

Psychopathic leaders – do they exist?

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1. Background

Along history and across cultures individuals with traits such as cruelty, lack of empathy, remorselessness, irresponsibility, and aggressiveness have been described (Cooke and Michie 1999). In modern psychology these individuals have been attributed a variety of terms, e.g. psychopathy, sociopathy, or dyssocial or antisocial personality disorder. Most commonly, the term psychopath evokes associations of a severely criminal and/or ruthless individual. There is however also a more popular notion, often promoted in daily and weekly magazines, pointing out psychopathy as a common dysfunction among managers and leaders.

There is no doubt that psychopathic personality disorder is common among criminals and most research has been conducted on this group (Hall and Benning 2006; Patrick 2006). Psychopaths are however also present among non-criminals. It is important to study this group as well since it may yield knowledge about protective factors that may counteract antisocial behavior. Also, noncriminal psychopaths may engage in behaviors that are not formally illegal, but represent breaches of social norms and the right of others (Board and Fritzon 2005; Hall and Benning 2006).

Aim

This essay aims at describing psychopathic personality disorders and investigates if it exists among leaders. If so, to briefly describe their impact on employees and organizations.

What is psychopathy?

David T Lykken has described the psychopathic personality and how it develops (Lykken 2006). In summary, psychopathy is a personality disorder that develops from early childhood where the socialization process has failed. Poor success in rehabilitating young adults indicates that there may be a critical period for healthy and proper socialization. If a normal socialization has not been established and made habitual in the first years of life, it may never develop. A serious consequence is that poorly socialized individuals tend to fail with socializing their own children, thus creating a trans-generational problem.

The continuum of normal socialization results in a conscience that inhibits rule breaking. We learn to feel empathy for other people and creatures and take satisfaction in acts of altruism. Most individuals develop a sense of responsibility to family, friends and the community and have a desire to participate and contribute to the group survival (Lykken 2006).

Characteristics of a psychopath

Psychopaths are characterized by several typical traits and behaviors that can be conceptualized by two main constructs: *emotional detachment* and *antisocial behavior* (Harpur, Hakstian et al. 1988). Emotional detachment is one of the key traits and it is manifested by a lacking fear of consequences (low *harm avoidance*). It also includes lack of empathy, conscientiousness and altruism as well as superficial charm (charisma), remorseless use of others, egocentricity and narcissism. Antisocial behavior includes high impulsivity, reward-seeking and socially deviant behaviors as well as weak behavior control (Harpur, Hakstian et al. 1988; Patrick 2006). The antisocial behavior can, but need not be criminal. More socialized psychopaths often engage in behaviors that are not formally illegal, but represent breaches of social norms and the right of others (Board and Fritzon 2005; Hall and Benning 2006). Personal or professional success may for instance be achieved at the expense of family, friends, coworkers, customers and others.

The lack of empathy is often a result of low harm avoidance, which puts these individuals at an increased risk of traumatic life events at a young age. These traumatic events may be a major cause of the empathy disturbance. Psychopaths act in a way that indicates indifference to the consequences of their own actions. A combination of these traits with for instance perversions, hostility, aggression and a lack of normal constraint may result in harmful and dangerous deeds and individuals (Patrick 2006).

It has been shown that psychopaths take unnecessary risks and exhibit difficulties in avoiding for instance response-contingent loss of money or punishment (Fowles and Dindo 2006). This was demonstrated in a card-playing task where the probability of punishment was low in the beginning and then increased. Psychopaths continued to play the cards after the probability of punishment exceeded the probability of rewards. Psychopaths seeking rewards with no or low fear of punishment are of course potentially harmful to organizations as well as employees, especially in the long-term. Whereas a psychopathic employee may cause much damage to a group or an organization, a leader may cause complete destruction.

Psychopathic traits, such as charm and fearlessness, may be valuable and appealing assets in several professions, including law, politics and business (Hall and Benning 2006). These traits are however only superficial and usually destructive on the long-term. Dysfunctional personality traits that often can be confused with desirable traits are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Desirable and dysfunctional personality traits.

Desirable trait	Dysfunctional trait
Charisma	Superficial charm
Self-confidence	Grandiosity
Influence skills	Manipulation
Persuasive	Exploitative
Visionary thinking	Fantasies of power
Ability to take (calculated) risks	Impulsivity
Action orientation	Poor planning
Ability to take difficult decisions	Lack of empathy

Risk factors

A well-established risk factor for developing psychopathy is the absence of the biological father (Lykken 2006). The risk for social pathologies ranging from delinquency to death is approximately seven times higher for individuals raised without fathers compared to those raised by both biological parents. Interestingly, the presence of a step father does not decrease the risk that mother-only rearing is associated with. On the other hand, boys raised by single fathers did not exhibit an increased risk of psychopathy compared to those raised by both biological parents. Thus, the biological father seems to be a very important predictor of the development of social pathologies, including psychopathy.

Genetic factors in combination with parental skills are also important in the development of psychopathy (Lykken 2006). Individuals with an easily socialized genotype are more likely to be

socialized in spite of incompetent parents. The average genotype will be well socialized by parents with average socializing skills or better. Poor socializing skills of the parents can be compensated by the extended family or a peer group, but without these moderators *sociopathy* is likely to develop. Individuals with the hard-to-socialized genotype are likely to become psychopaths unless the parents are exceptionally skillful or other strong socializing influences are present. In that case, the psychopathic feature of fearlessness might result in the development of a hero instead. Most probably these parents have to a lesser extent relied on punishments and threats. Instead they may have promoted and role modeled respectful interactions, love, empathy, and found positive ways of eliciting and rewarding socialized behaviors with affectionate pride. However, psychopathy may also result from subtle brain malfunctions. In those cases, parental skills will probably not counteract the development of psychopathy (Lykken 2006; Patrick 2006).

The complexity of psychopathy

Psychopathy is a personality disorder that seems to be dimensional rather than categorical (Board and Fritzon 2005). In the categorical view, psychopathy is something that differs from normal behavior. In the dimensional approach, however, it is viewed as extreme or exaggerated forms of normal behavior. This means that personality is more of a continuum rather than a categorical facet.

Psychopathy and leadership

By now the existence of “successful psychopaths” is well-established and these individuals have been found to operate (often successfully; at least on the short-term) within organizations (Babiak 1995; Board and Fritzon 2005; Hall and Benning 2006). Psychopaths often exhibit coveted qualities for leadership, i.e. elements of narcissism, which may facilitate promotion to managerial positions. For instance, successful leaders are often described as charismatic, enthusiastic, aggressive, dominant, extrovert, independent, creative, self-confident and having good social skills. Psychopaths also often seek out and develop relationships with high ranking or top managers and have good skills in manipulating them (Board and Fritzon 2005). This has been shown to be frequently implicated in managerial success (Kipnis, Schmidt et al. 1980). In a study of organizational leadership, a group of leaders were found to exhibit typical narcissistic behaviors, i.e. grandiosity, exhibitionism, self-centeredness and lack of empathy (de Vries and Miller 1985).

Board & Fritzon (2005) have found elements of psychopathic personality disorder in a sample of senior business managers. The managers were compared with patients with diagnosed psychopathy, mental illness patients and psychiatric patients with regard to personality disorders. Relative to the three patient samples, the senior business managers were more likely to demonstrate traits associated with a *histrionic* personality disorder, i.e., superficial charm, insincerity, egocentricity, manipulative behaviors. They were equally likely to have traits associated with narcissistic and compulsive personality disorder, i.e. grandiosity, lack of empathy, exploitative behaviors, independence (narcissism) as well as perfectionism, excessive devotion to work, rigidity, stubbornness, and dictatorial tendencies (compulsive). With regard to the antisocial behaviors, the senior business managers were less likely to demonstrate physical aggression, consistent irresponsibility with work and finances, lack of remorse. This was also true for other psychiatric traits, such as impulsivity, suicidal gestures, affective instability (borderline), mistrust (paranoia) and hostility alternated with remorse (passive-aggressiveness). It is only natural that these traits are less prevalent and pronounced among business managers as they would probably have counteracted career development.

What kind of leaders are psychopaths?

While psychopaths appear to have benefits in acquiring leadership positions, leadership performance is usually poor leaving various forms of victims along the way. In a study of the real-world importance of leadership for the success or failure of organizations and social institutions Kaiser et al. (2008) refer to studies of executive overconfidence or arrogance. They report that studies using different methodologies have found that arrogant CEOs are more likely to make risky acquisitions and pay more for them than their market value. Another study conclude that arrogant CEOs also change strategy more frequently, make increasingly expensive acquisitions, and produce less consistent results (Chatterjee and Hambrick 2007).

Psychopathic performance seems to be poor in general, but also across tasks and contexts (Moscato and Salgado 2004). Psychopaths do often not complete work tasks and they create conflicts within teams (Babiak and Hare 2006). Low levels of organizational structure appear to be beneficial for those with personality disorders. Psychopaths seem to prosper in less bureaucratic organizations, especially those undergoing chaotic change with poor structure (Babiak and Hare 2006).

Psychopathy is not limited to certain organizational leaders, politicians or dictators. These charismatic leaders make a good impression, but do not deliver and create significant problems for the organization and the employees. Babiak and Hare (2006) offer some practical suggestions when confronted with a psychopath within one's organization. Apart from the clear advice not to label an individual as a psychopath, their suggestions are summarized below:

Handling psychopathic leaders:

- Build and maintain reputation as a good performer
- Put it in writing
- Avoid confrontations
- Make a formal complaint
- Leave on your own terms
- Make good use of your performance appraisal
- Get on with your life and your career

Handling psychopathic co-workers:

- Consider reporting abusive behavior
- Consider leaving

Handling psychopathic subordinates:

- Continuously improve your leadership and management skills
- Build and maintain rapport with your staff
- Build and maintain a strong relationship with your boss
- Keep good notes and documents
- Use your company performance management process
- Seek advice from Human Resources

Handling psychopathic clients:

- Get paid up front
- Be very careful about boundaries
- Remain in charge
- Check everything out
- Be alert to distortions and gaps
- Be aware of the things that go awry – you will become the enemy

- Keep copious notes on everything

Warning signs

Roy Lubit (2002) have listed some warnings signs for detecting destructively narcissistic leaders. These signs are often also applicable to psychopathic leaders as narcissism usually is a key element among these individuals. The warning signs include:

- Devaluing and exploiting others
- Lack of concern for the needs of subordinates unless convenient
- Trying to take all credit for success
- Undermining competitors for promotion
- Excessively criticizing others
- Scapegoating
- Excessive self-promotion and attention-seeking behavior
- Seeing all events in terms of significance to their own careers
- Being highly defensive when criticized
- Harboring unfounded beliefs that others want to hurt them
- Currying favor with superiors while failing to
- Support and develop those below them

Conclusions

The present essay has found convincing evidence for the existence of psychopathic personality disorder among leaders. Several of the psychopathic traits are also coveted traits in a leader, but naturally not when combined with a psychopathic or other personality disorder. While psychopaths appear to have benefits in acquiring leadership positions, leadership performance is usually poor leaving various forms of victims along the way. Leaders with psychopathic traits are charming and take risks, which may be beneficial on the short term. Over time though, their proneness to manipulate, lie, defy rules and authority and exploit others constitute a weakness rather than strength (Hogan and Kaiser 2005; Padilla, Hogan et al. 2007). If this is true, psychopathic leaders will ultimately derail and there is some support for this assumption (Maccoby 2000; Lubit 2002; Burke 2006). For instance, leaders that increase isolation, degrade subordinates, create internal competition and fail to learn from or teach others are more likely to derail. However, as leaders with moderate scores on personality disorders seem exhibit optimal performance, having no dysfunction may not be most favorable either (Kaplan and Kaiser 2003). In addition, certain organizational cultures are formed in a way that makes it possible for psychopathic leaders to succeed (Babiak and Hare 2006). Some authors even propose that psychopathic leaders may be the best ones in times of turbulence (Maccoby 2000).

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