

Is Psychopathy an Evolutionary Asset?



Some of the best-known characteristics of psychopaths are that they lack a moral compass, don't have sympathy, react impulsively, and are not paralyzed by fear. A recent [study](#) showed that, although psychopaths feel fear, but they struggle to recognize threats. Such a dysfunctional threat system means that they appear to be fearless, when, in fact, they are able to react without inhibition to achieve their goal.

The modular mind

Since ancient times human have been driven by what evolutionary psychologist have started to call the modular mind theory, which proposes that the mind has seven distinct functional areas of motivation. These are self-protection, mate attraction and retention, kinship, affiliation, status, and disease avoidance. All these functions served our interests to survive as a species and was always instinctively viewed as desirable behavior.

With time, however, people organized themselves around laws and moral principles to sustain a healthy group orientation, a collective for-the-benefit-of-all type principle. However, two things stood out during the ages. Evolutionary instincts are difficult to change, and, in certain circumstances, continue to work best for an individual and his immediate support group. Imagine finding yourself in unexpected and sudden danger. For such situations, many psychopathic features are extremely useful. The same applies to crime groups, as William Marsden and Julia Sher explain in [Angels of Death](#).

“What separates [criminals] from the rest of us is that they make partying the center of their existence. They live purely in the present. Criminals lack the kind of self-discipline and control that enables normal people to plan for the future, educate themselves and build careers. As adolescents, criminals are impulsive, hyperactive and easily bored. They are

addicted to the moment. And the supreme moment is the party. Sex, drugs, fast cars and alcohol. No inhibitions. They commit crimes not because they are poor or disadvantaged but because living the life of a criminal allows them to perpetuate their party lifestyle. In fact, studies show that the most accomplished criminals, the ones who make the most money, are the ones that have the least self-control, party the hardest and act the most impulsively. Like warriors of the past, the criminal of today has to be able to face danger and concentrate totally on the moment... He has to act without caution, without self-control and without any concern for the future. He has to shoot first.”

Most psychopaths are not criminals

As seen here, addicted to the present, lacking self-control and inhibitions, being impulsive, hyperactive, and excitable, which are all psychopathic features, are linked to criminal behavior. This is one reason why, up to now, criminality has been an integral part of how a psychopath is defined. But, we also recognize that most people with callous-unemotional and hyperactivity-impulsivity traits, don't engage in violent crimes, or any crimes at all, for that matter. Many are successful CEO's, politicians, bankers, journalists, surgeons, soldiers, and cops. These two dimensions of psychopathy are also proving useful in highly competitive careers, and in situations where a quick and unemotional reaction means the best chance of survival. A typical psychopath can fit into a group and be self-centered at the same time. They blend in when needed, take ruthless decisions, and act with little hesitation.

Primary psychopaths

Of course, many experts agree that there are two broad types of psychopaths, namely primary and secondary. Without going into too many details, primary psychopathy is associated with heritable traits that don't necessarily require an adverse environment to flourish. Recent scientific studies have shown that the primary psychopath's brain differs from the norm. MRI scans highlighted reduced activity in an area towards the center of many psychopaths' brains called the orbital cortex, which is believed to play a role in regulating our emotions and impulses as well as morality and aggression. Many also have a genetic variant, called MAO-A. Studies have linked this gene has to violent and antisocial behavior. Functional impairment or reduced volume of the amygdala also seems to contribute to psychopathic traits. The amygdala is a brain area that is considered the seat of emotion and heritable characteristics or damage can influence personality.

Secondary psychopaths

Secondary psychopaths, on the other hand, are strongly influenced by negative experiences, especially in childhood and is, therefore, more of a coping mechanism. Furthermore, primary

psychopaths tend to be more overt narcissistic, have lower fear, anxiety, and other emotions, and are more consistent in their actions than secondary psychopaths, who rely on covert narcissism and manipulation to achieve their goals.

So, what does this mean?

Both types of psychopaths have advantages in some situations. Psychopathy is not disappearing, in fact, some scientists argue that the number of psychopaths is steadily increasing, which points to selective mutation. It is nature's way to ensure that beneficial traits continue to develop to ensure the survival and thriving of a species. The fact that one to two out of every hundred people in the general population are psychopathic, quite a high number, also suggests that it is genetically beneficial enough to warrant a heritage line. In the context of epigenetics too, if one argues that secondary psychopathy develops based on situational pressure, but changes the biological and brain functioning of the individual, it can also contribute to an intergenerational transfer of psychopathic traits, which becomes more and more embedded in the human DNA as time goes on.

Read more – [Psychopaths in Film, Are Portrayals Realistic and Does it Matter?](#)