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[What Is Really A Psychopath?](#)

After 25 years of research a psychologist challenges the conventional view

For most people on the planet, the term "psychopath" evokes thoughts of violence and bloodshed - and evil of the darkest kind. But during 25 years, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has built a body of work that may help temper such deeply ingrained perceptions. Sure, people do commit horrific, unimaginable crimes. But does that automatically mean they are psychopathic? And what is "psychopathy" anyway? With unique research access to prison inmate populations in Wisconsin, Joseph Newman has devoted his career to answering such questions. "My main concern is that the label (of psychopath) is applied too liberally and without sufficient understanding of the key elements," says Newman, who is chair of the UW-Madison psychology department. "As a result, the term is often applied to ordinary criminals and sex offenders whose behavior may reflect primarily social factors or other emotional problems that are more amenable to treatment than psychopathy." So who are psychopaths? Broadly speaking, they are people who use manipulation, violence and intimidation to control others and satisfy selfish needs. They can be intelligent and highly charismatic, but display a chronic inability to feel guilt, remorse or anxiety about any of their actions. Scientists estimate that 15-25 percent of men and 7-15 percent of women in U.S. prisons display psychopathic behaviors. The condition, however, is hardly restricted to the prison system. Newman estimates that up to 1 percent of the general population could be described as psychopathic. Surprisingly, many who fall into that bracket might lead perfectly conventional lives as doctors, scientists and company CEOs. "Psychopathy appears to exist throughout the world and has probably existed throughout history," Newman says. Behavioral specialists now use the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised - a diagnostic questionnaire created by Hare - to detect psychopathy. But although there is finally consensus on the best way to identify the condition, there is still a lot of disagreement on why it occurs in the first place. The dominant scientific model asserts that psychopathic individuals are incapable of fear or other emotions, which in turn makes them indifferent to other people's feelings. But Newman has a different idea entirely. He believes that psychopathy is essentially a type of learning disability or "informational processing deficit" that makes individuals oblivious to the implications of their actions when focused on tasks that promise instant reward. Being focused on a short-term goal, Newman suggests, makes psychopathic individuals incapable of detecting surrounding cues such as another person's discomfort or fear. In a study he repeated in different prison populations, for instance, Newman examined how quickly psychopathic and non-psychopathic individuals respond to a series of mislabeled images, such as a drawing of a pig with the word "dog" superimposed on it. Researchers flashed each image and then timed how long it took for subjects to name what they saw. Over and over again, Newman found that non-psychopathic subjects subconsciously stumbled on the misleading labels and took longer to name the images. But psychopathic subjects barely noticed the discrepancy and consistently answered more quickly. Newman says the result is one instance of how psychopathic individuals have difficulty processing peripheral cues, even when those cues are entirely obvious to everyone else. Furthermore, the study task didn't involve any of the emotions that people commonly associate with psychopathy, such as anger or a lack of fear. So the fact that psychopathic subjects barely noticed the wrongful labels - even in the absence of emotional cues - supports the idea that a psychological deficit might be at play. "People think (psychopaths) are just callous and without fear, but there is definitely something more going on," Newman says. "When emotions are their primary focus, we've seen that psychopathic individuals show a normal (emotional) response. But when focused on something else, they become insensitive to emotions entirely."