PSYCHOPATHIC PERSONALITIES.

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QUESTION: What is a psychopath?

ANSWER:

In Great Britain the concept of a psychopath was first identified by Pritchard in 1835 in connexion with the term 'Moral insanity.

In 1913 the term psychopath was linked to the term 'moral imbecile' in the Mental Deficiency Act.

It should be stressed, however, that there is no connexion whatsoever between subnormality, usually referred to as learning difficulties nowadays, and psychopathy, although both conditions can coexist, at the same time, in one person.
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The 1959 Mental Health Act defined psychopathic disorder as 'a persistent disorder or disability of mind, whether or not including subnormality of intelligence, which results in abnormally aggressive or seriously irresponsible conduct on the part of the patient and requires, or is susceptible to, medical treatment.'

The 1983 Mental Health Act which is in force at this moment (February 2002) defines psychopathic disorder as a 'persistent disorder or disability of mind, (whether or not including significant impairment of intelligence) which results in abnormally aggressive or seriously irresponsible conduct on the part of the person concerned.'

The incidence of psychopathic disorder is estimated at 0.25% or roughly one in four hundred of the general population.

It must be borne in mind, however, that the definition of psychopathic disorder is controversial, contentious and difficult.

Problems always arise when making a diagnosis e.g is the person 'mentally ill' or is it just that their behaviour is outside the boundaries of normally accepted behaviour.

Classically the person who is diagnosed as a psychopath, or personality disorder is viewed by others as being a person who transgresses normal behaviour boundaries, no matter what those boundaries may be.
The person is then identified as a 'deviant' and their subsequent history will lead to them being identified as either a 'criminal' or as being 'mentally ill'.

Of course in some cases the person may be a member of both groups. Special Hospitals such as Ashworth, Broadmoor and Rampton specialise in the care and treatment of the criminally insane.

Also, of course, some people move backwards and forwards from the 'criminal' to the 'sick' groups.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PSYCHOPATHIC DISORDER.

A list of some of the signs and symptoms of psychopathic disorder might include:

1. The fact that punishment is of no avail: in other words the psychopath does not learn from experience.

2. They lack foresight, insight, judgement, conscience and remorse.

3. They are abnormal in emotion and behaviour from early youth.

4. There is USUALLY no gross intellectual defect, (although there may be).

These criteria are somewhat dated today but, nevertheless, they are still of historical interest and still have considerable current value.
A sociopath is a person who is a member of a deviant group or culture in which an entire section of people have different cultural values from mainstream society. Many such people are often wrongly labelled as psychopaths. In fact a sociopath may well be quite well adjusted within their own group and may well be highly regarded within it.

The true psychopath, however, will always be at odds with the culture in which they live, no matter how deviant that culture may be.

A sociopathic culture might be identified as a place such as the Falls Rd of Belfast, some of the black areas of Britain, the interior of some of our jails or the membership of certain gangs such as the Hells Angels that have a distinct and well thought-out philosophy and identity.

The psychopath however does not fit into ANY group. He, or she, will ALWAYS be the 'odd one out'.

Also, of course, one must distinguish between the true 'out and out' psychopath, (very rare) and the person who simply has psychopathic tendencies, (very common).
DESCRIPTIONS OF PSYCHOPATHIC SIGNS, SYMPTOMS AND BEHAVIOUR.

A psychopathic personality is selfish and self-centered and usually, is totally lacking in any feeling for other people. They have great difficulty in learning from past experience, cannot plan ahead realistically or foresee the consequences of their actions. They may give way to sudden impulses, like a small child, and, unlike most people they either cannot, or will not restrain sudden whims. They have little or no sense of right or wrong, of responsibility or of remorse.

Neither punishment nor kind treatment appears to alter their selfish, self-centered behaviour in any way.

There is an old joke told about psychopaths that they 'cannot tell right from wrong!' The answer to this comment might well be 'Wrong him! And then see!' Psychopaths, notoriously, are exceptionally keen that their rights and privileges are respected, to an incredible degree, while at the same time being fanatically indifferent to the rights and privileges of other people.

It is significant that in jail, where psychopaths are concentrated together the 'lowest of the low' is not a paedophile, as many members of the public imagine but is a 'pad thief'. In other words an inmate who actually steals off other inmates. It is interesting and significant that prisoners regard this kind of theft as 'different'.

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The psychopath is notoriously impulsive and may be prone to outbursts of violence. They are emotionally demanding, rarely giving anything in return. They appear to be incapable of any real emotional feeling towards others.

Not surprisingly they often come into conflict with the law.

Their anti-social conduct may range from inefficiency at work, lack of interest in any form of occupation, pathological lying, swindling, repeatedly borrowing money without paying it back, alcoholism, drug-abuse, sexual deviancies and crimes of every type, both profit-orientated and also totally motiveless outbursts of violence and murder.

The psychopath is often exceptionally manipulative and their desire to be the centre of attention can, in its most extreme forms amount to a death wish.
TYPES OF PSYCHOPATH.

Classically there are three types of psychopath:
1. INADEQUATE.
2. AGGRESSIVE.
3. CREATIVE.

There are also overlapping types:
A. INADEQUATE-AGGRESSIVE.
B. CREATIVE-AGGRESSIVE.

Obviously it is not possible to be both INADEQUATE and CREATIVE at the same time so these two types do not overlap.
INADEQUATE PSYCHOPATHS.

Classically the inadequate psychopath lacks persistence and cannot cope with stress and routine. They seldom stay in one job for very long and are easily bored and depressed by the grind of everyday work.

Everyone else is to blame for the misfortunes which befall them, never themselves.

Often the psychopath may possess considerable charm and may be able to enlist sympathy and support from other people. Inevitably however anyone who tries to help the inadequate psychopath finds themselves very quickly drained dry of money, emotion, sympathy and love.

Both male and female psychopaths tend to be sexually promiscuous and incapable of forming stable relationships.

Both their emotional coldness and their need for instant gratification leads to them being flagrantly and frequently unfaithful to their partners with the obvious result that they change partners rapidly.

Many inadequate psychopaths totally lack any sense of moral responsibility or guilt for their actions and this also contributes to the breakdown of their marriages and relationships.
PSEUDOLOGIA FANTASTICA.

Inadequate psychopaths frequently become swindlers, thieves, con-merchants and may be pathological and habitual liars.

Many of them lie repeatedly and for no apparent reason.

In fact in pseudologia fantastica the reason lies invariably in wish fulfillment in which the psychopath tells lies which he wishes were true and lives in a make believe fantasy world.

Often they will describe, in great detail, their imaginary past careers in some glamorous military unit such as the S.A.S or the paratroopers or an equally untrue account might be about a career in the film or music industry. Many inadequate psychopaths personalise stories when they borrow some glamorous or exciting anecdote from a book or film and then recount it with themselves as the hero.

When challenged by someone who can identify these lies the reaction might range from an assumption of injured innocence to an indifferent shrug.

Strangely enough it is usually quite easy for other people to identify the lies that the inadequate psychopath tells and the reason is self-evident. One would expect the psychopath to research the subject of their lies carefully, to go to the library for instance and read books on the subject or to watch several videos about the S.A.S or
whatever their particular fantasy is. Most inadequate psychopaths do not do this and the reason lies in the personality of the psychopath.

Most of the inadequate, shiftless, lazy, incompetent people who we are describing are simply too lazy, and too incompetent to do their homework properly and, consequently, are easily, and repeatedly caught out as the pathological, and inadequate liars that they are. A golden rule of telling lies is that the liar must know more about the subject that they are lying about than the person they are lying to.

Since most inadequate psychopaths have only a sketchy, superficial knowledge of the subject of their lies it is easy, consequently, to catch them out.

Many inadequate psychopaths compensate for their inadequacies by drinking alcohol to excess or by drug abuse.

All of this contributes to the shiftless, insecure world of their own making in which they pass through jobs, friendships, relationships, marriages and money with equal speed and ease.

Examples of this type of person might include tramps, gililbs, prostitutes, petty criminals of all kinds and anyone who makes a practice of living off other people.
AGGRESSIVE PSYCHOPATHS.

Aggressive psychopath may be very dangerous people due to their habit of acting out their fantasies and impulses. In other words psychopaths may give way to their violent immoral impulses and explode into furious outbursts of anger and violence which may occur for little, or no, reason.

CLOUDING OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

This violence may be so intense that clouding of consciousness occurs. This is a condition in which the little self-control that the psychopath has, vanishes completely. They may then commit the most brutal assaults, sexual crimes and murders.

Incredibly after such an outburst the psychopath may well feel relaxed, cheerful and happy. Typically they feel as if this episode has cleared the air for them.

BELLE INDIFFERENCE.

Sometimes they will display an almost fanatical amount of indifference, both to the fate of their victims and even to themselves and their own fate. This condition is known as Belle Indifference.

After the initial feeling of euphoria or calm has worn off the tension will gradually increase again until the situation is re-created.

With the aggressive psychopaths their total lack of any social sense or moral responsibility causes them to be excluded from their group and, as a natural consequence both the group and the psychopath come to regard themselves as
On rare occasions an aggressive psychopath who is also a charismatic leader figure may well become an icon to other people but, even so, they will never have any real friends or peer group, only followers, admirers, allies and enemies. Examples of this type of person might vary from a youth-cult, teenage gang leader to a high-profile military or political figure such as Margaret Thatcher or Adolf Hitler.

CREATIVE PSYCHOPATHS.
Creative psychopaths are people who channel their psychosexual energies into creative or constructive functions.

Creative psychopaths will still have the ruthlessnes, manipulation, selfishnes, egocentricity and emotional coldness of the typical psychopath. They will still lack warmth, understanding, remorse, judgement, foresight, insight, morality, have a low tolerance to stress, be indifferent to the harm they cause others yet STILL be great artists, writers, statesmen, builders or musicians.

A person can do, or be, good or bad. It is not WHAT they do that personifies a psychopath it is HOW they do it and the emotion that they feel, or do not feel, that matters.

Examples of this type of person might include Sir Winston Churchill or Florence Nightingale.
CAUSES OF PSYCHOPATHIC BEHAVIOUR.

As in any illness or condition the causes must be either inherited, social, psychological or physical and it would seem that the causes of psychopathy are a combination of all of these.

Many theories have been put forward and many have been disproved or have fallen into disfavour.

SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES.

It is obvious that environment must be a key factor in shaping personality. Adverse conditions influencing personality might include:

1. Emotional and maternal deprivation as an infant.
2. Sexual and/or emotional abuse as a child.
3. Family violence.
4. Large family size leading to a low overall income and adverse home conditions.
5. Parental role models who provide an unsuitable example, e.g. if they are violent to their children, to other people or to themselves.
6. Parents who fail to set, or enforce limits, to their children.
7. Parents who are themselves psychopaths.
8. Peer groups that teach and instill inappropriate behaviour patterns.
PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES.

1. In Freudian theory the psychoanalytical approach postulates that psychopathy is due to a poorly formed super-ego (or conscience).

2. Inability to delay gratification has also been suggested.

3. The need for high stimulation is another possible cause. Psychopaths, notoriously, crave excitement, danger and being the focus of attention.

4. Many aggressive psychopaths may be hooked on the adrenalin high of constant danger, fear and excitement. Most of these Freudian theories are largely discounted nowadays.

PHYSICAL.

1. Physical causes such as E.E.G. abnormalities and differences or similarities in XXY chromosomes are now largely discounted also.

2. Organic brain damage is one theory that does appear to have stood the test of time. Infections such as meningitis and encephalitis, physical injury or the long-standing abuse of alcohol may all lead to people showing behaviour patterns that are similar to psychopaths.
TREATMENT.

The treatment of psychopaths is notoriously difficult. Many different methods have been tried and many have failed.

MEDICATION.

1. Both in hospitals and in jail many psychopaths persistently and repeatedly ask for tablets that will cure them. When informed that no such medication exists they frequently become threatening and abusive. Many psychopaths are simply requesting treatments such as methadone, temazepam and valium which they use, or abuse, outside of jail and hospital in order to get 'high'.

2. PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS.

The experience of the author of this essay is that putting psychopaths into psychiatric hospitals is not only a total and utter waste of time and scarce resources but is actually counter-productive as it actually makes the psychopath worse.

In my experience most psychopaths simply regard a hospital admission as a free holiday and wallow in the chance to manipulate other patients, doctors and nursing staff, to abuse drink and drugs and to use, and abuse the rights and privileges that, quite rightly, are granted to people who are actually suffering from a treatable mental illness.
3. COGNITIVE BEHAVIOUR THERAPY.

Some time ago I attended a conference in London chaired by a woman named Christine Padesky who has a P.H.d. in psychology.

I spent two days listening to the theory of cognitive behavioural therapy treatment. Apparently the theory of cognitive treatment is to find out the causes of personality disorder and then find a more constructive behaviour pattern for dealing with these problems.

The most interesting fact in the entire two day course was when a speaker described how they had cured many personality disorders in a matter of six to eight weeks by using cognitive therapy.

I personally do not believe that this is possible.

I found it very interesting that the speaker then went on to describe the personalities of the people they had cured and, invariably, the people were highly intelligent.

In fact no-one had been cured at all.

The intelligent personality disorder simply works out what the interviewer wants to hear and then says it.
As a psychiatric nurse working in a high-security prison I frequently meet inmates who lie repeatedly and flagrantly to me. Often, the inmate will say whatever he thinks that I want to hear and, of course, whatever it is that he thinks will achieve his aims.

His aims are usually: bail, medication, a transfer to hospital and a report to the judge or magistrate stating that he was mentally ill when he committed the crime and should be let off lightly.

4. THEREPEUTIC COMMUNITIES.

The concept of treating personality disorders by admitting them to a therepeutic community is a very interesting one.

The idea is that psychopaths will be placed in a situation where they will be forced to come to terms with their condition and, will then begin to mature.

This theory postulates that putting psychopaths into therepeutic communities will result in peer group pressure being placed on the psychopath and some kind of meaningfull or improving change of personality will then happen.

HA!HA!HA!

In my experience most psychopaths, particularly inadequate and aggressive ones simply run away from stressfull situations so little is achieved.
In my opinion jail as a treatment for personality disorder is grossly under-rated.

It is certainly true to say that, in fact many psychopaths actually settle down and accept, or even, enjoy jail.

There are many reasons for this. In jail psychopaths may find a culture with which they can identify.

There is comradeship (of sorts). There is a clearly defined enemy, the 'screws'. There is an actual language or jail argot, which the new inmate quickly learns.

On the other hand however when psychopaths arrive in jail, particularly for the first time, two very significant events happen.

Firstly, in many instances for the first time in their lives, the young psychopath has a peer group of equally nasty, aggressive, unpleasant, violent and manipulative personality disorders surrounding them.

The second, equally important, consideration is, of course, that, in jail, the person cannot walk away from the situation, instead they have to accept the consequences of their own actions.

They have to face up to their own personalities and, in many instances they begin to mature.

Often, totally against their own wills and wishes.
This, of course, is one reason why psychiatric nurses, in jail, frequently meet inmates who demand, request, beg, beseech, plead and manipulate in an attempt to be transferred to hospital.

Many of them produce lists, of not very convincing, signs and symptoms, of their claimed mental illness, in an attempt to achieve this.

Of course the psychopath does not particularly want a transfer to a psychiatric hospital: they simply want a transfer to anywhere out of jail.

6.TIME.

Time, and lots of it, is one treatment that actually does seem to work with psychopaths.

Whether or not the fact that the time is spent in jail, in psychiatric hospital, in the community or elsewhere makes any difference is debatable.

Nevertheless one can only say that as they get older psychopaths seem to change and mature in their violent and manipulative behaviour.
7. A NICE GIRL.

In many instances former psychopaths have suddenly appeared to mature and become responsible people because of the experience of a stable relationship in their lives.

There is an old saying 'he needs a nice girl' and indeed it would seem that, like many Old Wives' tales there is a basis of truth in this statement.

If a psychopath meets a person whom they sincerely fall in love with then, often for the first time in their lives, they are in a situation where they actually care about another person.

Indeed, as has already been pointed out some psychopaths do not even care about themselves.

To actually start feeling real human emotions for the first time can be a profound experience for the psychopath.
CONCLUSION.

In conclusion it can only be said that due to the demanding and difficult nature of their previously described personalities, psychopathic patients are among the most draining and least rewarding of clients to work with.

Nevertheless on the odd occasion that a former psychopath has appeared to mature into a sensible and sensitive adult, human-being the reward is self-evident.
BIBLIOGRAPHY.

In researching this essay I used many books and articles as well as my own personal experiences:

In particular I would like to express my gratitude to

2. Psychology and Psychiatry for Nurses by Peter Daly and Heather Harrington.