

# Myths about psychopaths busted

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(Medical Xpress) -- New research challenges the belief that psychopaths are born not made, and suggests psychopaths may even be able to change their spots.

While psychopaths in the popular [imagination](#) like Patrick Bateman in the film *American Psycho* or Alex in *Clockwork Orange* are portrayed as charming, guiltless and terrifying, the research suggests that [psychopathy](#) is a much more complex personality disorder and one that is widely misunderstood.

Dr Devon Polaschek from Victoria University's School of Psychology was one of four researchers who examined psychopathy in research about to be published in the leading public policy journal of the Association for Psychological Science, *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*.

"We pulled together the very extensive research and theoretical literature on psychopathy and one of the important things we found was the lack of consensus among scientists about the disorder," says Dr Polaschek.

She says the research sought to dispel some of the myths and assumptions that people often make about psychopathy.

"There's a view that psychopaths are born not made but research doesn't support this. It's also not always a lifelong disorder per se -- people who show signs of psychopathy in adolescence don't necessarily show this in early adulthood for instance, or vice versa," she says.

“Most significantly, although many people assume that psychopathy is untreatable, there is next to no scientific evidence either way.”

Dr Polaschek, a clinical psychologist, came to this research because of her work with high risk prisoners.

"My work is focused on their rehabilitation and reducing criminal risk through well-designed psychological programmes."

She says their research indicates that a sizeable group of adult offenders labelled as psychopathic are actually more emotionally disturbed than emotionally detached.

"The research raises some key issues about how we should deal with this problem. Gaining a clear understanding of the disorder is important because important public policy decisions are made based on research," says Dr Polaschek.

Provided by Victoria University

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