

THE PSYCHOPATH AS PROTOTYPE FOR PATHOLOGICAL LYING AND DECEPTION

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ABSTRACT. Pathological lying, deception, and manipulation are key clinical features of the psychopath (sociopath, antisocial personality). We present some clinical accounts and theories of these behaviors, and we review recent research in which self-report inventories, psychological tests, and polygraph examinations were administered to male criminal psychopaths. In general, there is a marked discrepancy between these empirical findings and clinical/behavioral manifestations of deception by psychopaths, perhaps because laboratory measures related to deception lack sensitivity and ecological validity with this particular population.

1. Introduction

Most clinical accounts of psychopaths make explicit reference to the readiness and skill with which they lie, deceive, cheat, and manipulate others. Everyone dissimulates and deceives at one time or another (DePaulo & Kirkendol, this volume; Ekman, 1985), but psychopaths do so much more persistently and blatantly, and with considerably more panache, than do most people. At the same time they have no difficulty at all in looking people straight in the eye and in intruding on their personal space, all the while exuding sincerity and rectitude. When caught in an obvious lie they are not embarrassed or thrown off track; rather, they act as if nothing is wrong, offer a facile explanation, or simply change the topic. Many have no inhibitions about attempting to deceive others, no fear of being found out, and no hesitation in using (often incorrectly) a superficial, pompous, and confusing mixture of technical jargon and inflated terminology, larded with pseudoscientific and "pop" psychological terms and concepts, all used to impress and dazzle others. That there may be more style than substance to what they say may go unnoticed, largely because psychopaths seem able to find and exploit the weaknesses of others and to dominate interpersonal relations. To those not involved it may seem strange that anyone could be fooled by the approach used by some psychopaths. However, it is one thing to have second-hand information about what happened and quite another to have been directly involved. As one victim of a psychopath's elaborate scam told us when we expressed surprise that she had actually believed him, "You had to be there." (See Doren, 1987, pp. 179-243 for some of the tactics used by psychopaths to exert control over others).

Even those who know what sort of a person they are dealing with may find it difficult not to be taken in. For example, we routinely videotape the interviews of prison inmates who take part in our research. It is not uncommon for the interviewer to be taken in by what the psychopathic inmates have to say. It is only when the videotapes are played back that it becomes apparent to the interviewer that he or she may have been somewhat gullible.

Professional experience with the criminal justice system does not guarantee immunity from manipulation, as the courts, mental health personnel, correctional staff, and parole boards can readily attest. The ability of psychopaths to deceive and con are just as great in prison as they are on the outside. Although some continually engage in disruptive institutional behavior others work the system to their own benefit. For example, it is not unusual for psychopaths to make heavy use of the institutional programs that are likely to impress the parole board. They frequently upgrade their education, sometimes managing to take university courses (almost always in psychology, sociology, and criminology rather than in chemistry, physics, etc.). The prisons in which we do most of our research are located in an area with a large fundamentalist population. The psychopaths in these prisons, as well as other astute inmates, often find it useful to "find Christ" and to become a "born-again Christian," an experience that may lead to community support for early release. This is quite a rational tactic, for it is one of the few ways that someone with a long history of criminal and antisocial behavior can convince others that a dramatic overnight change in attitudes has taken place. Psychopaths may be able to use the criminal justice system to their own advantage and to put on a good show for parole boards, but they are not so successful at meeting the terms of early release and at remaining out of prison (Hart, Kropp, and Hare, 1988).

Although the motivations for many of their lies and deceptions are no doubt similar to those of ordinary people, and although they are frequently very convincing, psychopaths sometimes engage in deceptive behavior that seems baffling and self-defeating to others. Indeed, those who work with psychopaths often get the impression that they do not really consider their verbal behavior to be inconsistent with the truth, at least as they see it. In some respects, it is almost as if they believe what they say, even though others can readily discern that they are lying. At times it is difficult not to get the impression that psychopaths are unable or unwilling to monitor what they are saying, with the result that they will sometimes make a series of logically inconsistent statements with aplomb and with seeming unawareness of what they have done. For example, when asked if he had ever committed a violent crime a psychopathic inmate in one of our studies said "No. But I once had to kill someone." Another psychopath, serving a term for armed robbery, replied to the testimony of an eyewitness with "He's lying. I wasn't there. I should have blown his fucking head off." The perplexing nature of the psychopath's lying and deception is well illustrated in the following quotation from Cleckley's classic work, *The Mask of Sanity*:

The psychopath shows a remarkable disregard for the truth and is to be trusted no more in his accounts of the past than in his promises for the future or his statement of present intentions. He gives the impression that he is incapable of ever attaining realistic comprehension of an attitude in other people which causes them to value truth and cherish truthfulness in themselves. Typically he is at ease and unpretentious in making a serious promise or in (falsely) exculpating himself from accusations, whether grave or trivial. His simplest statement in such matters carries special powers of