

Successful Psychopathy: A Scientific Status Report

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Abstract

Long the stuff of clinical lore, successful psychopathy has recently become the focus of research. Although numerous authors have conjectured that psychopathic traits are sometimes associated with occupational or interpersonal success, rigorous evidence for this assertion has thus far been minimal. We provide a status report on successful-psychopathy research, address controversies surrounding successful psychopathy, examine evidence for competing models of this construct, and offer desiderata for future research.

Keywords

psychopathy, personality, criminality, executive functioning, protective factors, leadership, heroism

If you are like most people, the name Forest Yeo-Thomas will mean nothing to you. Yet you have almost certainly heard of Yeo-Thomas's fictional incarnation on the big screen. Recent documents suggest that Yeo-Thomas (1902–1964), a British spy, was the prime inspiration for novelist Ian Fleming's iconic character, James Bond (Jackson, 2012).

Like Bond, Yeo-Thomas was swashbuckling, charismatic, and daring. After lying about his age, then 16-year old Yeo-Thomas entered the U.S. army and aided the Poles during World War I; captured by the Russians, he escaped by strangling a guard with his bare hands. Imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II, he was tortured with electric shocks and submersion in ice-cold water but refused to surrender crucial secrets. On other occasions, he averted near-certain demise by donning a parade of disguises, faking official papers, passing himself off as a Nazi sympathizer, leaping from a speeding train, tossing an enemy pursuer into a river, and hiding in a moving hearse after swapping places with a corpse. He repeatedly violated British espionage rules by carrying a weapon wherever he traveled. Like Bond, Yeo-Thomas was frequently observed seducing women. He once piloted a small plane with a woman on his lap, and while married, he ventured into a torrid love affair with a female pilot.

Some scholars might contend that Yeo-Thomas embodied the *successful psychopath*, sometimes termed the *adaptive* or *subclinical psychopath*: an individual

who displays many of the core features of psychopathic personality (psychopathy) while achieving success. The lion's share of the field's knowledge about psychopathy has stemmed from individuals ensconced safely behind prison walls, most of whom are presumably unsuccessful (Lilienfeld, 1994). Nevertheless, the past decade has witnessed growing interest in an intriguing possibility: Perhaps many psychopathic individuals are thriving in the everyday world, in some cases occupying the higher echelons of selected professions. Indeed, Hare (1993) posited that incarcerated psychopaths "represent only the tip of a very large iceberg" (p. 115).

The Gap Between Clinical Lore and Research

Echoing Hare, several authors have conjectured that psychopathic individuals are overrepresented in certain vocations, including politics, business, military combat, law enforcement, firefighting, and risky sports (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Fowles & Dindo, 2006; Stevens, Deuling, & Armenakis, 2012). Long the stuff of clinical lore, successful psychopathy in various incarnations has received

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high-profile coverage in recent popular books, including Dutton's (2012) *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: Lessons in Life From Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers*, Ronson's (2011) *The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry*, Fallon's (2013) *The Psychopath Inside: A Neuroscientist's Personal Journey Into the Dark Side of the Brain*, and Thomas's (2013) *Confessions of a Sociopath: A Life Spent Hiding in Plain Sight*.

Still, the amount of popular speculation devoted to successful psychopathy dwarfs the modest research base bearing on its correlates and causes (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013). Moreover, the successful-psychopathy construct is scientifically controversial, with some even contending that it is an oxymoron because psychopathy is inherently pathological (Kiehl & Lushing, 2014). Further muddying the waters, some researchers who have studied "successful" psychopaths have examined people who achieved professional success, whereas others have examined people who were merely living outside the confines of prisons and jails. Furthermore, investigators have adopted disparate operationalizations of "success" with respect to psychopathy. Some emphasize short-term success, whereas others emphasize long-term success; some emphasize the attainment of personal fame and fortune, whereas others emphasize behaviors benefiting society. Still others emphasize only the absence of prominent antisocial behavior.

These definitional ambiguities notwithstanding, research on successful psychopathy has at last begun to keep pace with clinical speculation (Smith, Watts, & Lilienfeld, 2014). In this article, we offer a scientific status report on successful psychopathy. Recognizing that most psychopathological constructs are "open concepts" marked by fuzzy boundaries (Meehl, 1986), we adopt a relatively expansive operationalization of success that includes either short-term or long-term accomplishment, as well as behaviors that profit either the individual or society.

Successful Psychopathy: Definitional and Conceptual Issues

In his book *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Clarify Some Issues About the So-Called Psychopathic Personality*, Cleckley (1941) was the first scholar to systematically delineate the cardinal features of psychopathy. According to Cleckley, the quintessential psychopath displays a paradoxical configuration of traits. On the one hand, he or she—usually he (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002)—is superficially charming, devoid of disabling anxiety, and articulate. On the other hand, the psychopath is guiltless, callous, self-centered, and aimless (see also McCord & McCord, 1964). As a consequence of this malignant cocktail of seemingly contradictory features, psychopaths can easily dupe others into believing they are trustworthy. From this

perspective, successful psychopathy is not an oxymoron; it may instead be a variant of psychopathy in which the adaptive traits (e.g., superficial charm, social poise) comprising Cleckley's "mask" are especially prominent. Consistent with this view, Cleckley presented several examples of individuals, including physicians and businessmen, with marked psychopathic features who had nonetheless achieved career success. For example, he described a small-town psychiatrist who, although wholly incompetent and a serial plagiarizer, fooled legions of bedazzled followers into believing that he possessed a profound understanding of psychoanalysis.

Successful psychopathy can be conceptualized in terms of three models (see also Hall & Benning, 2006). First, the *differential-severity model* proposes that successful psychopathy is simply a mild expression of clinical psychopathy. This model presumes that psychopathy is a unitary construct and that successful and unsuccessful psychopathy differ in intensity. Second, in the *moderated-expression model*, successful psychopathy is viewed as a *forme fruste*—an atypical manifestation—of psychopathy whose less savory behavioral manifestations have been tempered by protective factors, such as intact executive functioning, intelligence, or effective parenting. This model similarly posits that psychopathy is a unitary construct, but it also assumes that successful psychopathy is associated with one or more variables (extraneous to psychopathy itself) that buffer individuals against maladaptive outcomes. Third, in what we call the *differential-configuration model*, successful psychopathy is characterized by a different constellation of personality traits, such as boldness and conscientiousness, than is unsuccessful psychopathy. In contrast to the first two models, this model presumes that psychopathy is an amalgam of two or more distinct traits rather than a unitary construct and that successful and unsuccessful psychopathy differ in their constituent traits.

Successful Psychopathy: Early Research

In one of the first research efforts to identify successful psychopaths in the community, Widom (1977) placed advertisements in underground newspapers in the Boston area. The advertisements called for "charming, aggressive, carefree people who are impulsively irresponsible but are good at handling people and looking out for number one" (p. 675). Participants submitted autobiographical descriptions, which Widom used to screen for psychopathic traits. Widom found that her sample of 28 individuals bore similarities to psychopaths previously studied in prisons. For example, they received low scores on an empathy measure and exhibited the classic Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory profile associated with

psychopathy, namely, elevated scores on the Psychopathic Deviate and Hypomania scales. About two-thirds of the sample had been arrested at least once. Unlike clinical psychopaths, Widom's participants displayed intact executive functioning, including normal performance on a delay-of-gratification task and the Porteus Maze test, a measure of impulse control. A follow-up study conducted in Indiana using the same methodology (Widom & Newman, 1985) yielded similar findings, although only 41% of participants had been arrested.

Widom's work was an important step toward detecting successful psychopaths (see also Sutker & Allain, 1983), although her investigations were limited by the absence of a comparison sample. Moreover, her technique may have recruited psychopathic individuals who managed to stay out of prison rather than those who achieved social success; in Widom and Newman's study, most participants were at the low end of an occupational-achievement scale.

Advertisement methodologies have been used to good effect in other studies (e.g., Belmore & Quinsey, 1994). For example, Miller, Rausher, Hyatt, Maples, and Zeichner (2014) identified 104 community participants using Widom's advertisement technique. These participants received elevated scores on two well-validated psychopathy questionnaires. Even within this selected sample, high psychopathy scores were associated with violent and nonviolent antisocial behavior, as well as with measures of tolerance to pain-inducing stimuli, including electric shock.

Recent Evidence: Models of Successful Psychopathy

In the new millennium, researchers have explored competing frameworks for the conceptualization and causes of successful psychopathy, including the three models delineated earlier.

Differential-severity model

The differential-severity model comports with burgeoning evidence that psychopathy is underpinned by one or more dimensions rather than by a taxon, or natural category (Edens, Marcus, Lilienfeld, & Poythress, 2006). At the same time, other data are inconsistent with the differential-severity model. Ishikawa, Raine, Lencz, Bihrl, and Lacasse (2001) recruited males from temporary-employment agencies in the Los Angeles area. After identifying those who scored above the threshold for psychopathy on the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003), the authors subdivided participants into those who had been convicted ($n = 13$; unsuccessful psychopaths) and those who had not been convicted ($n = 16$;

successful psychopaths). Although the latter group received significantly lower overall PCL-R scores than the former group, this difference was attributable to PCL-R Factor II, which largely comprises antisocial behaviors. Running counter to the differential-severity model, which implies that successful psychopaths are simply less extreme than unsuccessful psychopaths, the former group received nonsignificantly *higher* scores on PCL-R Factor I, which comprises the interpersonal and affective features (e.g., superficial charm, narcissism, guiltlessness) of psychopathy. This finding raises the possibility that, compared with unsuccessful psychopaths, successful psychopaths exhibit lower levels of certain psychopathic traits but intact or higher levels of others. This conclusion must be tempered by the small sample sizes of the study and the fact that the participants, although non-convicted, were not necessarily "successful" per se.

Moderated-expression model

Ishikawa et al. (2001) further found that successful psychopaths differed from unsuccessful psychopaths in several protective variables. Compared with the latter individuals, the former exhibited significantly greater heart-rate increases following an emotional manipulation (in which they had to give a videotaped speech concerning their personal flaws) and superior performance on the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test, an executive-functioning measure that requires participants to shift behavior in response to changes in contingencies. In a subsequent study using the same recruitment methodology, Gao, Raine, and Schug (2011) found that successful psychopaths ($n = 23$) displayed more pronounced P300 event-related potentials following an unexpected auditory stimulus compared with unsuccessful psychopaths ($n = 22$), suggesting more intact information processing in the former group.

Although based on nonincarcerated rather than socially successful samples, these investigations suggest that, compared with unsuccessful psychopaths, successful psychopaths may possess higher autonomic responsivity, as well as superior executive functioning (see also Widom, 1977) and information processing. These variables may be protective factors that allow psychopathic traits to be channeled into socially adaptive, or at least less patently antisocial, manifestations. Nevertheless, the extent to which these group differences are attributable to general intelligence is unknown. Given that intelligence may diminish the risk of antisocial behavior among individuals with prominent psychopathic traits (Wall, Sellbom, & Goodwin, 2013), this possibility merits investigation.

Several researchers have examined the protective role of parenting among children with pronounced callous and unemotional traits, such as lack of guilt and empathy,

which may be precursors of psychopathy. Some—but not all—research indicates that among children with elevated callous and unemotional traits, positive parenting practices, such as positive reinforcement and warmth, are concurrently associated with diminished antisocial behavior (Frick & White, 2008; Waller, Gardner, & Hyde, 2013), raising the possibility that these practices exert a buffering effect among children at risk for psychopathy (see also Lykken, 1995). The extent to which positive parenting explains the emergence of successful psychopathy in adulthood awaits investigation in longitudinal studies.

Differential-configuration model

Mullins-Sweatt, Glover, Derefinko, Miller, and Widiger (2010) asked 146 attorneys, psychologists with legal expertise, and clinical-psychology professors to identify a psychopath, defined as a charming and guiltless social predator, who had achieved personal success. Interestingly, three-fourths of clinical-psychology professors selected a current or past academic colleague; one was “an endowed professor with numerous federal grants” (p. 556). The authors asked respondents to describe their selected successful psychopath using the five-factor model (FFM) of personality. Mullins-Sweatt and colleagues found that the prototypical successful psychopath was similar to the consensus prototypical psychopath (as identified in previous studies) on most FFM traits. Still, there were noteworthy differences: Successful psychopaths displayed higher levels of certain facets of extraversion (e.g., assertiveness, excitement seeking) and conscientiousness (e.g., order, self-discipline), as well as lower levels of agreeableness (e.g., straightforwardness, modesty).

Recent work on a dimension termed *fearless dominance*, derived from factor analyses of the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996), lends support to the differential-configuration model (Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003). Fearless dominance captures a broad dimension of boldness (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009) encompassing physical fearlessness, interpersonal poise and potency, and emotional resilience. High levels of fearless dominance alone are not sufficient for psychopathy, although they may map largely onto Cleckley’s (1941) “mask” of seemingly healthy adjustment (Lilienfeld, Patrick, et al., 2012). Fearless dominance is linked to superior executive functioning (Sellbom & Verona, 2007), suggesting a potential point of convergence with the moderated-expression model.

Recent studies suggest that fearless dominance may be a marker of the successful features of psychopathy and may bear important implications for leadership. Lilienfeld, Waldman, et al. (2012) asked 121 presidential biographers and other experts to rate the 42 U.S. presidents, up

to and including George W. Bush, on their pre-office traits using a measure of the FFM, which they used to extract estimates of fearless dominance. Using data from several large-scale polls of presidential performance by historians, Lilienfeld and colleagues reported that fearless dominance was significantly associated with historians’ ratings of overall presidential performance, leadership, public persuasiveness, communication ability, and willingness to take risks.

Fearless dominance may also be linked to occupational choice. In a community sample ($N = 3,388$), Lilienfeld, Latzman, Watts, Smith, and Dutton (2014) found that fearless dominance was significantly associated with holding (a) leadership positions in organizations and (b) high-risk occupations, such as those in law enforcement, firefighting, and dangerous sports. Nevertheless, because this study was cross-sectional, the possibility that holding these occupations contributed to increases in fearless dominance over time cannot be excluded.

Pursuing conjectures that some psychopaths and heroes are “twigs from the same branch” (Lykken, 1982, p. 22), Smith, Lilienfeld, Coffey, and Dabbs (2013) examined the relation between fearless dominance and “everyday heroism.” Operationalizing heroism as altruism that entails social or physical risk, they administered a questionnaire assessing the frequency of such actions as assisting a stranded motorist or attempting to resuscitate a collapsed individual. Across several undergraduate and community samples, Smith and colleagues found that fearless dominance was modestly correlated with everyday heroism. Using the sample described earlier, they further reported that fearless dominance was significantly associated with a history of pre-office wartime heroism among U.S. presidents.

Although these results dovetail with the hypothesis that fearless dominance maps onto the adaptive traits of psychopathy, this conclusion should be qualified by two caveats. First, some authors argue that fearless dominance is only peripherally relevant to psychopathy (Miller & Lynam, 2012). One possibility is that fearless dominance is a protective variable that helps to differentiate successful from unsuccessful psychopathy, with the former condition characterized by charisma and venturesomeness. If so, the aforementioned findings on fearless dominance may be better explained by a moderated-expression model than by a differential-configuration model. Second, Mullins-Sweatt et al.’s (2010) findings suggest that successful psychopathy, at least as conceptualized by experts, is associated with conscientiousness. Because fearless dominance is largely unrelated to conscientiousness, the former dimension may be insufficient to explain successful psychopathy; if so, a full account of successful psychopathy may require multiple traits.

An overarching perspective that accords with the differential-configuration view is the *triarchic model* (Patrick et al., 2009), which proposes that classical psychopathy is a constellation of three dimensions: boldness (operationalized by fearless dominance), disinhibition, and emotional coldness (or meanness). According to this model, boldness is marked by a heightened threshold of reactivity of the brain's defensive (threat) system (Patrick & Bernat, 2009). Through the lens of the triarchic model, successful psychopathy can be conceptualized as a constellation of both high levels of boldness (probably higher than in unsuccessful psychopathy) and low disinhibition coexisting with emotional coldness. This hypothesis accords with findings that (a) fearless dominance is associated with adaptive behaviors and (b) successful psychopathy is associated with elevated conscientiousness and intact or superior executive functioning, both of which are tied to low disinhibition (Krueger, Markon, Patrick, Benning, & Kramer, 2007).

Conclusions

Although successful psychopathy has long been the province of popular psychology, recent research has begun to shed light on this enigmatic construct. Provisional evidence suggests that, in contrast to unsuccessful psychopathy, successful psychopathy is characterized by higher levels of autonomic responsivity and executive functioning; it may also be tied to elevated fearless dominance and conscientiousness or, within the triarchic model, high boldness and low disinhibition, respectively. These results lend preliminary support to both the moderated-expression and differential-configuration models, raising the possibility that they are amenable to integration. Specifically, the distinctive traits of successful psychopathy may be protective factors that buffer psychopathic individuals against antisocial outcomes. Alternatively, they may be variables that combine with core psychopathic features, such as guiltlessness and callousness, to forge a distinctive "subspecies" of psychopathy.

At the same time, the nascent literature on successful psychopathy is limited in several respects. Researchers will need to develop more consistent operationalizations of success, examine the roles of intelligence and parenting as potential protective variables, and examine statistical interactions between psychopathy and putative protective variables. Such interactions are implied by the moderated-expression model but have rarely been tested (cf. Wall et al., 2013). By attending to these desiderata, researchers will hopefully achieve a better understanding of how one person with pronounced psychopathic traits can end up being the prototype of the habitual criminal, whereas another can end up being the prototype for Agent 007.

Recommended Reading

- Fowles, D. C., & Dindo, L. (2009). Temperament and psychopathy: A dual-pathway model. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *18*, 179–183. A helpful synopsis of research suggesting that psychopathy reflects the confluence of two independent dimensions, one reflecting a fearless temperament and the other reflecting affective and behavioral disinhibition.
- Gao, Y., & Raine, A. (2010). Successful and unsuccessful psychopaths: A neurobiological model. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, *28*, 194–210. An excellent review of the still-nascent literature on the biology of successful psychopathy and its potential differences from unsuccessful psychopathy.
- Patrick, C. J. (Ed.). (2006). *Handbook of psychopathy*. New York, NY: Guilford Press. Still the most comprehensive source for research and theory on the assessment, diagnosis, causes, and treatment of psychopathy.
- Skeem, J. L., Polaschek, D. L., Patrick, C. J., & Lilienfeld, S. O. (2011). Psychopathic personality: Bridging the gap between scientific evidence and public policy. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, *12*, 95–162. A detailed review of the implications of scientific findings on psychopathy for public policy, including violence prediction, violence prevention, and the insanity defense.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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