

Psychopaths not all psychos

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"There is no real recipe for psychopathic personality disorder," says Jennifer Skeem, UCI professor of psychology & social behavior. "The environmental factors are as ill-defined as the genetic factors, although antisocial behavior mixed with a history of punitive discipline, abuse and neglect seems to apply in many cases." Credit: Steve Zylius / University Communications

Jennifer Skeem's research requires that she spend time inside the minds of individuals most of us try to avoid: psychopaths.

Psychopathy is a complicated and widely misunderstood personality disorder, says the UC Irvine professor of psychology & social behavior, marked by boldness, fearlessness, cruelty, aggression and impulsivity.

While some people believe psychopaths are born, not made, Skeem stresses that the condition is shaped by the complex interaction of both environmental and genetic factors.

"There is no real recipe for psychopathic personality disorder," she says. "The environmental factors are as ill-defined as the genetic factors, although antisocial behavior mixed with a history of punitive discipline, abuse and neglect seems to apply in many cases."

Some of Skeem's findings might come as a

surprise to a public that equates the condition with serial killers and fictional characters such as Hannibal Lecter.

Psychopathy is not synonymous with violence, Skeem notes. In fact, she has found that psychopathic people often have no history of violent behavior or criminal convictions.

"An individual doesn't necessarily need to be physically violent or a common street criminal to have psychopathic traits," she says. Researchers estimate that about 1 percent of the general population are psychopaths.

Skeem points to Gordon Gekko, the unscrupulous financial executive played by Michael Douglas in the 1987 film "Wall Street," as someone with all the signs of psychopathy.

She cites Ponzi scheme mastermind Bernie Madoff and Enron executive Andrew Fastow - ruthless, detached individuals who showed little remorse for robbing victims of their life savings - as real-life examples. Psychopathic traits helped them quickly climb the corporate ladder yet ultimately led to their downfall.

Can such traits ever be used for good? Skeem notes that the bold, risk-taking bomb squad leader in the Academy Award-winning movie "The Hurt Locker" succeeded in a high-pressure environment thanks to psychopathic tendencies.

Of course, some psychopaths do resort to violence and crime. But according to Skeem, youth and adults with high scores on measures of psychopathy can exhibit reduced violent and criminal behavior after intensive treatment, such as mental health counseling and drug abuse rehabilitation.

"There is scant scientific evidence to support the claim of 'once a psychopath, always a psychopath,'" she says.

While not necessarily destructive or physically threatening, psychopaths are usually unpleasant people. Callousness, selfishness and lack of guilt make personal and professional relationships with them unbearable.

So how should you handle a psychopath in the workplace or at your next family reunion?

"You can try to work with the individual to get him or her therapy and treatment," Skeem says. "But if you don't have that kind of investment in the person, it's best to keep a distance."

She directs the School of Social Ecology's Risk Reduction Research Lab, where her team focuses on understanding why some people with mental disorders engage in self-harm, violence and criminal behavior - and others do not.

Skeem hopes her work can be used to inform legal decisions - on sentencing and parole, for example - concerning high-risk, high-need individuals. Decisions based on faulty assumptions about risk for violence and amenability to treatment can have adverse consequences for both offenders and the public, she notes.

"Research on psychopathy has evolved to a level that it can greatly improve on the current one-size-fits-all policy approach," Skeem says.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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