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## Utter amorality: can psychopaths feel emotions?

[Omni](#), [Winter, 1995](#) by [Steve Nadis](#)**[New!]** Save a personal copy of this article and quickly find it again with Furl.net. [Get started now.](#) (It's free.)

Human conduct, though often mystifying, is never so perplexing as in the case of the pure psychopath - a "cold-blooded" person who instinctively resorts to lying, cheating, stealing, and perhaps murder without a trace of remorse. How can one in 100 people, by some estimates, turn out this way, incapable of experiencing normal emotions, incapable of feeling love or compassion for others - traits considered the essence of humanity? The answer may lie in faulty mental wiring. Numerous experiments show psychopaths have different physiological responses to stimuli from normals and also employ different mental processes while performing simple tasks.

For more than 25 years, University of British Columbia psychophysicologist Robert Hare, author of *Without Conscience*, has been probing the minds of psychopaths. In experiments in the Sixties, he and his colleagues measured the responses of psychopaths and normal subjects prior to administering mild electric shocks. Unlike the normals, the psychopaths showed no anticipatory anxiety (measured in terms of sweaty palms) before the shocks. "They weren't apprehensive at all," Hare says. "One might infer that threats of punishment have little effect - something that seems to be true in the real world as well."

Like many other research psychologists, Sven Christianson at the University of Stockholm believes conventional emotional constructs don't apply to psychopaths. In a study with Hare, Adelle Forth of Carleton University, and others, Christianson showed participants 15 color slides and later tested their memory of the scenes. The eighth slide appeared in two versions: one showed a woman riding a bicycle in front of two cars; the other, the same woman lying beside the bicycle with blood oozing from her head, the same two cars in the background. Normal subjects remembered the emotional slide more vividly and paid more attention to more central rather than peripheral details. Psychopaths did not show the same focus and so didn't remember one slide better than the other. "Since the psychopath feels nothing for the woman immersed in blood, he doesn't find the image noteworthy" Christianson says.

Another study by Hare and his group points to similar emotional deficits. In a "lexical decision" task, subjects were presented a string of letters and asked if it were a word or not. Response times and brain waves were measured. Nonpsychopaths identified emotionally charged words like "cancer" or "rape" more quickly than neutral words like "tree" or "plate." And their EEG responses


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to the emotional words were larger and more prolonged. "When you see the letters c-a-n-c-e-r," says Hare, "you say, 'Yes, that's a word,' but you also conjure up images, make associations." Psychopaths don't do that. Whether the word is "paper" or "murder" their response times and EEG patterns do not differ.

At the Bronx VA Medical Center, assistant chief of psychiatry Joanne Intrator and her colleagues used a SPECT imaging machine to measure blood flow in the brains of both psychopath substance abusers, nonpsychopath substance abusers, and control subjects who were asked to perform a word-identification task. Psychopaths used a different strategy to identify emotional words compared to the other groups. "This and other studies suggest that psychopaths process and use language and emotion in a very 'superficial' manner," says Hare, a collaborator. Control subjects showed coordinated activity in the frontal cortex, temporal lobes, and amygdala, areas thought to play a role in the integration of thoughts and feelings. "We seem to be targeting the same areas other researchers think may be important for the development of a moral sense and conscience," Hare adds.

Hare and his colleagues are conducting MRI studies to determine whether the anomalies in mental processing are due to underlying structural or functional problems. "New techniques from cognitive neuroscience are opening a window into what's going on here," Hare says. "It looks like there might be a neurophysiological basis for this coldblooded, predatory behavior that has baffled us for so long."

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