

# On the trail of the elusive successful psychopath

Sarah Francis Smith, Ashley L. Watts and Scott O. Lilienfeld

**For decades, researchers and social commentators have alluded to the successful psychopath. Features associated with psychopathy such as interpersonal charm and charisma, fearlessness and a willingness to take calculated risks may predispose to success in a number of professional arenas, such as business, law enforcement, politics and contact sports. A burgeoning body of research is taking strides to examine potential adaptive manifestations of psychopathy. Nevertheless, the existence of successful adaptations of psychopathy remains hotly contested. Can researchers track down the elusive successful psychopath or will the concept go down in history as clinical lore?**

## questions

'Successful psychopathy' could be seen as an oxymoron because psychopathy is a mental disorder and therefore characterised by impairment. Do you agree? Why or why not?

In operationalising successful psychopathy, should we think of success as a single dimension or are there multiple underlying dimensions?

## resources

Hall, J.R. & Benning, S.D. (2006). The 'successful' psychopath. In C.J. Patrick (Ed.) *Handbook of psychopathy* (pp.459–475). New York: Guilford. [www.psychopathysociety.org](http://www.psychopathysociety.org)

Best known as a British geographer and explorer, Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890) was as fearless as he was charismatic. Perhaps owing to his love of adventure, Burton joined the army in young adulthood, an outlet that afforded him many opportunities for travel and assimilation into unknown cultures (Brodie, 1967). After undertaking a dangerous pilgrimage to Mecca, Burton's audacious attitude and passion for discovery led him to extensive explorations of Syria, India and the African Great Lakes. He was also an accomplished scholar and activist (Burton, 1893), publishing several books, and established the Anthropological Society of London in 1863. A progressive individual, Burton is credited with bringing about the publication of the *Kama Sutra* in English. Awarded a knighthood in 1886 by Queen Victoria, Burton was a man of many talents and achievements. Yet, according to some scholars, such as psychologist David Lykken (2006), Burton exhibited pronounced traits of successful psychopathy, sometimes also called 'adaptive psychopathy' or 'high-functioning psychopathy'.

Indeed, Burton often travelled the globe to areas ridden with turmoil that posed immense danger. After narrowly escaping a massive planned attack by one of his enemies, Burton spoke not of fear but of the flattery he experienced at the number of people sent to kill him. Rumoured to have killed a young boy to prevent his discovery while disguised, Burton was often asked about this

incident. Although he denied committing this act, he described feeling 'quite jolly' about killing another person. Burton was also renowned for his insincerity, so much so that his obituary highlighted his love of 'telling tales about himself that had no foundation in fact'. It is therefore perhaps no surprise that some psychopathy scholars identified Burton as possessing a 'talent for psychopathy' (Lykken, 2006, p.11). Others suggested that had Burton been the 'son of a London butcher instead of the son of an army colonel his "monstrous talents" may have been used for criminal purposes' (Walsh & Wu, 2008, p.139).

Burton's life story raises a set of fascinating questions that have long puzzled clinical psychologists and psychiatrists (see Hall & Benning, 2006, for an informative review). Do successful psychopaths – people who possess the core traits of psychopathic personality but who achieve marked societal success in one or more domains – really exist? Indeed, some scholars have argued that the very concept of successful psychopathy is an 'oxymoron' because 'by definition, to be afflicted with a personality disorder (e.g. psychopathy) one must have pathological symptoms that cause impairment in multiple domains of one's life' (Kiehl & Lushing, 2014).

The questions hardly end there. If successful psychopaths exist, how do they differ from psychopaths in jails and prisons? Do certain occupations and avocations serve as 'magnets' or niches for successful psychopaths? Are successful psychopaths also at elevated risk for criminal behaviour? How do we define successful psychopathy in the first place? Can a psychopath be considered successful if he or she achieves success in a single domain of life (e.g. occupational, financial) or multiple? Or is simply evading arrest or legal entanglement sufficient?

Until recently, these questions were almost exclusively the stuff of clinical lore and speculation. But times, and attitudes, change. Despite a great deal of interest in the 'dark side' of leadership (Hogan et al., 1990) and interpersonal behaviour more

## references

- Babiak, P. & Hare, R.D. (2006). *Snakes in suits: When psychopaths go to work*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Babiak, P., Neumann, C.S. & Hare, R.D. (2010). Corporate psychopathy: Talking the walk. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 28(2), 174–193.
- Benning, S.D., Patrick, C.J., Hicks, B.M. et al. (2003). Factor structure of the psychopathic personality inventory. *Psychological Assessment*, 15, 340–350.
- Boddy, C.R. (2011). The corporate psychopaths theory of the global financial crisis. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 102(2), 255–259.
- Boddy, C.R., Ladshewsky, R.K. & Galvin, P. (2010). The influence of corporate psychopaths on corporate social responsibility and organizational commitment to employees. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97(1), 1–19.
- Brodie, F.M. (1967). *The devil drives: A life of Sir Richard Burton*. New York: Norton.
- Burton, I. (1893). *The life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton KCMG, FRGS* (Vols. 1 and 2). London: Chapman and Hall.
- Cale, E.M. & Lilienfeld, S.O. (2002). Histrionic personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder: Sex-differentiated manifestations of psychopathy? *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 16(1), 52–72.
- Cleckley, H. (1982). *The mask of sanity* (6th edn). St Louis, MO: Mosby. (First published 1941)
- Connelly, B.S. & Ones, D.S. (2010). An other perspective on personality: Meta-analytic integration of observers' accuracy and predictive validity. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(6), 1092.
- Falkenbach, D. & Tsoukalas, M. (2011, May). *Can adaptive traits be observed in hero populations?* Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society

broadly, research suggests there may also be a bright side to some 'dark triad' personality traits (Judge et al., 2009). Indeed, psychopathy, along with narcissism and Machiavellianism (the other two members of this triad), appear to predict both positive and negative social outcomes, including short-term occupational success (e.g. leadership: Judge & LePine, 2009). This academic research is mirrored by a burgeoning popular literature surrounding the concept of successful psychopathy (see box 'Snakes in suits?').

But how much of this is hype and how much is rooted in science? Over the past 10 to 15 years, a growing cadre of researchers – including those in our laboratory team – have begun to make inroads into this question.

### A fine-grained analysis

Often mistakenly equated with serial killers or violent criminals, psychopaths are characterised by a distinctive constellation of affective, interpersonal

and behavioural features. As described by psychiatrist Hervey Cleckley (1941) in his classic book *The Mask of Sanity*, psychopathy comprises such characteristics as superficial charm, dishonesty, narcissism, lack of remorse, lack of empathy, unreliability and poor forethought. Although Cleckley regarded psychopaths as pathological, he noted that they exhibit at least some adaptive characteristics, such as social poise, venturesomeness and an absence of irrationality and anxiety. In fact, Cleckley wrote of a psychopathic business man who, save for the occasional extramarital affair and drinking spree, exploited his interpersonal charm and risk-taking to propel him to occupational success.

A more fine-grained examination of the concept of psychopathy may further our understanding of the potential adaptive manifestations of a disorder so often viewed as invariably sinister. Although psychopathy was originally conceptualised as a global or unidimensional condition, factor analyses revealed that the most widely used

psychopathy measures, such as the interview-based Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R: Hare, 1991) and the self-report Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised (PPI-R: Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005), are underpinned by at least two broad dimensions. In the case of the PPI-R (Benning et al., 2003; but see Neumann et al., 2008, for an alternative factor structure) these higher-order factors are termed Fearless Dominance and Self-Centered Impulsivity (one PPI-R subscale termed Coldheartedness does not load highly on either factor). The first of these factors consists of many of the affective and interpersonal features associated with psychopathy, such as physical fearlessness, social boldness, superficial charm and a relative immunity to anxiety. In contrast, the

second of these factors consists primarily of the behavioural features associated with psychopathy, such as impulsivity, recklessness and a propensity toward antisocial acts.

This two-factor structure bears important implications for the potentially successful manifestations of psychopathy. In particular, Fearless Dominance may be linked primarily to adaptive behaviour, whereas Self-Centered Impulsivity and Coldheartedness may be linked primarily to maladaptive behaviour (Fowles & Dindo, 2009).

### The non-criminal psychopath

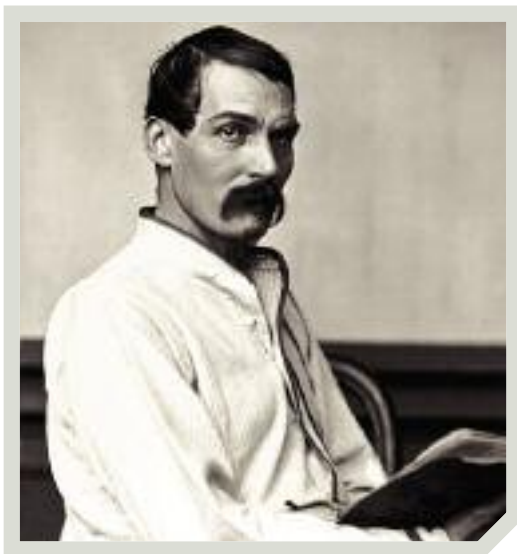
Despite traditional views of psychopathy as purely maladaptive, some authors have proposed that certain features of the disorder can predispose to success in arenas characterised by physical or social risk, such as business, law, politics, high-contact or extreme sports, law enforcement, firefighting, and front-line military combat (Skeem et al., 2011). Nevertheless, for decades, research on psychopathy focused almost exclusively on largely unsuccessful individuals, especially incarcerated males. It was not until the 1970s that researchers began to examine potentially adaptive manifestations of the condition.

These early investigations centred on community samples. The pioneering work of psychologist Cathy Widom, then at Harvard University, was one of the first attempts to examine psychopathy outside of prison walls. Straying from the typical inmate sample, Widom (1977) attempted to draw potentially psychopathic participants from the Boston community, attracting them with an enticing newspaper advertisement:

'Psychologist studying adventurous carefree people who've led exciting impulsive lives. If you're the kind of person who'd do almost anything for a dare...'

and a later version read:

'Wanted charming, aggressive,



Sir Richard Francis Burton – a successful psychopath?

Fowles, D.C. & Dindo, L. (2009). Temperament and psychopathy. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18(3), 179–183.

Furnham, A. (2007). Personality disorders and derailment at work: The paradoxical positive influence of pathology in the workplace. In J. Langan-Fox et al. (Eds.) *Research*

companion to the dysfunctional workplace. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

Goodwin, D.K. (2013). *The bully pulpit*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hall, J.R. & Benning, S.D. (2006). The 'successful' psychopath. In C.J. Patrick (Ed.) *Handbook of psychopathy* (pp.459–475). New York: Guilford.

Hare, R.D. (1991). *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised*. Toronto: Multi-

Health Systems.

Hicks, B.M., Markon, K.E., Patrick, C.J., et al. (2004). Identifying psychopathy subtypes on the basis of personality structure. *Psychological assessment*, 16(3), 276–288.

Hogan, R., Raskin, R. & Fazzini, D. (1990). The dark side of leadership. In K.E. Clark & M.B. Clark (Eds.) *Measures of leadership*. West Orange, NJ: Leadership Library of America.

Jonason, P.K., Slomski, S. & Partyka, J. (2012). The dark triad at work: How toxic employees get their way. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52(3), 449–453.

Judge, T.A. & LePine, J.A. (2007). 20 The bright and dark sides of personality: Implications for personnel selection in individual and team contexts. In J. Langan-Fox et al. (Eds.) *Research companion to the dysfunctional*

carefree people who are impulsively irresponsible but are good at handling people and at looking after number one.' (p.675)

Once recruited, participants provided biographical and psychiatric information as well as criminal history. In Widom's study, a full 65 per cent of the sample met criteria for sociopathy, an informal term similar to psychopathy. Several of Widom's participants held jobs of significant ranking, such as business managers and investment bankers. Nevertheless, much of the sample reported arrest records and engagement in criminal or antisocial behaviours.

Ultimately, Widom's sample was composed not of especially successful individuals but rather of troublemakers who had largely escaped the detection of the legal system. Still, it was one of the first efforts to examine psychopathy beyond iron bars. More recently, researchers have continued to use Widom's advertisement-based recruitment paradigm to attract non-incarcerated individuals with pronounced levels of psychopathic traits from community or undergraduate samples (e.g. Miller et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2013).

### The psychopathic hero

Building on Widom's work, some researchers have hypothesised that features related to psychopathy, such as fearlessness, may predispose individuals to heroic behaviour. In fact, David Lykken (1995, p.29) speculated that the 'hero and the psychopath may be twigs off the same genetic branch'.

Numerous intriguing examples supporting this conjecture can be found in the popular media. Take Jeremy Johnson, a prominent businessman and millionaire from St. George, Utah. Following the 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti, Johnson staged his own rescue mission. Piloting his personal aircraft, Johnson evacuated children from the area and delivered much-needed supplies to the shattered country. These heroic acts were not unusual for Johnson, who was known for sending his own helicopter on rescue missions to retrieve stranded hikers in his home state. Alas, there is more to

the story. A pure hero no longer, Johnson currently faces 86 criminal charges such as conspiracy, money laundering, fraud and the theft of \$275 million from unwitting customers through fraudulent credit card charges. Although intriguing, stories such as Johnson's are only anecdotal, so systematic research is called for.

Some investigators have responded to this call by examining psychopathic traits among individuals who hold occupations that afford frequent opportunities for heroic behaviour. In one interesting study (Falkenbach & Tsoukalas, 2011), members of potentially 'heroic' occupations, namely, law enforcement and firefighting, scored higher on the Fearless Dominance factor of the PPI than did incarcerated offenders. Still, because these intriguing findings relied on occupation as a proxy for heroism, they are open to several interpretations.

More recently, Smith et al. (2013) examined the relation between psychopathy, again assessed using the PPI, and heroism. To assess heroism, they administered a questionnaire to assesses the frequency with which individuals engage in a variety of heroic behaviours that are reasonably common in daily life, such as assisting a stranded motorist, administering CPR to a collapsed individual, and breaking up a fight in public. Participants also completed a measure of altruistic behaviour subdivided into two subscales, altruism toward charities and altruism toward strangers. Smith and colleagues reported a positive association between certain psychopathic traits, on the one hand, and heroic behaviour and altruism towards strangers, on the other. More specifically, the Fearless Dominance component of psychopathy was most related to heroism and altruism toward strangers, suggesting that predisposition towards fearlessness and a willingness to take risks may contribute to heroism. In a second part of the study, Smith et al. (2013) examined the relationship between psychopathy and a more objective indicator of heroism – war heroism among the US presidents.

## Snakes in suits?

Perhaps in response to recent economic and social disasters, such as the United States housing market crash in 2008, the Enron scandal and Bernie Madoff's Ponzi schemes, the concept of successful psychopathy has become the subject of increasing interest to researchers and the general public alike. Scores of academic and trade books feature the successful or pseudo-successful psychopath, charming his or her (usually his: see Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002, for a review of sex differences in psychopathy) way through life, business deals and romantic relationships. Some of these recent tomes include *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* (2007, HarperCollins) by Paul Babiak and Robert Hare and *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: Lessons in Life from Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers* by Kevin Dutton (2012, Macmillan).

More recently, a few individuals have 'outed' themselves as successful psychopaths by chronicling their psychopathic path to victory in such autobiographical pieces as *Confessions of a Sociopath: A Life Spent Hiding in Plain Sight* (2013, Sidgwick & Jackson) by M.E. Thomas, an anonymous allegedly successful lawyer and academic, and *The Psychopath Inside: A Neuroscientist's Personal Journey into the Dark Side of the Brain* (2013, by University of California at Irvine neuroscientist James Fallon (2013, Penguin).

Also in the limelight are business psychopaths, with countless media pieces boasting such catchy titles as 'Bad bosses: The psycho-path to success?' (CNN: [tinyurl.com/pdgz6r3](http://tinyurl.com/pdgz6r3)) and 'Capitalists and other psychopaths' (*New York Times*: [tinyurl.com/qgjnmao](http://tinyurl.com/qgjnmao)).

workplace. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

Judge, T.A., Piccolo, R.F. & Kosalka, T. (2009). The bright and dark sides of leader traits. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20(6), 855-875.

Kiehl, K. & Lushing, J. (2014). Psychopathy. In *Scholarpedia*. Retrieved from <http://scholarpedia.org/article/psychopathy>

Lilienfeld, S.O., Patrick, C.J., Benning,

S.D. et al. (2012). The role of fearless dominance in psychopathy: Confusions, controversies, and clarifications. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 3(3), 327-340.

Lilienfeld, S.O., Waldman, I.D., Landfield, K. et al. (2012). Fearless dominance and the US presidency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103(3), 489-505.

Lilienfeld, S.O. & Widows, M.R. (2005).

*Psychopathic Personality Inventory - Revised: Professional manual*. Lutz, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.

Lykken, D.T. (1982, September). Fearlessness: Its carefree charm and deadly risks. *Psychology Today*, pp.20-28.

Lykken, D.T. (1995). *The antisocial personalities*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Lykken, D.T. (2006). Psychopathic personality: The scope of the problem.

In C.J. Patrick (Ed.) *Handbook of psychopathy*. New York: Guilford.

Miller, J.D., Jones, S.E. & Lynam, D.R. (2011). Psychopathic traits from the perspective of self and informant reports: Is there evidence for a lack of insight? *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 120(3), 758-764.

Miller, J.D. & Lynam, D.R. (2012). An examination of the Psychopathic Personality Inventory's nomological



Drawing on personality ratings completed by expert historians, statistical algorithms were used to extract psychopathy levels for each of the US presidents. Conceptually replicating the findings in the first part of the study, the Fearless Dominance component of psychopathy was positively associated with presidential war heroism. The presidential war heroes included Theodore Roosevelt and Zachary Taylor, who also scored well above the mean on Fearless Dominance. These findings, although promising, need to be extended to other samples, especially those marked by high levels of occupational heroism.

### The psychopathic president

These same psychopathic traits, such as interpersonal dominance and persuasiveness, may be conducive to acquiring positions of power, particularly in the leadership domain. Moreover, these traits may predict successful leadership among political figures (Hogan et al., 1990). Indeed, Lykken (1995) speculated that such influential individuals as US President Lyndon B. Johnson and Brigadier General Charles ('Chuck') Yeager, widely known as the first pilot to break the sound barrier, possessed certain personality features associated with psychopathy, such as boldness and adventurousness. Nevertheless, few studies have put this notion to a systematic test.

In an attempt to examine the relations between psychopathy and presidential leadership, Lilienfeld, Waldman et al. (2012) asked 121 presidential biographers and other experts to rate 42 US presidents, up to and including George W. Bush, on their pre-office personality traits, such as extraversion, disagreeableness, and lack of conscientiousness. The authors compared the presidential personality ratings with the results of several large-scale polls of

presidential performance by well-known historians (e.g. the 2009 C-SPAN Poll of Presidential Performance, the 2010 Siena College Poll) and objective indicators of presidential performance (e.g. re-election, winning an election by a landslide, initiating new legislation). Estimates of presidents' psychopathic traits were obtained by using previously validated formulas for predicting these traits from normal-range personality dimensions. The experts' ratings of each president's psychopathic traits displayed moderate to high inter-rater agreement. This methodology, although not flawless, is well-suited for rating past presidential figures, as meta-analytic evidence suggests that informant ratings are strong predictors of behaviour, often more so than are self-



Theodore Roosevelt – nicknamed 'The Lion'

reports of personality (Connelly & Ones, 2010).

Lilienfeld, Waldman et al. (2012) found that Fearless Dominance was significantly associated not only with historians' ratings of overall presidential performance, but with independently rated leadership, public persuasiveness, communication ability

and willingness to take risks. Additionally, Fearless Dominance was associated with initiating new legislation, winning elections by a landslide, and being viewed as a world figure. Interestingly, Fearless Dominance was even associated positively with assassination attempts, perhaps because bolder presidents tend to ruffle more feathers. Theodore Roosevelt, variously nicknamed 'The Lion', 'The Happy Warrior', and 'The Dynamo of Power', scored highest on Fearless Dominance, while his immediate successor, President William H. Taft, sometimes called 'The Reluctant President', brought up the rear on this trait. Although

the differences among presidents in their psychopathy levels must be qualified by the fact that they derived from only a few informants for each leaders, they are often broadly supported by historical evidence from multiple sources. For example, in a recent book on Roosevelt and Taft, *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism*, Princeton presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin (2013) highlighted the stark differences in personality and leadership style between these two chief executives.

### The psychopathic businessman

In the past decade, the topic of psychopathy in business settings has similarly attracted increasing attention. Although such influential authors as Hervey Cleckley, David Lykken, Paul Babiak and Robert Hare have described vivid case examples of ruthless but prosperous businessmen who exhibited marked features of psychopathy, formal research on the implications of psychopathy in the workplace has been lacking – until recently.

Recent work indicates that psychopathy is related to the use of hard negotiation tactics (e.g. threats of punishment: Jonason et al., 2012), bullying (Boddy, 2011), counterproductive workplace behaviour (e.g. theft by employees: O'Boyle et al., 2011), and poor management skills (Babiak et al., 2010). Although these results suggest that psychopathy has a marked 'dark side' in the workplace, there may be more to the story. Some authors have speculated that some psychopathic traits, such as charisma and interpersonal dominance, may contribute to effective leadership and management, at least in the short term (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Boddy et al., 2010; Furnham, 2007). Nevertheless, questions remain regarding the long-term effectiveness of such traits, with some suspecting that psychopathic traits tend eventually to be destructive.

Recent research tentatively supports

network. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 3, 305–326.  
 Miller, J.D., Rauscher, S. Hyatt, C.S. et al. (2013). Examining the relations among pain tolerance, psychopathic traits, and violent and non-violent antisocial behavior. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*. doi:10.1037/a0035072  
 Neumann, C.S., Malterer, M.B. & Newman, J.P. (2008). Factor structure

of the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI): Findings from a large incarcerated sample. *Psychological Assessment*, 20, 169–174.  
 O'Boyle, E.H., Jr, Forsyth, D.R., Banks, G.C. & McDaniel, M.A. (2012). A meta-analysis of the dark triad and work behavior: A social exchange perspective. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97(3), 557–579.  
 Santosa, C.M., Strong, C.M., Nowakowska,

C. et al. (2007). Enhanced creativity in bipolar disorder patients. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 100(1), 31–39.  
 Skeem, J.L., Polaschek, D.L., Patrick, C. J. & Lilienfeld, S.O. (2011). Psychopathic personality bridging the gap between scientific evidence and public policy. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 12(3), 95–162.  
 Smith, S.F., Lilienfeld, S.O., Coffey, K. & Dabbs, J.M. (2013). Are psychopaths

and heroes twigs off the same branch? *Journal of Research in Personality*, 47(5), 634–646.  
 Walsh, A. & Wu, H.H. (2008). Differentiating antisocial personality disorder, psychopathy, and sociopathy. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 21, 135–152.  
 Widom, C.S. (1977). A methodology for studying noninstitutionalized psychopaths. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 45(4), 674–683.

the view that psychopathy can be a double-edged sword in business settings. For example, data using the PCL-R show that psychopathic individuals are viewed as good communicators, strategic thinkers and innovators in the workplace (Babiak et al., 2010). More recently, unpublished research from our own lab has further elucidated the potential dual implications of psychopathy for workplace behaviour and leadership. In a sample of 312 North American community members, subdimensions of psychopathy, as measured by the PPI-R, were differentially related to leadership styles and counterproductive workplace behaviour. Specifically, Fearless Dominance was positively associated with adaptive leadership styles and minimally related to counterproductive workplace behaviour and maladaptive leadership styles. In contrast, Self-Centered Impulsivity was positively related to counterproductive workplace behaviour and negatively associated with adaptive leadership styles. In addition, individuals high on Fearless Dominance held more leadership positions over their lifetime than did other individuals.

Although preliminary, these findings raise intriguing questions about the varied implications of psychopathic traits in the business world. Charisma, fearlessness, and willingness to take calculated business risks may predispose to business and leadership success. In contrast, certain features associated with psychopathy, such as impulsivity and lack of empathy, may do the opposite.

### Controversies

Despite – and perhaps partly because of – the growing interest in successful psychopathy, the concept has been embroiled in increasing scientific controversy (Hall & Benning, 2006). Some researchers have questioned the relevance of adaptive features to psychopathy, maintaining that because psychopathy is a disorder, the concept of the successful psychopath is logically contradictory. In response, proponents of the successful psychopathy construct, including our laboratory team, point out that individuals with some serious psychological conditions, such as bipolar disorder, can achieve remarkable success in certain creative endeavours, such as art, music and science (Santosa et al., 2006).

In addition, the relevance of Fearless Dominance to psychopathy has recently come under fire. In a meta-analytic



(quantitative) examination of the construct validity of the PPI-R across multiple studies, Miller and Lynam (2012) criticised Fearless Dominance for its lack of relation to violence and antisocial behavior, and for its positive linkages to healthy personality traits, such as low neuroticism. Nevertheless, classic clinical writings on psychopathy (e.g. Cleckley, 1941) and subtyping research (e.g. Hicks et al., 2004) have historically alluded to the existence of two ‘faces’ of psychopathy, one primarily associated with psychological health and adaptive functioning, and another associated with maladaptive features such as impulsivity and antisocial behaviour (Lilienfeld, Patrick et al., 2012). Hence, the *a priori* exclusion of adaptive functioning from the nomological network of psychopathy seems overly restrictive and contraindicated by both a rich body of clinical literature and controlled research. Such exclusion would also leave unresolved the crucial question of why so many people, including business and romantic partners, find psychopaths superficially alluring and appealing. To understand what makes psychopaths ‘tick’ interpersonally, we almost certainly need a better grasp on the social implications of their adaptive characteristics.

### Future directions

The existence and nature of successful psychopathy continue to be flashpoints of scientific controversy and debate, largely because a host of questions remain unresolved. For example, the multidimensional structure of psychopathy raises questions about which psychopathic traits are most related to adaptive outcomes. It seems plausible that the interpersonal and affective features of

psychopathy are more adaptive than the behavioural ones. Additionally, these features may interact statistically to propel individuals into divergent outcomes. It is also possible that the relation between psychopathic features, such as Fearless Dominance, and life success is ‘curvilinear’, meaning that such features may predispose to success in moderate, but not extremely high, doses. In fact, at very high doses of these traits, adaptive fearlessness may merge into maladaptive recklessness, although evidence for this intriguing possibility is lacking. Furthermore, competing conceptualisations of successful psychopathy exist. It is unknown whether successful psychopathy is merely a milder or subclinical form of the disorder or whether other variables, such as intelligence, effective impulse control, good parenting or social class moderate or channel the expression of psychopathy into adaptive avenues (Hall & Benning, 2006).

Finally, research examining occupations and avocations that may attract psychopathic individuals is sorely needed. For example, high-risk professions such as the military, law enforcement and extreme sports may be particularly desirable to individuals who are fearless and enjoy risk-taking (Lykken, 1982). Research targeting these and other professions may help us to better understand the controversial and often elusive successful psychopath.



**Sarah Francis Smith**  
is a graduate student in the Department of Psychology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia  
sarah.francis.smith@emory.edu



**Ashley L. Watts**  
is a graduate student in the Department of Psychology, Emory University  
ashleylwatts@gmail.com



**Scott O. Lilienfeld**  
is Professor in the Department of Psychology, Emory University  
slilien@emory.edu



RODNEY STREET

88 Rodney Street Liverpool L1 9AR | Tel: 0151 706 7902

Email: [info@eightyeightrodneystreet.co.uk](mailto:info@eightyeightrodneystreet.co.uk)

[www.eightyeightrodneystreet.co.uk](http://www.eightyeightrodneystreet.co.uk)

### *Sessional, Occasional and Full Time Consulting Rooms*

Flexible, Cost Effective Consulting Rooms

Personalised Telephone Answering

High Speed Wireless Internet

#### Opening Hours

Weekdays: 9am to 5pm | Weekends: 9am to 5.30pm

## CPD Workshops

### Teaching Clients to use Mindfulness Skills

With Dr Maggie Stanton & Christine Dunkley  
20th Sept 2014 – University of East Anglia  
3rd Oct 2014 – Sheffield University  
18th Oct 2014 – London University

### Understanding Acceptance & Commitment Therapy

With Prof Sue Clarke  
31st Oct 2014 – Uffculme Centre Birmingham

### Introduction to Compassion Focused Therapy

With Prof Paul Gilbert  
21st Nov 2014 – London South Bank University

For details and for our full range of workshops :-  
[stantonltd.co.uk](http://stantonltd.co.uk) or [grayrock.co.uk](http://grayrock.co.uk)



The British  
Psychological Society

Promoting excellence in psychology

## Postdoctoral Conference Bursary Scheme

This Research Board bursary scheme supports the work of postdoctoral researchers and lecturers.

Conference bursaries are available to support UK psychology postdoctoral researchers and lecturers to attend any academic conference, either in the UK or internationally, relevant to the applicants work. Each bursary consists of up to £150 (UK) or £300 (international) to contribute towards the costs of registration and travel to attend the full conference.

There are two rounds of the scheme each year, with submission deadlines on 1 April and 1 October. **Get your applications in now for the October deadline.**

For the full criteria and an application form please contact Carl Bourton at the Society's office [carl.bourton@bps.org.uk](mailto:carl.bourton@bps.org.uk)

**Note:** For the purposes of the bursary scheme, a postdoctoral research/lecturer is defined as a person who is employed at a UK HEI and is within three years of the completion of their doctoral research degree (i.e. PhD) in psychology.