

Psychopath. Successful psychopath.

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Forest “Tommy” Yeo-Thomas was a real-life swashbuckler, charismatic and daring. The World War II British spy, known as the “White Rabbit” to the Nazis, employed an array of disguises and fake documents to elude the enemy in Vichy France, once pretending to be a corpse while traveling in a coffin. He withstood severe torture by the Gestapo, leapt from a moving train, and strangled a prison guard with his bare hands. He was also known as a seducer of beautiful women.

Most people have never heard of Yeo-Thomas, though most are familiar with his fictional incarnation. He was the inspiration for novelist Ian Fleming’s flamboyant hero Bond. James Bond.

I read about Yeo-Thomas for the first time just recently, in a forthcoming paper in the journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. Three Emory University psychological scientists—Scott Lilienfeld, Ashley Watts and Sarah Smith—use the adventurous spy’s life to illustrate a clinical type they call the “successful psychopath.” Long the stuff of clinical lore, the successful psychopath displays many of the core features of the malignant psychopathic personality—but with real-life success rather than crime and imprisonment. Although most of what’s known about psychopathy comes from failed criminals locked up in prison, the Emory scientists raise the intriguing possibility that many psychopaths are actually thriving in the real world, perhaps occupying the higher echelons of professional life.

In this current literature review, the scientists review the existing evidence supporting the idea of a high-functioning psychopath, and they attempt to answer some basic questions about the concept: Is the successful psychopath simply a milder version of the clinical psychopath? Or is he—almost always a man—an atypical manifestation of the disorder, in which the unsavory traits have been tempered by protective factors like intelligence and effective parenting? Or is the adaptive version of psychopathy an altogether different constellation of personality traits, such as boldness and conscientiousness?

The quintessential psychopath is a paradoxical mix of traits: On the one hand, the psychopath is superficially charming, articulate and devoid of anxiety, but he is also guiltless, callous, self-centered and aimless. These traits allow psychopaths to dupe others into believing they are trustworthy. In an early attempt to identify successful psychopaths in the community, scientists advertised in a Boston underground newspaper for “charming, aggressive, carefree people who are impulsively irresponsible but are good at handling people and looking out for number one.” This yielded a sample of 28 individuals with similarities to psychopaths previously studied in prisons. They had low scores on empathy, and elevated scores on psychopathy traits. But they had normal executive functioning, including impulse control. Two in three had been arrested at least once, and most were at the low end of professional achievement.

This early, inconclusive study suggests that successful psychopaths may be lower on certain psychopathic traits and higher on others—a conclusion supported by more recent studies as well. One study, for example, recruited men from temporary employment agencies in Los Angeles, and compared

those who had been convicted with those who had not. The successful ones had significantly lower scores on antisocial behaviors, but the unsuccessful men—that is, those convicted of crimes—had higher scores on traits like superficial charm, narcissism and guiltlessness.

Are successful psychopaths “protected” in some way from their more unsavory tendencies? A few studies point this way. Comparing imprisoned and non-imprisoned subjects, these investigations suggest that successful psychopaths have higher autonomic nervous system reactivity—they are not as emotionally cool—and higher executive function. These assets may be protective, allowing successful psychopaths to channel their traits into socially adaptive behavior. Similarly, other scientists have examined the protective role of parenting for children who are callous and lacking in guilt and empathy. In some but not all of these studies, positive parenting practices, like warmth and reinforcement, seem to act as a buffer, diminishing antisocial behavior in kids at risk for adult psychopathy.

Many of these studies have used a loose definition of “successful”—basically those who have avoided imprisonment. By contrast, a recent study asked lawyers, psychologists and academics to identify a psychopath—defined as a charming and guiltless social predator who had achieved personal success. They were asked to describe their high-achieving psychopath’s personality traits. There were some noteworthy differences between successful and unsuccessful psychopaths (characterized from previous studies): The successful ones showed higher levels of assertiveness and excitement-seeking, and also conscientiousness, including self-discipline. They were also lower on agreeableness. (Interestingly, three out of four clinical psychology professors identified a current or past academic colleague as a successful psychopath.)

Recent work has focused on what’s called “fearless dominance”—encompassing physical fearlessness, interpersonal poise and potency, and emotional resilience. Such boldness is not sufficient in itself for psychopathy, but it may be a marker for the successful features of psychopathy—and may have implications for leadership. Scientists asked 121 presidential biographers and other experts to rate 42 U.S. presidents, up to and including George W. Bush, on their pre-office traits of fearless dominance. They found that fearless dominance was significantly associated with overall presidential performance, leadership, public persuasiveness, communication ability and willingness to take risks. Scientists have examined the relation between fearless dominance and “everyday heroism”—that is, altruism entailing social or physical risk, like administering CPR to a stranger in need. Fearless dominance was associated with such everyday heroism, and it was also associated with early wartime heroism among U.S. presidents.

So are psychopaths and heroes simply “twigs from the same branch”? Perhaps, although the successful psychopath remains something of a scientific enigma. This provisional evidence points to some tantalizing possibilities, but we still do not know for sure why one person with pronounced psychopathic traits ends up as a habitual and cold-blooded criminal, while another ends up as the prototype for Agent 007.

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