

# Psychopathy: A Misunderstood Personality Disorder

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Psychopathic personalities are some of the most memorable characters portrayed in popular media today. These characters, like Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho*, Frank Abagnale Jr. from *Catch Me If You Can* and Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*, are typically depicted as charming, intriguing, dishonest, guiltless, and in some cases, downright terrifying. But scientific research suggests that psychopathy is a personality disorder that is widely misunderstood.

“Psychopathy tends to be used as a label for people we do not like, cannot understand, or construe as evil,” notes Jennifer Skeem, Professor of Psychology and Social Behavior at the University of California, Irvine. Skeem, Devon Polaschek of Victoria University of Wellington, Christopher Patrick of Florida State University, and Scott Lilienfeld of Emory University are the authors of a new monograph focused on understanding the psychopathic personality that will appear in the December issue of [Psychological Science in the Public Interest](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

In the course of their research, the authors reviewed many scientific findings that seemed to contradict one another. “Psychopathy has long been assumed to be a single personality disorder. However, there is increasing evidence that it is a confluence of several different personality traits,” Skeem says. The authors of the monograph argue that rather than being “one thing” as often assumed, psychopathy appears to be a complex, multifaceted condition marked by blends of personality traits reflecting differing levels of disinhibition, boldness, and meanness. And scientific findings also suggest that a sizable subgroup of juvenile and adult offenders labeled as psychopathic are actually more emotionally disturbed than emotionally detached, showing signs of anxiety and dysphoria.

According to Skeem, these important distinctions have long escaped the attention of psychologists and policy-makers. As a result, she and her co-authors set about to try to dispel some of the myths and assumptions that people often make about psychopathy. Although many people might assume that psychopaths are ‘born,’ not ‘made,’ the authors stress that psychopathy is not just a matter of genes – it appears to have multiple constitutional causes that can be shaped by environmental factors. Many psychologists also assume that psychopathy is inalterable – once a psychopath, always a psychopath. However, there is currently scant scientific evidence to support this claim. Recent empirical work suggests that youth and adults with high scores on measures of psychopathy can show reduced violent and other criminal behavior after intensive treatment.

Along with challenging the assumption that psychopathy is a monolithic entity, perhaps the other most important myth that the authors hope to dispel is that psychopathy is synonymous with violence. Skeem points out that psychopathic individuals often have no history of violent behaviour or criminal convictions. “Psychopathy cannot be equated with extreme violence or serial killing. In fact, “psychopaths” do not appear different in kind from other people, or inalterably dangerous,” she observes. Nor is it clear that psychopathy predicts violence much better than a past history of violent and other criminal behavior – or general antisocial traits.

Effectively dispelling these myths is important, the authors argue, because accurate policy recommendations hinge on which personality traits – and which groups of people – associated with psychopathy one is examining. “Decisions about juvenile and adult offenders that are based on faulty assumptions about violence risk, etiology, and treatment amenability have adverse consequences, both for individual offenders and the public,” Skeem says.

In clarifying the personality traits that characterize psychopathy, scientists can contribute to prevention and treatment strategies that improve public health and safety. “In short, research on psychopathy has evolved to a level that it can greatly improve on the current, ‘one size fits all’ policy approach,” concludes Skeem.