

## Immorality, lack of empathy, anti-social behavior: The evolution of psychopathological tendencies

**W**hen you start to notice them, psychopaths seem to be everywhere. This is especially true of people in powerful places. By one estimate, as many as 20% of business leaders [have “clinically relevant levels” of psychopathic tendencies](#) – despite the fact [as little as 1% of the general population](#) are considered psychopaths. Psychopaths are characterised by shallow emotions, a lack of empathy, immorality, anti-social behaviour and, importantly, deceptiveness.



From an evolutionary point of view, psychopathy is puzzling.

Given that psychopathic traits are so negative, why do they remain in successive generations? Psychopathy seems to be, in the words of biologists, “maladaptive”, or disadvantageous. Assuming there’s a genetic component to this family of disorders, we’d expect it to decrease over time.

But [that’s not what we see](#) — and there’s evidence that the tendencies are, at least in some contexts, an evolutionary benefit. According to my own [research](#), the reason for this may be down to the ability to fake desirable qualities through deception.

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### The power of cheating

Trust and trustworthiness are important elements in the story of human social evolution. The most successful people, evolutionarily speaking, are the ones regarded as trustworthy or reliable.

Trust further encourages cooperation, which has helped us to develop tools, build cities and spread across the world — even to the most inhospitable environments. No single other species has achieved this, making human cooperation [a wonder of the natural world](#).

Yet once our cultural groups became too large to know everyone individually, we needed to find ways to ensure the people we met were likely to be cooperative. It’s easier to trust a parent or sibling when hunting in the wild than to trust a stranger — the stranger might attack you or refuse to share any meat with you.

To cooperate with a stranger takes trust — they have to convince you they’ll do no harm. But they could, of course, cheat by pretending to be trustworthy and thereafter killing you or stealing your meat.

Cheaters who pull this off will be at an advantage: they'll have more food and probably be thought of as good hunters by other, unsuspecting people. So cheating posed a problem for non-cheaters.

Therefore it is thought that cultural groups [developed powerful tools](#), such as punishment, to dissuade cheating in cooperative partnerships. Evolutionary psychologists also argue that people evolved what's called a [cheater detection ability](#) to tell when someone is likely to be a cheater. This [put cheaters at a disadvantage](#), especially in groups where punishment was strict.

This approach relied on the ability to trust others when it is safe to do so. Some people argue that trust is just [a kind of cognitive shortcut](#): rather than making slow and deliberative decisions about whether someone is trustworthy, we look for a few signals, probably subconsciously, and decide.

We do this every day. When we walk by a restaurant and decide whether to stop in for lunch, we choose whether to trust that the people running it are selling what they advertise, whether their business is hygienic and whether the cost of a meal is fair. Trust is a part of daily life, at every level.

Yet this presents us with a problem. As I suggest in my research, the more complex society is, the easier it is for people to [fake a proclivity for cooperation](#) — whether that's charging too much at a store or running a multi-national social media company ethically. And cheating while avoiding punishment is, evolutionarily speaking, still the best strategy a person can have.

So, within this framework, what could be better than being a psychopath? It's effective, to misuse a popular modern phrase, to "fake it till you make it". You garner trust from others only insofar as that trust is useful to you and then betray trust when you no longer need those people.

Viewed in this way, it's surprising there aren't more psychopaths. They occupy a disproportionate number of powerful positions. They don't tend to feel the burden of remorse when they misuse others. They even appear to have more relationships — suggesting that they face no barriers to successful reproduction, the defining criterion of evolutionary success.

## Why not more psychopaths?

There are a few convincing theories about why these disorders aren't more common. Clearly, if everyone were a psychopath, we'd be betrayed constantly and probably completely lose our ability to trust others.

What's more, psychopathy is almost undoubtedly only partly genetic and has a lot to do with what's called "human phenotypic plasticity" — the innate ability for our genes to express differently under different circumstances.

Some people think, for example, that the callous and unemotional traits associated with psychopathy [are consequences of a difficult upbringing](#). Insofar as very young children do not receive care or love, they are likely to turn off emotionally — a kind of evolutionary fail-safe to prevent catastrophic trauma.

That said, people from different countries don't associate the same traits with psychopathy. For example,

a cross-cultural [study](#) showed that Iranian participants did not, in contrast to Americans, rate deceitfulness and superficiality as indicative of psychopathy. But the general idea is that while some people have a genetic predisposition to such traits, the tendencies develop mainly in tragic family circumstances.

People with a morbid fascination with psychopathy should be aware that the object of their interest often is a sad product of the failures of society to support people.

The cultural context of psychopathy may be a point of hope, however. Psychopathy, at least in part, is a set of characteristics that allows people to thrive — again, evolutionarily speaking — even when faced with terrible hardship. But we can, as a society, try to redefine what desirable qualities are.

Rather than focusing on being good or trustworthy only because of how it can help you get ahead, promoting these qualities for their own sake may help people with antisocial tendencies to treat others well without ulterior motives.

That's probably a lesson we can all learn — but in a world where pathological fakers are the ones who tend to be celebrated and successful, redefining success in terms of ethics may be a way forward.

The amazing thing about evolution is that we can ultimately help shape it.

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