

Delving into the Murky Waters of Psychopaths and Sociopaths

for those working in the mental health field...
and others
interested in this fascinating area of psychology



Do you know the difference between a Psychopath and a Sociopath?

One of the most common misconceptions, even in the mental health field, is that they are one and the same...with essentially the same diagnosis.

Unless you are specialised in researching or working in this area, it can be a murky place to delve into. While both share some distinctly similar features, the behavioural patterns and lifestyle choices are often separate and strikingly different.

So what is the difference?? Well, the first clue is in the name of each:

sociopath and **psychopath**.

A sociopath is thought to have developed persistent 'bad' behaviours through their experience of society, this can be anything from extensive childhood neglect or trauma, to perceived slights from society.

When you meet or interview a sociopath they will often refer to the unfairness of the world or the unjustness of society. They will also often show hints of empathy or at least offer insight that they once did feel remorse or love or significant emotion.

From my experience, sociopaths appear to have been born with the same ability to love and feel just like any other person in society. It has been their experience in the world that has led them to behave in ways that most of society finds incomprehensible.

Now, this is different for the psychopath: for these individuals, feeling empathy, remorse or love is an alien concept.

Indeed, they can describe it to you in dramatic and fascinating language.



Yet most will openly admit that they simply cannot feel these emotions and in fact view such emotions as weakness.

Bob Hare, the pioneer for psychopathic personality research aptly noted:

“they can sing the lyrics but they will never respond to the melody”

A psychopath can almost be described as a caricature of a person: everything about them needs to be that bit more pronounced and dramatic...their only ‘fear’ is that the mask of sanity, which they wear each day, may slip and their vagueness may be revealed.

While all of this sounds dramatic and intriguing, the truth is, psychopaths and sociopaths are not really what society may imagine.

Television programs such as Criminal Minds and CSU, typically portray Psychopaths and Sociopaths as people lurking in dark alleys ready to pounce and murder kittens at any given time.



While in rare cases there are such individuals, the reality is, we are surrounded every day by individuals with these traits. It might be:

- That ambitious banker who aggressively pursues and gets every promotion
- The politician who wins every election, by telling us what we want to hear
- or that medical specialist who climbs the ranks at an exponential pace



Psychopathic traits provide them with the impetus, the motivation and the direction to achieve at a high level.

But...while they might indeed achieve, these are also the individuals who have just as much ability to wreak havoc with the lives others in the subtle but devastating fashion that our 'paths' thrive on.

When working in the area of mental health and the law, it is imperative to have an understanding of individuals with the traits of Sociopaths and Psychopaths, particularly when it comes to understanding the limits in diagnosing individuals with either of these constructs.

Australia is lagging behind when it comes to accepting these characteristics.

To further complicate the issue, there is significant confusion about the use of the term 'Antisocial Personality Disorder' as an 'all-in-one' label for psychopathy and sociopathy.

But that's a topic of another newsletter!

In the meantime, let us know what you think...

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