

Neurocriminologist Identifies a Key Piece of the Puzzle of ?Successful? Psychopaths

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The majority of studies on psychopathy are conducted on people who are incarcerated in prisons and jails. However, there is now ample evidence that people with psychopathic traits are not found only in prisons. They are living among us and can be found in all walks of life: among our neighbors, family members, co-workers, and the professionals we see.

However, there is very little published information on people with psychopathic traits who are not arrested, who are often called ?successful? psychopaths. The puzzling question is how these people manage to operate in society without being caught. Are they similar to or different from the incarcerated people who are more typically included in studies of psychopathic offenders? Dr. Robert Schug, a neurocriminologist and forensic psychologist at the California State University and a member of the Aftermath: Surviving Psychopathy Foundation, found some answers in his and Dr. Adrian Raine?s groundbreaking study on the topic of successful psychopathy.

In a discussion organized by the Aftermath Foundation, Dr. Schug shares the key questions that motivated this research study: ?Do all psychopaths think alike? What about the ones who get caught versus the ones

who don't??

Dr. Schug and his colleagues examined these questions through a neuropsychological lens. They studied the

functioning of men and women (ages 19 to 61) recruited from temporary employment agencies in Los

Angeles on a battery of tests. All the participants were evaluated on a clinical measure of psychopathy, the

Psychopathy Checklist. The high scorers were then divided into two groups: those who had never been

convicted of any crimes (the successful psychopathy group) and those who had at least one conviction (the

unsuccessful psychopathy group).

Results showed that the ?successful? psychopaths performed better than the unsuccessful ones on

executive functioning, that is the ability to plan and carry out goal directed actions, monitor performance, and

correct one?s behavior as needed. Quite unexpectedly, in a few areas of executive functioning, successful

psychopaths even performed better than non-psychopathic (healthy) adults.

According to Dr. Kosson, President of the Aftermath Foundation, ?Almost everything we know about people

with psychopathic traits is based on offenders who have gotten caught and are spending time in prisons, jails

or forensic hospitals. We know that we also need to understand how psychopathy operates in the community,

and there have been an increasing number of studies that investigate college students and people in the

community who report having psychopathic traits. However, because these self-reports are only weakly

related to clinical indices, we can only learn a little bit about clinical psychopathy by studying the self-reports

of college students. Dr. Schug?s study is one of only a very few studies that examine clinical features of

psychopaths in a community sample, and its findings are very important for understanding psychopathic

people in the community.?

For more information about the findings, please see this video of Dr. Schug discussing his study.

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Aftermath: Surviving Psychopathy Foundation

The goal of Aftermath is to reduce the negative impact of psychopaths on individuals and society. Aftermath supports

research and education regarding the traits and characteristics of psychopathy and its impact on victims.

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