

PSYCHOPATHS AND CORPORATE POWER

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When I hear the word psychopath I immediately think of Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*. In reality Hannibal Lecter is not typical. Craighead, Miklowitz, and Craighead (2013) talk about limitations in the results of research studies because so many of them study criminals. In some respects I think it might be wise to modify their statement to say the studies focus on criminals who got caught. A couple of weeks ago there was an article in the popular press about the occupations that attract the highest number of psychopaths. Number one on the list was corporate Chief Executive Officers (CEO). Whether or not the top ranking is correct a look at public corporate attitudes and actions in recent years suggests there are a significant number of psychopaths in corporate positions of authority. To use the diagnosis found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.)* (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) it appears many executives can be diagnosed with Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD).

Clive R Boddy is an associate professor of Marketing in Britain who has studied and written extensively about ASPD in corporate environments. In one study Boddy, Ladyshevsky, and Galvin (2010) used a sample of 346 executives. The study observed that historically there has been little empirical research to identify corporate psychopaths since asking permission to search for psychopaths in the executive suite is likely to be summarily rejected! Therefore they elected to use the standard PCL-R instrument in a group of instruments in a study intended to show levels of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The study was conducted in Australia. They found the incidence of psychopathology among the executives was slightly more than triple the Australian population norm. Using some prior research they also selected a group of

executives with, in their opinion, a distinct pattern of psychopathology they termed Corporate Psychopaths (CP). The significant common denominator in CP is equating financial success with personal power. The real thrust of their study was to compare the impact of psychopathic supervisors on the performance of those they supervised. Not surprisingly they found employees supervised by psychopaths performed significantly worse on every measure of productivity, CSR, and loyalty to the organization. Further the study extrapolated the information onto the financial results and found that despite outward appearances CP negatively affected profitability and shareholder value. In a second report Boddy (2011) examined the incidence of bullying using the same research data. Employees supervised by those with CP were more than twice as likely to be subjected to bullying in the workplace.

In their major paper Boddy, Ladyshevsky, and Galvin (2010) used existing research about the underlying causes of ASPD. I assume that the underlying research has the same limitations noted by Craighead, Miklowitch, and Craighead (2013). Most of the research studies those who have been convicted of criminal behavior or are otherwise incarcerated. Some of the findings seem fairly obvious when compared to the characteristics specified in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). Someone who has little fear is more likely to be aggressive and violent. Someone whose emotional judgment is impaired is likely to be impulsive. Studies also show there is a genetic component but it does not seem dominant. Like so many conditions we deal with, there is much we do not know.

A study that discusses how people suffering from APSD react to trauma and stress (PTS) found that they do not. This was reported in a review by George Palermo (2012). It should be noted that the study subjects were all criminals. Regardless this may relate back to the studies of

CP. Trauma, though not unknown, is not endemic in the corporate world but stress is. Conceivably those who are less subject to stress are more likely to succeed.

Lack of empathy is one of the key features of ASPD. The DSM-5 (2013) phrases it in terms of lack of remorse. As criminal behavior is also common this leads to a fundamental question in forensic psychology: Do psychopaths know the difference between right and wrong? In the Netherlands Cima, Tonnaer, and Hauser (2010) studied this with a group of psychopaths incarcerated in a mental facility. The answer, as might be expected, is they consistently are aware of the distinction but truly do not care about the harmful effects of their actions. It is almost as if you could describe a key component of ASPD as narcissism on steroids. This aspect may also account for treatment prognosis being so poor (Craighead, Miklowitz, & Craighead, 2013). As this pertains to those with corporate authority, they are rich, they are successful, and they have power. So long as these conditions prevail and they measure success and happiness in terms of this, treatment will never be sought.

The DSM-5 (APA, 2013) estimates ASPD affects between .2% and 3.3% of the population annually. That translates to anywhere between 600,000 and 3,000,000 psychopaths. The evidence indicates a substantial number of them are in positions that seriously affect society. Considering the powerful positions psychopaths may achieve and the intractability of the condition to treatment society faces a major challenge dealing with the consequences. A major question is what can society do collectively to change this? And specifically what can psychologists contribute toward possible solutions? If nothing else I would say it is a professional responsibility to publicize the problem and protest most vigorously. I would generally say that those who are aware of oppression or injustice and fail to do anything about it implicitly endorse it.

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