

SUBCLINICAL PSYCHOPATHS

How They Adapt, Their Interpersonal
Interactions with and Effect on Others,
and How to Detect Them

Cary Stacy Smith
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By

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and

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*In loving memory of my parents, Elmer and Dorothy Smith,
I miss you, Daddy and Mama.*

PREFACE

The idea for this book began in 2006 at a Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL–R) workshop in Encino, California. One of the attendees asked Robert D. Hare, the assessment instrument’s creator, about the psychopathic 1% of the general population. He replied that they had jobs (some were high paying and prestigious), had wives and husbands, had mothers and fathers, had children, went to school, drove cars and trucks, caught colds, etc. In other words, the majority of this 1%, who possess no empathy and/or conscience toward others, looks just like everyone else and doesn’t engage in criminal acts; thus, they never see the inside of a jail. They are highly skilled in the art of manipulation and can size someone up within minutes of meeting him or her. They’re called subclinical psychopaths, and the only difference between them and their better known clinical counterparts is in degree, not kind. Are they dangerous? Definitely. They have no compunction using others to get what they want and are masters at it.

These people engage in dishonest activities, never committing a crime serious enough to warrant an arrest. Instead of becoming part of the criminal justice system, they skirt around the edges of it. Are there any subclinical psychopaths who become serial killers like Henry Lucas and his lover Ottis Toole? No. While subclinical psychopaths have no conscience, they’re not apt to murder; rather, they’re most likely to freeload and take money from someone who is lonely. That being said, while the subclinical psychopath might not engage in murder, it doesn’t bother him or her to know that someone was killed by someone like Lucas or Toole.

This book is intended for a general audience wanting to know more about a phenomenon that’s both fascinating and scary; likewise, it’s also meant for mental health professionals seeking to gain information about a topic that, thus far, has received scant attention from researchers. We focus on a number of different areas concerning subclinical psychopathy, with some chapters being a bit more technical than others, primarily due to the nature of the

data reported. Our book is not a treatise on subclinical psychopathy. We do, however, hope that, after reading this book, readers will walk away with a better understanding relating to subclinical psychopaths.

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SUBCLINICAL PSYCHOPATHS

Chapter 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO SUBCLINICAL PSYCHOPATHS

Generally, Subclinical Psychopaths (SPs, also referred to as partial, subcriminal, or compensated) are as dangerous as their cousin (because there are more of them and they are often successful), the clinical psychopath (CP). However, whereas the latter often come across as vain, brash, and full of bravado,¹ the former, who share similar personality characteristics, are often able to hide their true opinion behind a façade of friendliness.²

Subclinical psychopaths share most of the trademark behaviors and traits symptomatic of psychopathy. For instance, they lack empathy, guilt, or remorse while exhibiting a great capacity for glibness/superficial charm, manipulateness, inconsistency, and deceitfulness/lying, with a grandiose sense of self-worth.³ Four factors comprise psychopathy: interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and overt antisocial features.⁴

According to Robert D. Hare,⁵ 1% of the general population is psychopathic, although the majority of these individuals are not violent; rather, while they have psychopathic tendencies, it's a much less pronounced level. SPs function more as con artists, taking advantage of others to gain sex or money, with most white-collar criminals falling into this category. Most business scams are carried out by SPs.⁶ In a

¹ Cleckley, H., (1982). *The mask of sanity*. New York: Plume.

² Guggenbuhl-Craig, A. (1980). *The emptied soul: On the nature of the psychopath*. Putman, CT: Spring Publications:

³ Meloy, R. (1996). *The psychopathic mind*. Northvale, NJ: Aronson.

⁴ Neumann, C. S. (2007). Psychopathy. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 191, 357–358.

⁵ Hare, R. D. (1999). *Without conscience: The disturbing world of the psychopaths among us*. New York: Guilford Press.

⁶ Ibid.

country the size of the United States, this figure translates into 3,000,000 individuals who lack basic human emotion for others.

To get a clear picture of what an SP is, think of a vice-president of a Fortune 500 company who has been tapped to go even higher in the command hierarchy. He made it to the top, not because he's smarter and more competent—he made it to the higher echelons because he possessed an unparalleled ability at conning others.⁷ Think of a district attorney (DA) who has exculpatory evidence that could potentially free a defendant accused of a grisly crime. The defendant's life or death means nothing to the prosecutor. What's important is that the DA dreams of higher political office, realizing that he needs something catchy to make his name better known statewide. Life imprisonment or the death of a nonentity doesn't concern him in the least. The college professor who publishes bogus research for one specific reason—to rise higher in academia. The researcher who wins a grant for potentially lifesaving medicine, fudging the data to show the drug's amazing properties after finding out that it works little better than a placebo.

The emotions that a normal person feels—love, sadness at another person's loss, and so on—have little effect on a psychopath. They feel little true affection for others and their caring and concern for others is contingent on their own selfish motives. Yet they are experts at mimicking the behavior of others. While they might not genuinely feel emotion, they are pros at appearing as if they do. As most people possess at least a rudimentary sense of right or wrong, it beggars a normal person's imagination to think that some individuals feel nothing at all toward others, regardless of the situation or the people involved. Coupled with his or her innate ability to blend in with the crowd allows the subclinical psychopath to remain concealed.⁸

This permits the subclinical psychopath to inflict pain and cause devastation on his or her family, his or her colleagues, and anyone else unlucky enough to be drawn to him or her. The key to understanding psychopathy (both clinical and subclinical) is to realize that this type of person can lie, cheat, and cause incalculable harm (both physical and emotional) without feeling any compunction at all. A psychopath

⁷ Boddy, C. R. P., Ladyshevsky, R., & Galvin, P. (2010). Leaders without ethics in global business: Corporate psychopaths. *Journal of Public Affairs, 10*(3), 121–138.

⁸ Hercz, R (2001). *Psychopaths among us: Dr. Robert Hare claims there are 300,000 psychopaths in Canada, but that only a tiny fraction are violent offenders like Paul Bernardo and Clifford Olsen. Who are the rest? Take a look around.* <http://www.hare.org/links/saturday.html>. Accessed February 15, 2011.

seldom feels guilt, yet he or she might have done something monstrous to someone else. A psychopath lies to such an extent that it is often impossible to believe anything that comes from his or her mouth (unless the information can be verified). They live their lives freeloading off other, manipulating for personal gain, but give little to nothing in return.

If there are people like this, and there are millions, then how can we explain them? Thus far, no one has come up with a definitive answer to this question. A number of research studies has been conducted to find which variables in childhood lead to psychopathy,^{9, 10, 11} but nothing conclusive has been published. This translates into the fact that we know next to nothing concerning the etiology of the disorder. It could be genetics, it could be environment, or (more likely) it could be a mixture of the two, but we don't know for sure.

The one thing researchers know for sure is that psychopathy is a psychological construct defined by an indulgence in illegal, sexual, and violent impulses, with an apparent incapability to learn from past mistakes.¹² SPs gain pleasure from their manipulations, often stating that their victims deserve what they get for being trusting and obsequious. Nonetheless, their behavior is usually not as brazen as a CP.¹³ The SP learned at an early age that he or she was different from everyone else and never felt trepidation (unlike most people at a young age) about engaging in risky activities like using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs.¹⁴ He or she did not feel fear when facing a dangerous situation and might have engaged in activities simply because they were hazardous.¹⁵ Both CPs and SPs have the ability to love others, although in both cases, the love centers around their malignant narcissism. Ac-

⁹ Weiler, B. L., & Widom, C. S. (1996). Psychopathy and violent behaviour in abused and neglected young adults. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, 6(3), 253-271.

¹⁰ Blair, R. J. R., Peschardt, K., Budhani, S., Mitchell, D. G. V. & Pine, D. S. (2006). The development of psychopathy. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47(3-4), 262-276.

¹¹ Kotler, J. S., & McMahon, R. J. (2005). Child psychopathy: Theories, measurement, and relations with the development and persistence of conduct problems. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 8(4), 291-325.

¹² Forth, A. E., Cooke, D. C., & Hare, R.D. (1998). *Psychopathy: theory, research and implications for society*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.

¹³ Van Honk, J., Hermans, E. J., Putman, P., Montagne, B., & Schutter, D. J. (2002). Defective somatic markers in sub-clinical psychopathy. *Neuroreport* 12, 13 (8), 1025-1027.

¹⁴ Maillous, D. L., Forth, A. E., & Kroner, D. G. (1997). Psychopathy and substance use in adolescent male offenders. *Psychological Reports*, 81(2), 529-30.

¹⁵ Saltaris, C. (2002). Psychopathy in juvenile offenders: Can temperament and attachment be considered as robust developmental precursors? *Clinical Psychology Review*, 22(5), 729-752.

According to Guggenbuhl-Craig, psychopaths want power over all else.¹⁶ The socially adept psychopath may have a tumultuous personal life but can excel in his or her profession.¹⁷

Growing up, they realized that they did not feel emotions like others but grasped the value of appearing as if they did, so they learned how to pretend sadness, heartache, and other behaviors by closely watching others.¹⁸ In order to adjust to societal demands, they “compensate” or learn to act in a manner that hides their true personality. They train themselves how to laugh and joke, and they become highly skilled at showing concern for the welfare of others, even if the apprehension is merely pretense.¹⁹ Subclinical psychopaths are often intelligent and successful in their career, but what separates them from their normal colleagues is their intense desire to be number 1 and their complete lack of conscience in attaining their goals.²⁰ It should be noted, however, that SPs (unlike CPs) can feel loyalty toward others, even though it’s uncommon.

Herewith is a snippet of information taken from Robert D. Hare’s website:

And it’s really just beginning. Psychopathy may prove to be as important a construct in this century as IQ was in the last (and just as susceptible to abuse), because, thanks to Hare, we now understand that the great majority of psychopaths are not violent criminals and never will be. Hundreds of thousands of psychopaths live and work and prey among us. Your boss, your boyfriend, your mother could be what Hare calls a “subclinical” psychopath, someone who leaves a path of destruction and pain without a single pang of conscience. Even more worrisome is the fact that, at this stage, no one—not even Bob Hare—is quite sure what to do about it.²¹

The difference between an SP and a CP does not center on behavior, rationalizations, relationships with others, cognitions, etc.; rather, the difference is in intensity or prevalence.²² While subclinical psy-

¹⁶ Guggenbuhl-Craig, *The emptied soul: On the nature of the psychopath* (see Footnote 2).

¹⁷ Babiak, P. & Hare, R. D. (2006). *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work*. New York: Harper.

¹⁸ Dadds, M. R., et al., (2009). Learning to ‘talk the talk’: the relationship of psychopathic traits to deficits in empathy across childhood. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 50 (5), 599-606.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Forth, A. E., Cooke, D. C., & Hare, R.D. *Psychopathy: theory, research and implications for society* (see Footnote 12).

²¹ Hercz, *Psychopaths among us* (see Footnote 8).

²² Hesern, M., Thomas, J. C., & Segal, D. L. (2006). *Comprehensive handbook of personality and psychopathology*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Press.