

CONCEPT OF PSYCHOPATHIC POSITIVE-ADJUSTMENT TRAITS: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THEORY AND RESEARCH

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Although psychopathy is commonly regarded as a disorder closely related to criminality, there is also increasing attention paid to its non-criminal form and the adaptive features of psychopathic personality. The aim of this article is to introduce the concept of psychopathic traits of good adaptation, both in light of the theoretical foundations of the construct and the empirical data. The article demonstrates the presence of such traits in classical and contemporary models of psychopathy, in the evolutionary approach, and in relation to the division into primary and secondary psychopathy. Furthermore, it reviews the studies on the prevalence of adaptive features of psychopathy in different professional groups. The attempt to operationalize the construct of psychopathic traits of good adaptation—the Durand Adaptive Psychopathic Traits Questionnaire (Durand, 2019)—is also discussed. Finally, the limitations of using the concept of adaptive traits of psychopathy are analysed.

Keywords: psychopathy; non-criminal psychopathy; personality disorders; boldness.

Ever since the term *psychopathy* was introduced into psychopathology and abnormal psychology, it has been used primarily in a clinical context to describe a particular type of personality disorder. It is characterised by deficits at the level of affective functioning (lack of empathy, guilt and remorse, shallow emotional-

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ity, low emotional reactivity), disinhibition and an interpersonal style based on a tendency to manipulate and exploit the social environment (Patrick et al., 2009). Many authors believe that this combination of symptoms is closely associated with a predisposition to violate social and legal norms, and that psychopathy itself should be considered a personality predictor of crime (Dhingra & Boduszek, 2013; Beaver et al., 2017; Lee & Kim, 2022). The criminogenic nature of psychopathic personality¹ is both the focus of the classic McCord approach (1964) and the concept underlying the most popular tool for measuring psychopathy, the Psychopathy Checklist—Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003). A considerable body of evidence, however, suggests that antisociality and delinquent behavior should be regarded as secondary to the axial, personality-based symptoms of the disorder (Skeem & Cook, 2010).

In the discussion around the phenomenon of psychopathy and its link to criminal and socially undesirable lifestyles, there arises the question of the existence of a non-criminal subtype of the disorder—a category of the so-called successful psychopaths (Hall & Benning, 2006; Mullins-Sweatt et al., 2010; Cigna et al., 2018). Thus, the scope of the studies on the subject includes the search for those features of psychopathy that are not directly maladaptive in nature, but enable psychopathic individuals to function normally in the social environment, and under certain conditions even foster better performance.

Adaptive Features of Psychopathy in Classical and Contemporary Models

The concept of the adaptive features of psychopathy is not entirely new in attempts to develop a clinical model of the disorder. Notably, as regards the diagnostic criteria of the disorder, Harvey Cleckley (1941/1976), in his work “The Mask of Sanity”, lists symptoms that are not strictly pathological, such as superficial personal charm and brilliance, lack of delusions and other symptoms of thought disturbances, lack of anxiety and neurotic symptoms, and low suicidal risk. Such traits form a kind of mental wellness “mask” that hinders the clinical diagnosis of the disorder and allows psychopathic individuals to camouflage their severe emotional deficits or behavioral regulation problems (Patrick, 2018). Although in Cleckley’s view the

¹ There are two general approaches, taxometric and dimensional, used in current conceptualizations and measures of psychopathy (Wright, 2009). In the first approach, psychopathy is considered as a personality disorder, i.e. nosological entity, a variant of antisocial personality disorder (Dunne, 2021), and its measurement is based on behavioral and clinical symptoms. In the second approach, psychopathy is viewed as a configuration of personality traits which are only considered psychopathological when manifesting to an extreme degree. The dimensional approach is not only a useful alternative model for classifications of personality disorders (Anderson & Kelly, 2022) but also supports research on adaptive traits on psychopathy, discussed in this review.

core and distinctiveness of psychopathy lies primarily in disturbances at the affective level, the aforementioned non-pathological characteristics are an important element that distinguishes psychopathy from other nosological entities. In the clinical context, the adaptive function of the traits that form the “mask” is associated with the image of a mentally healthy and well-adjusted person, while in the non-clinical context, these traits enable the individual to function in society despite damage to the environment that results from the psychopath’s lifestyle. It is worth noting that Cleckley’s diagnostic criteria for psychopathic personality do not include any behavioral indicators directly related to criminality, which is consistent with the view that criminal psychopathy should be treated only as one of the varieties or subtypes of this disorder.

Although Cleckley’s prototypical model was one of the inspirations for Hare’s two-factor concept, the PCL-R itself does not distinguish traits that are a counterpart of those of the “mask” of psychopathy. The tool admittedly includes items related to positive self-presentation, ease of speaking or high self-esteem, but they are treated primarily as components of an interpersonal style based on a tendency to manipulate, lie and cheat, which is closely linked to the violation of legal norms and antisocial behavior. However, adaptive features of psychopathy are present in alternatives to the clinical PCL-R scale—in self-report tools such as the Psychopathic Personality Inventory—Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005) and the Triarchic Psychopathy Measure (TriPM; Patrick, 2010). These tools, using a dimensional approach, allow for the measurement of psychopathic trait intensity in the general population, going beyond the diagnosis in clinical or forensic settings.

Between the two main factors of the PPI-R, i.e., fearless dominance (FD) and self-centered impulsivity (SCI), the former refers to the characteristics of psychopathy related to the indicators of psychological adjustment. The FD factor is composed of three subscales: social influence (the ability to manipulate others, exert influence on and resist influence from the environment, the tendency to dominate in interpersonal relationships), stress immunity (the ability to cope under pressure, uncertainty and stress) and fearlessness (engaging in dangerous, high-risk and highly stimulating behavior). The “boldness” dimension in the TriPM based on the triarchic model of psychopathy (Patrick et al., 2009) appears to be analogous to the fearless dominance construct. On this view, boldness describes a combination of interpersonal characteristics (bold, dominant, confident, decisive, subordinating others, lacking social anxiety) and specific low reactivity to dangerous, stressful or highly stimulating situations. The factor analysis data indicates that the boldness component also consists of three factors: positive self-image, leadership, and stress immunity (Roy et al., 2021).

Fearless dominance and boldness refer to a similar diagnostic domain, which is supported by data from validation studies on measures combining the PPI with the triarchic model (e.g., PPI-Tri Scale; Hall et al., 2014) and by the strong positive correlation between the two scales, observed in both non-criminal and penitentiary populations (van Dongen et al., 2017). Some researchers are of the opinion that the constructs of fearless dominance and boldness can be considered equivalent and thus reflecting the character of the adaptive traits of psychopathy (Lilienfeld et al., 2016). Studies conducted with PPI-R and TriPM reveal that, in contrast to the other components of psychopathy, fearless dominance/boldness are associated with the psychological adjustment indicators such as low level of stress and depression (Dalkner et al., 2018) and prosocial behavior (Gatner et al., 2016), and positively correlate with general intelligence (Sanchez de Ribera et al., 2019) and the ability to perceive emotions (Copestake et al., 2013). There is ample evidence suggesting that the traits of psychopathy within the fearless dominance/boldness construct are also weakly associated with externalising behavior (Crowe et al., 2021). This data thus supports the notion that certain features of psychopathy are not directly psychopathological and criminogenic in nature. It seems that it is the intensity of these “masking” traits, alongside reduced indicators of callousness and disinhibition, that are largely associated with the non-criminal behavioral pattern of successful psychopaths (Hall & Benning, 2006).

The construct of adaptive traits of psychopathy also appears in studies dealing with the application of factor models of personality (Big Five, HEXACO) to the measurement of personality disorders. Research using the Five Factor Model of Personality has shown that although psychopathy in its interpretation as a configuration of the FFM dimensions is associated with a range of criminal and socially undesirable behaviors (Miller & Lynam, 2003), some of the core features of the disorder—such as assertiveness—do not have a psychopathological connotation (Lynam & Widiger, 2007). The Elemental Psychopathy Assessment/EPA concept developed on the basis of the FFM (Lynam et al., 2011) does not explicitly indicate which of the basic features of psychopathy should be described as adaptive. However, among the four factors forming the structure of psychopathic personality—interpersonal antagonism, narcissism, disinhibition and emotional stability—the last one is most related to the indicators of positive adjustment (Bronchain et al., 2020). Similar conclusions could be based on data obtained in analyses conducted with HEXACO, which reveal a convergence of the boldness factor from the triarchic conception of psychopathy with personality measures of extraversion and emotional stability (Marcus et al., 2019; Collison et al., 2021).

Apart from the trait models of psychopathy, grounds for the distinction of adaptive traits in the structure of psychopathic personality, are provided by the concepts of evolutionary psychology. The evolutionary approach enables psychopathy to be considered as a strategy for adaptation in social environments and dealing with problems related to survival and reproduction (Glenn et al., 2011). Analyses conducted on this subject suggest that the low emotional reactivity typical of psychopathy may be useful in coping with severe stressors (da Silva et al., 2015), while a psychopathic lifestyle (the “live fast, die young” philosophy) and involvement in many, short-term intimate relationships increases the chances of reproductive success (Del Giudice, 2014). Studies on male inmates with the use of PCL-R have shown a positive correlation between reproductive success and the interpersonal aspect of psychopathy (Mededovic et al., 2017), leading to the conclusion that it is the ability to positively self-present and manipulate others that largely determines the effectiveness of the psychopathic adaptive strategy. These traits also allow the exploitation of the social environment and facilitate access to resources, creating a form of camouflage that covers the predatory/parasitic nature of the psychopath. Thus, from the evolutionary point of view, the traits corresponding to the “mask” of psychopathy in the Cleckleyian sense appear to have a dual function: adaptive (they enable the pursuit of a particular pattern of adaptation, especially under difficult environmental conditions; cf. Jonason et al., 2016) and compensatory (they allow periodic concealment of a range of psychopathic traits such as a propensity to break rules, egocentrism and irresponsibility, which are clearly socially undesirable and maladaptive, in terms of the population’s survival as a whole).

The last important aspect of contemporary research on psychopathic personality traits relating to adaptive properties of the disorder is the issue of heterogeneity of psychopathy and, consequently, the existence of its different subtypes. In the literature on this subject, a differentiation stemming from Karpman’s (1948) distinction between primary and secondary psychopathy is used. Primary psychopathy is characterized by emotional deficits, lack of empathy, low level of anxiety and manipulation of the social environment. It is believed that this subtype of the disorder has a strong biological basis. On the other hand, in the etiology of secondary psychopathy, a greater influence is attributed to environmental factors, such as trauma or unfavorable upbringing conditions. Secondary psychopathy is associated with high levels of anxiety and impulsivity, negative emotionality, hostility, and a tendency to reactive aggression.

The distinction between primary and secondary psychopathy is supported by findings from neuropsychological research (Koenigs et al., 2011). Primary psychopathy is related to reduced amygdala reactivity, while secondary psychopathy is linked with impaired prefrontal functionality (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). Other

studies also showed that both subtypes of psychopathy have different neurocognitive correlates, particularly in fear response (Sethi et al., 2018). The neurobiological model of successful and unsuccessful psychopathy (Gao & Raine, 2010) indicates a dual pathway in psychopathy etiology. Unsuccessful psychopaths exhibit several brain and psychophysiological abnormalities. These impairments are associated with poor behavioral control, social maladjustment and overt aggressive behaviors, similarly to secondary psychopathy. Neuropsychological functioning of successful psychopaths is not linked with decreased self-regulation and is revealed mostly in emotional processing deficits (e.g., damaged emotional empathy). The concept of successful psychopathy from the neurobiological model seems to be convergent with the primary subtype of psychopathy. Both constructs have a similar etiological background and neural foundations, and refer to psychopathic traits protecting against conviction and criminality.

At the theoretical level, features of psychopathy that are considered adaptive (e.g., resilience to stress, exertion of influence) are more often attributed to primary psychopathy than to secondary psychopathy, which is more associated with social maladjustment and delinquency (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). Research using measurement tools that take primary/secondary psychopathy into account such as the Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (LSRP; Levenson et al., 1995) suggests that while primary psychopathy does not co-occur with difficulties in social functioning, it also does not contribute to better performance in relationships with others (Baird, 2002). However, some findings show associations between primary psychopathy and strategically adaptive behaviors in social interactions (Osumi & Ohira, 2017).

The Durand Adaptive Psychopathy Traits Concept

The most recent concept referring to the adaptive function of psychopathic traits is proposed by Durand (2019). In reviewing the research on the correlates of the FD/PPI-I factor, the author identified the following three categories of non-pathological and positively adapted symptoms of psychopathic personality: social (e.g., self-presentation, management, and influence skills), protective (e.g., low anxiety and stress indicators, absence of fear and neurotic symptoms), and personality (e.g., boldness, high self-esteem, decisiveness, low impulsivity). Durand's intention was to construct a tool that measures the adaptive properties associated with psychopathy within the theoretical model underlying the PPI. This approach is an alternative to the triarchic model, which considers positive-adjustment features of psychopathy more in relation to meanness and disinhibition rather than as a unitary construct. In comparison to previously discussed classical and current models

of psychopathy, Duran's concept is the only one that focuses solely on the adaptive psychopathic features.

Resulting from an empirical verification of the existence of this particular configuration of psychopathy characteristics, the Durand Adaptive Psychopathic Traits Questionnaire/DAPTQ (Durand, 2019) contains nine scales: (1) Leadership—the ability to lead others and adopt the role of a leader; (2) Logical Thinking—a tendency to act based on rational judgement and calculation rather than emotions; (3) Composure—efficient handling of situations under pressure, the influence of strong emotions or stress; (4) Creativity—the ability to think outside the box; (5) Fearlessness—indifference to stimuli inducing fear or anxiety; (6) Money smart—financial resources management in an effective manner; (7) Focus—low susceptibility to attention distractors; (8) Extraversion—coping well with social exposure, quickly adjusting to different groups and social situations); and (9) Management—the ability to lead others, manage tasks or people.

The validation studies confirmed the presence of the expected positive correlation between the DAPTQ, and the PPI-I factor, primary psychopathy as measured by the LSRP, the four Big Five personality dimensions (except neuroticism), and risk-taking propensity. The DPAQ total score negatively correlated with secondary psychopathy, as well as state anxiety and perceived stress. Meanwhile, analyses conducted on a large sample of French students showed that the presence of adaptive traits of psychopathy as measured by the DAPTQ is associated with reduced indicators of psychopathology like depression or suicidal thoughts (Bronchain et al., 2021). This data corresponds with the basic theoretical assumptions of the Durand model, nevertheless—as the author emphasizes—the tool requires further validation work, especially with regard to individual subscales. This suggestion seems all the more justified, as the model itself is relatively heterogeneous and is a mixture of strictly personality traits (e.g., extraversion) and variables of cognitive nature, i.e. abilities (e.g., focus). The need for further in-depth research in this area is also evident when looking at the results of a cluster analysis, which suggest heterogeneity of the adaptive traits of psychopathy and their uneven distribution across psychopathic personality subtypes (Bronchain et al., 2020). Notwithstanding the need for broader support from other analyses, the operationalization of the construct of psychopathic traits of positive adaptation in the form of the DAPTQ is an important step forward in the field of research on the non-criminal variant of psychopathy.

Positive-Adjustment Traits of Psychopathy and Successful Psychopathy: Workplace as an Example

Contemporary studies on adaptive features of psychopathy are part of the broader stream of research on the non-criminal variant of psychopathy, also known as successful psychopathy (Benning et al., 2018). The subgroup of well-adjusted and non-convicted psychopaths living in society was already present in Cleckley's (1941/1976) conceptualisation of psychopathy. Successful psychopathy is currently considered in three theoretical approaches: the differential severity model, the moderated expression model and the differential configuration model (Lilienfeld et al., 2015; Hall & Benning, 2006).

The differential severity model is based on a dimensional approach to personality disorders. According to this model the difference between successful and criminal psychopathy lies in the decreased intensity of core psychopathic symptoms. The second approach asserts the same etiology of criminal and successful type of psychopathy. However, the developmental trajectory of successful psychopathy is influenced by protective factors (e.g., high intelligence, high socioeconomic status of caregivers) that modify the pattern of psychopathic traits toward a more adaptive expression. In contrast to this approach, the differential-configuration model posits two separate etiological pathways of successful and criminal psychopathy. Furthermore, both subtypes of psychopathy are considered to be relatively independent in terms of design and severity of psychopathic features.

Successful psychopaths are a strongly heterogeneous group that differs in the range of social adjustment. The basic cut-off criterion for successful type of psychopathy is lack of incarceration; however, studies on successful psychopaths reveal that the term 'successful' is linked with various forms and degrees of adaptation, going far beyond lack of criminal records (Lilienfeld et al., 2015; Benning et al., 2018). A significant body of research in this area concerns the prevalence of so-called high-functioning psychopaths in society—those found among executives, in business or corporate environments (Brooks & Fritzon, 2016). Underlying these analyses is the assumption that some of the psychopathic traits may be conducive to financial, professional and career success in organisations, and that the status achieved through them allows for easier access to economic resources, power or prestige.

Data collected from a large sample from Europe and the USA suggest that high indicators of the fearless dominance factor are associated with holding leadership and managerial positions (Lilienfeld et al., 2014). Similarly, research conducted in corporations confirms that individuals with psychopathic traits are present among managers at different levels of the organisational structure of companies (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013). Interpersonal characteristics of psychopathy—related to posi-

tive self-presentation, creating an appropriate self-image, or manipulating others—positively correlate with employee characteristics highly rated and valued by organizations, such as creativity and innovativeness, strategic thinking, and communication skills (Babiak et al., 2010). A similar correlation exists between the non-fear dominance factor and measures of career success, such as earned income or corporate position (Howe et al., 2014; Blickle & Genau, 2019). Additionally, the traits of psychopathy within the boldness factor have been shown to be predictors of both better performance and well-being among employees (Sutton et al., 2020). Some studies also showed that psychopathic traits (relating to the FD/boldness construct) can be considered adaptive in the workplace and increase the chances of career success (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013; Eisenbarth et al., 2018).

Research on the correlation between psychopathy and occupational effectiveness conducted outside corporations or business is less numerous. The hypothesis of the paradoxical utility of psychopathic traits was tested on police officers among other occupational groups (Falkenbach et al., 2017; Falkenbach et al., 2018). These studies suggest that a certain combination of the adaptive traits of psychopathy, consisting of stress resilience, fearlessness, and low emotional reactivity, is conducive to successful performance in tasks involving law enforcement and increases capacity to handle stressors typical of a police officer's work environment. The correlation between the intensity of adaptive traits of psychopathy and occupational stress has also been observed among British doctors, particularly surgeons. This group shows high indicators of stress resilience and fearlessness (Pegrum & Pearce, 2015). A slightly different profile of psychopathic traits emerges from the studies of leaders and political figures. In this case, the adaptive characteristics of psychopathy related to interpersonal functioning and social influence skills are the most pronounced. Based on a retrospective estimation of psychopathy traits in the US presidents, Lilienfeld, Waldman, et al. (2012) showed that the factor of fearless dominance is positively associated with measures of political success, indicators of leadership and crisis management. Furthermore, the authors revealed that fearless dominance was also associated with greater persuasiveness, which is consistent with other data on the correlation between psychopathy and the ability to influence the behavior and attitudes of others (Weiss et al., 2018).

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The theories and studies presented in this article do not exhaust the subject of positive-adjustment traits of psychopathy. Selected leading models (e.g., concept

of boldness/fearlessness) were discussed and only some of the research directions were outlined. This review has other limitations. Firstly, there was a focus on adaptive traits of psychopathy in adults. The scope of further analyses needs to be expanded to include a broader developmental perspective and consider early precursors of psychopathy in youth in the context of their adaptive functions. Secondly, the review does not consider gender differences in the manifestation of psychopathy. Meanwhile, there is evidence that women reveal a distinct pattern and severity of psychopathic features (Nicholls et al., 2021). Thus, it is possible that these differences are present in psychopathic traits of positive adaptation.

Lastly, limitations of this review also come from discrepancies regarding the very status of the positive-adjustment features of psychopathy. Despite its presence in both classical and contemporary conceptions of psychopathic personality, empirical evidence and the emergence of specific measurement tools such as the DAPTQ, the construct of adaptive traits of psychopathy is not free from controversy, invariably constituting the subject of disputes and discussions among researchers. Some authors are of the opinion that psychopathic traits related to the indicators of psychological adaptation should not be considered in isolation from the clinical or judicial context. According to this approach, psychopathy should be treated primarily in terms of a disorder whose milder, sublinear/non-criminal form is marked by a combination of the symptoms considered adaptive, with a lower intensity of overtly antisocial or dysfunctional behavior (Hall & Benning, 2006; Brooks et al., 2020). On the other hand, other data suggest the independence of constructs capturing the adaptive characteristics of psychopathy (boldness, fearless dominance, traits from Durand's model), from other traits of psychopathy such as emotional deficits or behavioral disinhibition, which raises the question to what extent can these traits be considered typical and unique to psychopathy (Gatner et al., 2016; see also Lilienfeld, Patrick, et al., 2012)?

Apart from concerns about the distinct status of psychopathic traits of good adaptation, the understanding of their adaptive function also remains a matter of debate. Does the criterion of adaptation refer only to high functioning, financially or professionally successful psychopaths, or does adaptation simply mean a lack of conflict with the law and contact with the psychiatric care system? Or perhaps—taking an evolutionary point of view—should the adaptability of psychopathic traits be considered in terms of adaptation to environmental conditions? Each approach to understanding the term 'adaptive' in relation to the characteristics of psychopathy involves the adoption of a slightly different research perspective, which consequently may complicate the comparison of research results from different groups or populations. Developing a consistent understanding of the characteristics of good adaptation in the case of psychopathic personality is also hindered by the multitude

of terms used to describe its non-criminal form, such as successful, functional, and subclinical psychopaths, among others. However, the existing theoretical discrepancies and controversies around the concept of adaptive, non-pathological features of psychopathy do not seem to be significant enough to limit the development of research in this area. Considering the marked increase in the number of publications on non-criminal psychopathy observed in the last decade, it can be predicted that it will continue to be one of the more dynamically developing areas of research on psychopathic personality.

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