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Psychologist adds scientific insight to loaded label of 'psychopath'

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For most people on the planet, the term "psychopath" evokes thoughts of violence and bloodshed - and evil of the darkest kind. But during 25 years, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has built a body of work that may help temper such deeply ingrained perceptions.

Sure, people do commit horrific, unimaginable crimes. But does that automatically mean they are psychopathic? And what is "psychopathy" anyway? With unique research access to prison inmate populations in Wisconsin, Joseph Newman has devoted his career to answering such questions.

The proper understanding of psychopathy has implications for the treatment of inmates everywhere - particularly for those who are wrongfully labeled. Newman's work could also serve as the backbone of new behavioral interventions that target psychopathic behaviors.

"My main concern is that the label (of psychopath) is applied too liberally and without sufficient understanding of the key elements," says Newman, who is chair of the UW-Madison psychology department. "As a result, the term is often applied to ordinary criminals and sex offenders whose behavior may reflect primarily social factors or other emotional problems that are more amenable to treatment than psychopathy."

But trying to alter stereotypes about a reviled segment of society has been a long and uphill road. For one thing, prison studies are notoriously difficult to do, as researchers must contend with a laundry list of

challenges such as issues of access and other constraints related to the protection of inmate rights. The field of psychopathy is also a contentious one, and Newman - who has put forward a provocative theory about the condition - has consistently faced opposition from his scientific peers.

The scientist has persevered, however, demonstrating in study after study the potential merit of his claims. And during the years, Newman's patient, steady approach has earned the respect of top researchers in the field.

"In looking back, I see (Newman) as one of the preeminent research scientists in the field - his work is ingenious, meticulous, methodologically sophisticated and driven by theory," says Robert Hare, a leading psychopathy expert at the University of British Columbia. "I really think he's the top man in the area."

So who are psychopaths? Broadly speaking, they are people who use manipulation, violence and intimidation to control others and satisfy selfish needs. They can be intelligent and highly charismatic, but display a chronic inability to feel guilt, remorse or anxiety about any of their actions.

Scientists estimate that 15-25 percent of men and 7-15 percent of women in U.S. prisons display psychopathic behaviors. The condition, however, is hardly restricted to the prison system. Newman estimates that up to 1 percent of the general population could be described as psychopathic. Surprisingly, many who fall into that bracket might lead perfectly conventional lives as doctors, scientists and company CEOs.

"Psychopathy appears to exist throughout the world and has probably existed throughout history," Newman says.

Behavioral specialists now use the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised - a diagnostic questionnaire created by Hare - to detect psychopathy. But although there is finally consensus on the best way to identify the condition, there is still a lot of disagreement on why it occurs in the first place.

The dominant scientific model asserts that psychopathic individuals are incapable of fear or other emotions, which in turn makes them indifferent to other people's feelings.

But Newman has a different idea entirely. He believes that psychopathy is essentially a type of learning disability or "informational processing deficit" that makes individuals oblivious to the implications of their actions when focused on tasks that promise instant reward. Being focused on a short-term goal, Newman suggests, makes psychopathic individuals incapable of detecting surrounding cues such as another person's discomfort or fear.

In a study he repeated in different prison populations, for instance, Newman examined how quickly psychopathic and non-psychopathic individuals respond to a series of mislabeled images, such as a drawing of a pig with the word "dog" superimposed on it. Researchers flashed each image and then timed how long it took for subjects to name what they saw.

Over and over again, Newman found that non-psychopathic subjects subconsciously stumbled on the misleading labels and took longer to name the images. But psychopathic subjects barely noticed the discrepancy and consistently answered more quickly.

Newman says the result is one instance of how psychopathic individuals have difficulty processing peripheral cues, even when those cues are entirely obvious to everyone else. Furthermore, the study task didn't

involve any of the emotions that people commonly associate with psychopathy, such as anger or a lack of fear. So the fact that psychopathic subjects barely noticed the wrongful labels - even in the absence of emotional cues - supports the idea that a psychological deficit might be at play.

"People think (psychopaths) are just callous and without fear, but there is definitely something more going on," Newman says. "When emotions are their primary focus, we've seen that psychopathic individuals show a normal (emotional) response. But when focused on something else, they become insensitive to emotions entirely."

Such studies certainly haven't been easy to do. Prison staff, space and financial resources are usually in short supply, and because inmate movements are restricted, Newman and his students routinely work under challenging time limitations. Still, the unwavering cooperation from the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) has far outweighed any problems. Indeed, the willingness of the DOC to grant him research access was one of the main reasons why Newman, a New Jersey native, decided to join the UW-Madison faculty in 1981.

"The cooperation that exists between the Wisconsin DOC and my university project is unprecedented and enviable," says Newman. "Over the years, the project has involved thousands of inmates, prison staff, university research assistants and correctional officials. We have never had a negative incident or breach of confidentiality and I believe everyone has benefited from this collaboration and found it to be enjoyable."

Dale Bespalec, the psychologist supervisor at the Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility, believes that Newman's work is crucial at a time when correctional authorities nationwide are struggling to understand the most effective ways to work with psychopathic individuals.

"We need to know more about this population as it presents unique challenges to the prison system and our efforts at rehabilitation and treatment," he says. " Everything that we can learn (about psychopathy) can impact our attempts to change people's patterns of behavior. Newman's work is likely to impact the entire field and not just Wisconsin."

But for psychopathy research to give rise to new behavioral treatment approaches, Newman says scientists need to get together, discuss ideas and continually challenge the status quo. "There has been a tendency to recycle the same intuitively appealing ideas rather than pursue critical tests of new ideas," he says.

To help generate fresh discussion and debate, Newman and others recently founded the Society for the Scientific Study of Psychopathy. The group, which has about 100 members, held its first international meeting in Canada last year.

"In addition to attracting talent to the field, it is important for investigators to cooperate," says Newman. "We need to listen to each other to benefit from feedback, we need to acknowledge the importance of diverse questions, and we need to cooperate in communicating the importance of this significant mental health problem."

Source: University of Wisconsin

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