

Psychopaths' disregard for others is not automatic

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Psychopaths exhibit callous disregard for the welfare of others, suggesting an inability to understand the perspective of people around them. Yet they can also be extremely charming and manipulative, seemingly indicating an awareness of the thoughts of others. This paradox has perplexed researchers, clinicians, legal authorities, and the lay public.

A new Yale study shows that psychopaths lack the ability to automatically assess thoughts of those around them, a process that underlies the formation of human social bonds. However, if asked to deliberately assess thoughts of those around them, they can process the thoughts of others.

"Psychopaths can be extremely manipulative, which requires understanding of another's thoughts," said Yale's Arielle Baskin-Sommers, professor of psychology and senior author of the study published March 12 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. "But if they understand the [thought](#) of others, why do they inflict so much harm?"

Baskin-Sommers received permission from the Connecticut Department of Correction to study inmates in maximum security prisons. Along with colleagues Lindsey Drayton and Laurie Santos, she had inmates play a computer game in which they were asked to perform a task from either their own perspective or that of an avatar on the screen dressed as an inmate.

Most people find it difficult to ignore the perspective of the avatar entirely, even if they are charged with playing the computer game from their own viewpoint, Baskin-Sommers said. "It is like speaking in front of a class: Your attention should not be on the audience, but it is impossible to ignore social cues such as eye rolling or yawning," she said. "That reflects our automatic process of considering the thoughts of those around us."

Psychopaths do not automatically pick up such cues, the study suggests. Also, inmates who scored high on [psychopathic traits](#) and showed the greatest degree of this deficit were more likely to have been convicted of assault crimes. However, when asked specifically to perform a task from the perspective of the avatar, even psychopaths showed they can accurately understand the perspective of others.

Psychopaths seem to have the ability consider the thoughts of others—only if there is a specific goal they want to accomplish, Baskin-Sommers explained.

Researchers say the hope is to understand the complexity of the psychopathic mind and consider ways to teach psychopathic individuals to develop strategies to consider those around them.

More information: Lindsey A. Drayton et al. Psychopaths fail to automatically take the perspective of others, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1721903115](#)

Provided by Yale University

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