive nature would make these individuals much less capable at any role involving long-term planning. Although ruthlessness, ambition, and lack of empathy could make it easier to progress in a given career, it could be that other traits make the person far less suitable for performing the role once they are promoted. All in all, it depends on what “type” of psychopath you are, and which of the psychopathic traits you have in your personality.

Should we be concerned?

While many psychopaths thrive in certain occupations, it is worrying to think that so many people who lack compassion for their fellow humans are in such positions of power and influence. Is this detrimental to our society? Although extremely competent in some areas, the motivation of these people is likely to be entirely self-serving and callous. In an ideal world, people would never be given an opportunity to personally benefit by causing harm to others or society as a whole. In these instances, the wrongdoer would be punished appropriately whenever they made a reckless or self-serving decision that was detrimental to others, thereby incentivizing them not to take this course of action. However, in the real world this type of misbehavior often goes unpunished, especially if the person involved is highly influential and powerful.

Every individual and their needs must be considered in a civilized society, and this should of course also

include those who lack empathy for others. Ultimately, there needs to be a thorough and consistently applied set of rules at all levels of society, in order for it to reap the rewards psychopathic individuals can provide without any danger. With their potential to greatly benefit society, they also have the potential to severely damage it. It is therefore important to minimize this risk, allowing people to pursue their own dreams and happiness without impacting negatively on the lives of others.

Robert Ganley is a post-doctoral research assistant at the University of Zurich (UZH). He graduated with a PhD from the University of Glasgow in 2016, and also received a MRes with distinction from the same university. His current research interests include neuronal circuits for pain control and transmission in the central nervous system

This article originally appeared at Culturico as [A useful psychopath?](#) and has been republished here with permission.