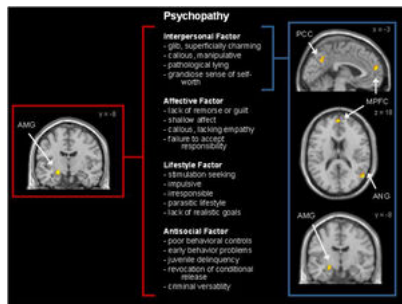


Health & Wellness

If psychopaths are born, not made, social policy can't do much to help

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A L Glenn, A Raine and R A Schug, "The neural correlates of moral decision-making in psychopathy," *Molecular Psychiatry* 14: 5-6 (2009)

On rare occasions, they can be mad, bad and dangerous. More usually, they live uneventful, friendless lives on the fringes of society, unable to sustain relationships or employment. If they have children, the same cycle of separateness, coldness and brutality is repeated anew.

Psychopaths have long fascinated scientists. They seem doubly burdened - both nature (bad genes) and nurture (poor parenting) have conspired to make them social outcasts. Governments, including this one, have long sought to reduce antisocial behaviour by tackling the nurture bit and encouraging more responsible parenting. Now a study by the Institute of Psychiatry suggests that, broadly speaking, they are backing a loser.

Essi Viding and her colleagues studied nearly 3,700 sets of twins. The seven-year-olds were individually scored for callous-unemotional (CU) traits - such as an inability to empathise, or the absence of guilt after wrongdoing - and for antisocial behaviour (AB). The group comprised both fraternal twins (who share 50 per cent of their genes) and identical twins (who share 100 per cent).

The researchers found that extreme CU behaviour was more common among identical twins than among fraternal twins. In plain terms, the prevalence of extreme CU traits had an overwhelmingly strong genetic component. Indeed, the ratio of genetic influence to environmental influence on psychopathic tendencies could be as high as 80:20. That suggests that psychopaths are born, not made.

Among the high-scoring AB group - the children showing considerable antisocial behaviour - a subset also had high CU scores, and a clear genetic dominance emerged in this group too. However, the low CU scorers - the children who behaved antisocially but felt guilty about it - tended to be much less at the mercy of their genes. Writing in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Dr Viding concludes that CU characteristics show a "remarkably high heritability". She adds: "Our findings also raise questions for public policy on interventions for antisocial behaviour."

Better parenting cannot reshape DNA and is unlikely to make much difference to children with extreme psychopathic traits. In any case, if children do inherit psychopathic traits from their parents, such parents are unlikely to empathise with measures to curb antisocial disorder or to feel guilty when their progeny run amok.

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