

Evolutionary Psychology

www.epjournal.net – 2013. 11(1): 120-125

Book Review

A Personality for Modern Living

A review of Kevin Dutton, *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success*. Scientific American: New York, 2012, 261 pp., US\$26.00, ISBN #978-0-374-29135-8.

Kristofer Thompson, Department of Psychology, University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, OK.

Robert D. Mather, Department of Psychology, University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, OK. Email: rmather@uco.edu (Corresponding author).

“I’ve always maintained that Dad was in possession of pretty much the ideal personality for modern living” (p. ix). Dutton’s words concerning his father’s psychopathic characteristics resonate in the introduction and establish the grounds from which his examination of psychopathy is sown. In an effort to elucidate the psychopathic mind and the conditions under which such a mind confers advantage, Dutton reasons that the implications of psychological pathologies are not exclusively unfavorable. Emanating a charming and hypnotic air, psychopaths may be socially alluring, masterfully concealing their true, cold nature by their very presence. Delving into this realm of silver linings is fitting in the case of the psychopath, as the psychopathic mind is prone to glean such linings from any circumstance. The question, therefore, is what might we learn from this mentality that could possibly enhance our own lives? When is psychopathy an adaptive human trait? When should we cooperate (Axelrod, 1984)?

It is well known that psychopathy can be extremely dysfunctional. All one must do for evidence of this is recollect examples of serial killers such as John Wayne Gacy or Ted Bundy. Of great interest with regards to these individuals is that from appearance, their brains are strikingly ordinary. Beneath the surface, though, subtle deviations from conventional cerebral functioning are present. A study by Williamson, Harpur, and Hare (1991) demonstrated that unlike non-psychopathic individuals, psychopaths identified neutral and emotion-evoking words with equal speed, as if associations to emotion were wholly disregarded. Electroencephalography (EEG) data collected on the electrical brain activity during these identifications also revealed differences. Although theta waves are generally reserved for restful states, they were found to exist in psychopaths during wakeful states, aiding in the coolness of the psychopathic mind toward emotion. It is this cool focus that lends psychopaths a hand in maneuvering social terrains, often allowing them to climb political or economic ladders.

If psychopathy appropriately materializes on the basis of such factors as intelligence and opportunity, it is capable of yielding decided advantage. The key is that psychopathy is not rigid, but rather involves a spectrum. While a psychopathic serial killer resides in the dysfunctional reaches of this spectrum, a psychopathic surgeon sits in the functional middle ground. Functional psychopaths may lack the violent, antisocial nature of their dysfunctional counterparts, allowing them to exploit the benefits of their predatory mentality in socially acceptable fashions. In the case of the surgeon, for instance, an absence of compassion for patients enhances the ability to perform mechanistically, thereby improving the success of operations.

Principle to this functional psychopathy is the disconnection between reason and emotion. Although such seemingly negates the possibility of empathy, Dutton delineates a cold empathy that psychopaths keenly employ, based in understanding as opposed to feeling. Exemplary of the distinction between the hot empathy that we feel and the cold empathy that psychopaths rely upon to comprehend others' frames of mind, Glenn, Raine, and Schug (2009) observed that when psychopaths were presented with a personal, or emotion-evoking, dilemma, the emotional centers of their brains were nearly as quiet as when presented with an impersonal dilemma. Essentially, psychopaths drew upon calculated reasoning, or cold empathy, when normal participants were swayed by hot, emotionally charged empathy.

As a means of shedding light upon what exactly a psychopathic personality structure consists of, Dutton outlines a study by Miller, Lynam, Widiger, and Leukefeld (2001) in which psychopathy experts appraised the psychopath along the dimensions of the Big Five personality test. Results indicated that while agreeableness was low, openness to experience and extraversion were decidedly high. Although conscientiousness was low overall, the sub-trait of competence was remarkably high, reflecting psychopaths' robust self-confidence. This mixed pattern was even greater for the dimension of neuroticism, with high scores along the sub-traits of hostility and impulsiveness, yet extremely low scores along others, such as anxiety and self-consciousness. Taken together, these Big Five scores portray a dark personality that is potent and dazzling, but as cold as ice.

Though the realization of psychopathy first surfaced in ancient Greece, known as "The Unscrupulous Man," it was not until Robert Hare's (1980) unveiling of the Psychopathy Checklist that psychopathy received clinical recognition. This acknowledgement by no means closed the case on psychopathy, though, as disagreements regarding its elements abound. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text rev.; *DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association, 2000), psychopathy is synonymous with Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD). Many theorists, however, beg to differ, reasoning that while the *DSM-IV-TR* (2000) diagnostic criteria for ASPD are slanted toward behavioral deviance, the core of psychopathy falls in the realm of affective impairment. Psychopathy and ASPD do often coincide with one another, but the presence of ASPD does not necessarily implicate psychopathy. For example, Hare (1999) suggests that whereas roughly 80% of inmates have ASPD, a mere 20% meet the criteria for psychopathy.

The majority of psychopaths are not incarcerated and some, rather alternatively, stand at the pinnacles of success. Such functional psychopaths are problematic for both

proponents of the behavioral approach, grounded in the *DSM*, and those of the personality-centered approach, grounded in the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), as they are capable of grand measures of self-discipline. In order to incorporate this functional realm, as well as assimilate behavioral and personality perspectives, Scott Lilienfeld and Brian Andrews (1996) devised the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI). Though an effective bridge between functional and dysfunctional psychopathy, the PPI is not without contest.

Joe Newman, for instance, believes that as opposed to a spectrum of increasing emotional incapability, psychopathy is an information-processing deficit that constricts attentional focus. Newman, Curtin, Bertsch, and Baskin-Sommers (2010) demonstrated this in a study in which attention was either directed toward or away from an ensuing electric shock. When a feature not associated with the ensuing shock (letter case) was attended to, psychopaths were substantially less anxious than controls, but when a feature directly related to the shock (color) was attended to, psychopaths experienced the greatest anxiety. Of great importance to Newman's perspective, marked attentional differences occur at the PCL-R threshold for clinical psychopathy, suggesting an abrupt cognitive shift at this point.

Concerning the evolutionary underpinnings of psychopathy, Dutton examines its adaptiveness, bearing in mind that its population rate of 1-2% remains stable over time, both in real life *and* in computer programs derived from game-theoretical models. Exemplary of how psychopathy can be adaptive, a study by Osumi and Ohira (2010) demonstrated that when psychopaths play the ultimatum game, their reluctance to reject offers, even when blatantly unfair, translated to a greater acquisition of money. Further, electrodermal activity revealed that psychopaths were far more relaxed than controls when faced with unfair offers.

In light of this fondness for utility over fairness, why have psychopaths not inherited the earth? Drawing upon the Prisoner's Dilemma, Dutton reasons that the psychopathic mentality of "survival of the fittest," or persistent defection, simply cannot dominate a world with repeated interactions, as humans develop social histories and communicate their experiences. Robert Axelrod (1984) raised the question of what exactly comprises a strategy that fulfills all of the requirements for evolutionary stability, organizing a Prisoner's Dilemma tournament between fourteen theorists' strategy-based computer programs. Despite the simple design of merely imitating the last response of its opponent, Anatol Rapoport's TIT FOR TAT proved to be invincible. In essence, this program reflected the human qualities of gratitude, anger, and forgiveness, exemplifying that while altruism is a fundamental component of group cohesion, it may have arisen from a survival disparity amid individuals rather than a higher-order benefit for the group. Dutton notes that the psychopathic rudiments of superficial charm, merciless retribution seeking, and nerveless return to normalcy can all be found in TIT FOR TAT's scheme for success, which may aid in explaining why psychopathy has evaded extinction.

In reality, psychopathy appears to be an effective reproductive strategy that expedites genetic propagation. Maximizing potentials for reproduction, the psychopathic mating strategy involves the coupling of more sexual partners with shorter relationships. Psychopaths employ a similar strategy in the corporate world, often resulting in increased profits and a heightened capacity to adapt to, and even thrive upon, rapid organizational change. To be sure, when Babiak, Neumann, and Hare (2010) administered the PCL-R to

top corporate executives, their scores revealed higher than average frequencies of psychopathic qualities. Additionally, the executives' scores were positively related to in-house perceptions of their creative, strategic, and communicative abilities. Comparable benefits of psychopathy extend into the realm of criminality, as Aharoni and Kiehl (in press) found that criminals with moderate levels of psychopathy were less likely to receive convictions for their offenses. Reasoning for this gains clarity when considering Helinä Häkkänen-Nyholm's and Robert Hare's (2009) observations that psychopathic criminals' displays of remorse gave the impression of greater authenticity than those of non-psychopathic criminals. In effect, as established through a study of microexpressions by Porter, ten Brinke, Baker, and Wallace (2011), psychopaths are simply more skillful at feigning emotions. Delving deeper into this emotional perplexity, it appears that psychopaths also recognize emotions with greater accuracy than the average individual. The work of Gordon, Baird, and End (2004) evidences that psychopaths' brains actually undergo an alternative pattern of activation when processing emotional expressions, indicating reliance upon areas related to perception and cognition rather than those associated with emotion.

Because the aim of the psychopathic brain is reward, psychopaths respond to rewarding circumstances (such as financial gain) at an accelerated rate. On the other hand, this entails a delayed response to punishment, meaning that even if negative consequences are probable, the possibility of reward will take precedence. Psychopaths' inclinations toward reward are specifically reflected in their dopamine circuitry, as evidenced in a two-part study by Joshua Buckholz and his colleagues (2010). When psychopaths were administered a stimulant, their brains released nearly four times the amount of dopamine as those of controls. Further, fMRIs revealed that when posed with the possibility of monetary reward, the dopamine reward region, or nucleus accumbens, of psychopaths was considerably more active than that of non-psychopaths. Although this may code for poor decision-making, highly functional psychopaths hold the ability to harness their lack of risk-aversion, or partiality for reward, utilizing it only in fitting contexts.

In a conversation with Dutton, Robert Hare explains that society is transitioning toward a more psychopathic mindset, citing that present humans appear to be all but anesthetized to conventional sexual behavior and social interaction. Although rates of homicide and war-related death have dropped enormously over the past few centuries, Steven Pinker (2011) notes that principles of dignity are vanishing. As revealed in a study by Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing (2011), students' empathy levels have decreased by approximately 40% during the past 30 years. Meanwhile, findings by Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, and Bushman (2008) indicate that students' levels of narcissism have radically increased over this same timeframe.

As the zenith of his endeavor to unravel the mind of the psychopath, Dutton experiences a psychopathic makeover at the hands of Nick Cooper, a leading expert in transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS). In this experiment, Cooper targets Dutton's dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and right temporoparietal junction, effectively simulating dysfunction in his amygdala. Speaking of the onset of his experience, Dutton describes, "An easy, airy confidence. A transcendental loosening of inhibition" (p. 157). Although the effects last less than half an hour, he very literally sees through a psychopath's eyes,

detailing a drastic transformation in the manner that he views various aspects of his life and surroundings.

Following his experience of TMS-induced psychopathy, Dutton visits the Dangerous and Severe Personality Disorder ward of Broadmoor Hospital, where he meets and converses with a few of the most dangerous psychopaths on earth. Upon arriving behind the high-security doors of this ward, Dutton notes that the atmosphere is similar to that of a lavish college dormitory, yet as his journey unfolds, it becomes all too apparent that looks can be deceiving. Through his friendly, though a bit spine-tingling, conversations with the residents, Dutton delineates the “seven deadly sins” of psychopathy, including ruthlessness, charm, focus, mental toughness, fearlessness, and action. Here, the association between psychopathy and enlightenment gains traction, as one psychopath explains that many of us exert such extensive effort focusing on possible disasters that we overlook much of the present.

While this psychopathic take on mindfulness is certainly of a different variety than that of a practiced Buddhist, Dutton reasons that there is a degree of overlap between the two nonetheless. Advancing into spiritual territory, he provides a framework within which particular saints’ behaviors appear analogous to those characteristic of modern psychopaths. Saint Paul, for instance, was ruthless, fearless, driven, and charismatic. Dutton’s association between spirituality and psychopathy is further clarified through a closer inspection of the Buddhist practice of right mindfulness. This practice involves training the mind to only contemplate the present, over time giving rise to dispassion, non-clinging, and release. Such surely resembles the psychopathic mentality, yet while the Buddhist master savors the moment, the psychopath seizes it. Although there are undeniable distinctions between these two approaches, Dutton contends that an array of similarities exist as well.

Dutton presents a compelling argument for the adaptive features of psychopathy and how these features can relate to different contexts. This book is appropriate for undergraduate evolutionary psychology students as well as more advanced scholars, with many testable predictions to be drawn out by traditional evolutionary psychologists. The wisdom of psychopaths is plentiful, and humans can relate to this information more than most would like to believe.

References

- Aharoni, E., and Kiehl, K. A. (in press). Evading justice: Quantifying criminal success in incarcerated psychopathic offenders. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*.
- American Psychiatric Association (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text rev.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Axelrod, R. (1984). *The evolution of cooperation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Babiak, P., Neumann, C. S., and Hare, R. D. (2010). Corporate psychopathy: Talking the walk. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 28, 174-193.
- Buckholtz, J. W., Treadway, M. T., Cowan, R. L., Woodward, N. D., Benning, S. D., Rui, L., . . . Zald, D. H. (2010). Mesolimbic dopamine reward system hypersensitivity in individuals with psychopathic traits. *Nature Neuroscience*, 13, 419-421.

- Glenn, A. L., Raine, A. A., and Schug, R. A. (2009). The neural correlates of moral decision-making in psychopathy. *Molecular Psychiatry*, *14*, 5-6.
- Gordon, H. L., Baird, A. A., and End, A. (2004). Functional differences among those high and low on a trait measure of psychopathy. *Biological Psychiatry*, *56*, 516-521.
- Häkkinen-Nyholm, H., and Hare, R. D. (2009). Psychopathy, homicide, and the courts working the system. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *36*, 761-777.
- Hare, R. D. (1980). A research scale for the assessment of psychopathy in criminal populations. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *1*, 111-119.
- Hare, R. D. (1999). *Without conscience: The disturbing world of the psychopaths among us*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Konrath, S. H., O'Brien, E. H., and Hsing, C. (2011). Changes in dispositional empathy in American college students over time: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *15*, 180-198.
- Lilienfeld, S. O., and Andrews, B. P. (1996). Development and preliminary validation of a self-report measure of psychopathic personality traits in noncriminal population. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *66*, 488.
- Miller, J. D., Lynam, D. R., Widiger, T. A., and Leukefeld, C. (2001). Personality disorders as extreme variants of common personality dimensions: Can the five factor model adequately represent psychopathy? *Journal of Personality*, *69*, 253-276.
- Newman, J. P., Curtin, J. J., Bertsch, J. D., and Baskin-Sommers, A. R. (2010). Attention moderates the fearlessness of psychopathic offenders. *Biological Psychiatry*, *67*, 66-70.
- Osumi, T., and Ohira, H. (2010). The positive side of psychopathy: Emotional detachment in psychopathy and rational decision-making in the ultimatum game. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *49*, 451-456.
- Pinker, S. (2011). *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined*. New York: Viking.
- Porter, S., ten Brinke, L., Baker, A., and Wallace, B. (2011). Would I lie to you? "Leakage" in deceptive facial expressions relates to psychopathy and emotional intelligence. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *51*, 133-137.
- Twenge, J. M., Konrath, S., Foster, J. D., Campbell, W. K., and Bushman, B. J. (2008). Egos inflating over time: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Journal of Personality*, *76*, 875-902.
- Williamson, S., Harpur, T. J., and Hare, R. D. (1991). Abnormal processing of affective words by psychopaths. *Psychophysiology*, *28*, 260-273.