

Taming Toxic People

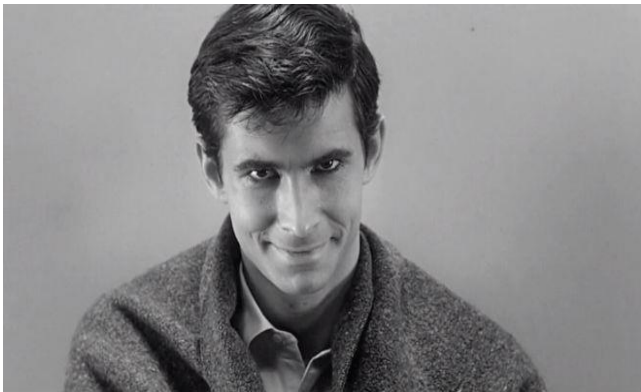
Dealing with psychopathic personality in the workplace -
Part 1 – the origins of psychopathic personality©

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So what is a Psychopath?

The hint lies somewhere in the word itself. It comes from two Greek words *psyche* meaning soul (or for modern sensibilities, mind) and *pathos* meaning disease or suffering. So a psychopath is someone who has a disease of the mind or soul. Interestingly, the word is not found in the diagnostic manuals for psychiatry and is more strictly within the class known as personality disorders – the term sociopath was first described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in 1952. The term “psycho” was first popularised by the Alfred Hitchcock film of the same name. We commonly subscribe psychopaths as deranged murderers – while some are murderers, most aren't.



The Character “Norman Bates” in the 1960 Alfred Hitchcock film *Psycho*

Characteristics of Psychopathy

While the following characteristics may be present in many personalities, the psychopathic personality tends to display these qualities in extreme levels. Psychopaths tend to be charming, impulsive, need constant stimulation, hold a grandiose sense of self worth, lack empathy towards others, are high risk takers, pathological liars and often lack fear of consequences. They sound absolutely perfect for the rough and tumble of high pressured corporate life – right? Well, not exactly. As we shall see, these characteristics are disastrous both for individuals and organisations alike if allowed to flourish and be rewarded. So you may want to ask – so where does it come from – is it nature; is it nurture?

Fear of fear can be a good thing

Every undergraduate psychology student has learnt about the classical “Little Albert” experiment. In 1920 (before ethics committees mind you) – psychologists could induce a *conditioned response* by associating a loud noise with a fluffy bunny rabbit to the poor unsuspecting 9 month old little Albert. Every time the fluffy bunny rabbit was presented the experimenters would hit an iron bar making a very loud noise. After few administrations, little Albert would associate the loud noise with the rabbit – simply presenting the rabbit would induce a fear response. Little Albert would demonstrate “anticipatory anxiety” when presented with a rabbit or even a fluffy toy that looked like the rabbit. So what has this got to do with psychopaths? Well, experiments in the 1970's and 80's showed that criminal psychopaths showed no anticipatory anxiety or stress from a countdown prior to receiving a very loud sound. While they felt the pain of the loud noise like normal subjects, they showed no anxiety prior to its administration. In other words, the prospect of receiving punishment did not distress them – they could not be conditioned to fear the fear like little Albert. Not fearing fear can create incredibly disinhibited personalities – while this may be good for the psychopath it is bad for the rest of us since they do not inhibit their behaviours often expected in normal social interactions. So what happened to Little Albert when he got older you may ask? I know the answer but you may have to wait for another paper.

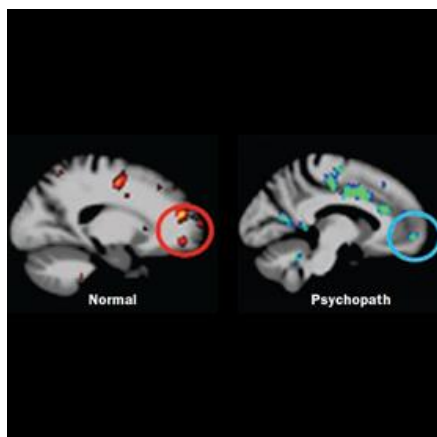
Feeling feelings is also a good thing

There is a difference between emotions and feelings. Basically speaking, emotions tend to be primitive responses to situations, they tend to be autonomic and are physical in nature. A gut reaction is an emotion. Feelings engage in higher order thought processes which engage in the pre-frontal cortex, they are more cognitive in origin and are more connected with our minds than our biochemistry. An intuition is a feeling since it also engages the faculties of the imagination and cognitive dissonance. While desire is an emotion, love is a feeling. Emotions tend to be intense and short lived, while feelings tend to regulate strong emotions. Psychopaths appear to have emotions but not feelings. Feelings require cognition and abstractions about how others feel. To be empathic requires the ability to feel other's feelings. Psychopaths lack the inner life for this to occur – while they can read the feelings of others, they don't necessarily have them. This may explain why psychopathic personalities prefer one-on-one conversations than group interaction. It is

difficult to read the emotional reactions of many people in complex interactions while the one-on-one lowers the cognitive load on guessing how people are feeling at a given moment. Psychopathic personalities often miss the feeling in a room – they have what Australians call “a tin ear”. Feeling other people’s feelings is a good thing since it regulates our behaviour in social situations that bond social groups and interactions.

The psychopathic brain

Some research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) identified that those subjects recognised to have psychopathic personalities when compared to normal controls, had smaller amygdala’s (source of primal emotions), less structural grey matter in the anterior prefrontal cortex (involved probably in complex planning and reasoning), and also in the temporal poles (involved in social and emotional processing). It also appears they have less spindle neurons which are believed to regulate emotions and social relatedness to others.



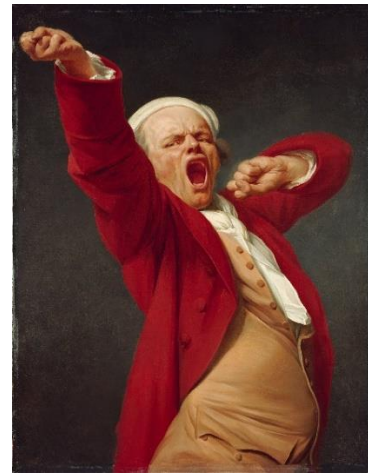
Psychopaths have lower prefrontal activation involved in complex planning and reasoning

In a sense, the psychopathic brain is structured in such a way as to be emotionally colour blind to the feelings of other peoples’ feelings.

As contagious as a yawn – not for psychopaths

The old saying is “as contagious as a yawn.” In higher order primates (and wolves for that matter), yawning is a socially contagious event. Research shows that we tend to yawn more with those who are close to us – we are up to 5 times more likely to yawn with family members than with strangers. Research in 2015 found that those subjects who scored high on psychopathy tended to yawn less than controls when shown images of people yawning. What the research suggests is that psychopathic personalities tend to miss the social cue induced in the

yawning response. I bet you are wondering by now whether you yawn when your friends or family members do? It is natural but unhelpful to self-diagnose our personalities, but we can’t help wondering, can we?



As contagious as a yawn – not for psychopaths

Human beings are exquisite social creatures. Missing social cues can often warn us of the motivation and desire of individuals to display behaviours that are pro-social. Social cues are used to convey empathy and solidarity with others – these could include weeping with others, feeling angry and the injustice experienced by friends and family and the like. While those with psychopathic personality tend to be charming and charismatic, feelings that are displayed are not to show solidarity but to seek a pre-conceived outcome. They are what psychologists call a “manipulation response” – these manipulation responses are to elicit a certain behaviour that favour the psychopathic personality’s ends or desires. These responses can be found in other personality disorders like borderline personality and narcissistic personality disorder.

Psychopathic personalities tend to be self-obsessed, fluent liars, lack remorse or guilt and display emotional shallowness and callousness. They often feel no responsibility for their actions and are often impulsive. It may take some energy to hide these characteristics, but the truth is, psychopaths hide them from some and not with others – it depends on the usefulness of the person in front of them. In part two we look at how we feel when we encounter those with psychopathic personality and what to do surviving a psychopathic boss.

References:

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- Marsh, AA et al, Reduced amygdala response to fearful expressions in children and adolescents with callous-unemotional traits and disruptive behaviour disorders. American Journal of Psychiatry, 165, 712-720.