

# *EMOTIONS, MASKS AND MORALS IN PSYCHOPATHICALLY-INCLINED PEOPLE*

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## ABSTRACT

Psychopaths appear to be ‘creatures apart’ – grandiose, shameless, callous and versatile in their violence. I discuss biological underpinnings to their pale affect, their selective inability to discern fear and sadness in others and a predatory orienting towards images that make most startle and look away. However, just because something is biologically underpinned does not mean that it is innate. I show that while there may be some genetic determination of fearlessness and callous-unemotionality, these and other features of the personality may arise from developmental failures in the interpersonal reception of their emotions, needs and their sense of self. One is unlikely to be able to own inner experiences if shamed for having them, or if, having them, one does not know how to regulate and soothe. So psychopaths may learn to attend away and suppress them. Rather than a fully inherited difficulty, they may have become unable to reflect on inner states, so meta-emotions and self-reflective emotions like guilt and shame do not fully arise. They retain enough sensitivity to know their difference, and hide. I suggest that psychopaths are characterised by a nested sense of self, arising from the surprising effect of shame on these seemingly shameless characters. They do not have an integrated sense of self across context or across time or in relation to a generalised social other. With a nested sense of self, diminished intensity and scope of affective experience (in both directly experienced and vicarious forms) they lack textured access to a personal, owned and integrated past. Thus they lack the kind of access to the past required for a motivationally compelling planning

of the future. They lack the emotional investment in the future that enables us to overcome the motivation to act opportunistically and myopically. These individuals live strangely in time. They have a fugitive sense of self and live nimbly among many pasts. They present an elegant and coherent mask to the person they are addressing in the moment and generate possible futures without conviction.

**Keywords:** personality, psychopathy, self, mental time-travel, shame, pale affect

## 1. Introduction

To be as good as one’s word in society requires integrity of character. By integrity I mean one will endeavour to fulfil one’s promises in different states of emotion, when driven by different self-interests and even if others are not monitoring one’s behaviour. It is a considerable developmental achievement. Since the study by Hartshorne and May (1928), we have known that most people will cheat if they believe it will go undetected. In psychology we are sobered by the fact that the correlation between one’s word and one’s actions is about .3 – not a very high correlation. The discrepancy is

not always in a morally adverse direction as early studies of prejudice show. LaPiere (1934) found that many hotels (90% of the 128 contacted) across America would not accept bookings for dinner from an Asian couple. Yet those same hotels had in fact already been visited by LaPiere and the couple with whom he was travelling. Only 1 out of 250 had refused to serve the couple when face to face. More recently, Batson and colleagues' have shown how readily moral hypocrisy can be induced by circumstance where one acts in a way that is explicitly counter to a personally avowed moral principle. So normatively, we expect a certain slippage between personal accounts of what one intends, believes one will do, or even what one says one has done, and the behavioural evidence.

However, even against this backdrop of a generous margin for error about what 'being as good as one's word' entails, psychopaths stand out as qualitatively distinct. How are we to account for this qualitatively different personality arising from empirical clinical case studies and research? Some accounts define psychopathy as a personality disorder. Others suggest that there are central, defining features of the personality that are genetically determined. Certainly the picture regarding remediation is bleak.

They are versatile in their violence, they lie, are charming but don't really care and they mess up lives without any real passion or conviction themselves. Rather they feign remorse and invent goals specific to the audience. They are not as good as their word. While it is normal to have each of these characteristics at times or to a certain degree, it is the constellation of them all occurring together at extreme levels that makes psychopaths seem qualitatively different, creatures apart. All these attributes hinge on three things; pale affect, shame and a disunified or 'nested sense of self' where different selves arise shaped to audience requirement but which are themselves not interlinked by reflective awareness. While psychopaths are capable of prospection – of anticipating the future, and conjuring vivid images of the past, they live strangely in time, and their manner of engaging in mental time travel is the clue to much about this unfolding personality profile.

## **2. Disorder or extreme personality style?**

Fields (1996) says "psychopathy is not a mental illness because it is not a process having an onset and a natural history" (1996, 273-4). I suggest it is an extreme personality style that has at its base biological difference in specific affective difficulties. Even these early deficits may be part of an early social history. They set in motion a contingent history of unfolding where early deficits affect later development in the manner of cascading constraints (McIlwain 2007, 2008). Being at extreme levels of some parameters early on has knock-on consequences for later development. Early deficits in emotional experience predispose the person to failing to develop other attributes crucial to empathy and morality. There is a dynamic, social aspect that is also part of this picture – 'scaregiving'. It entails having to hide out from those upon whom one depends; the experience of abuse, threat, or attack from those who optimally would

be one's protectors and guides, who would convey how to understand and soothe feelings. In such a case, avoidance in the form of a shamed retreat from feeling and from others may seem the only strategy. The outcomes of shame being added to the mix are many – depending on how one copes with it; but alienation, rageful attacks and a fragmented self are among them.

There is some evidence of early biological differences that support the view of psychopathy as a qualitatively different disorder. However, just because something is biologically underpinned does not mean that it is innate. Innate has many senses (Griffiths 2002), but in the psychopathy literature it indicates that the attributes of the personality arise early, have a genetic contribution to their occurrence and seem immovable.

Psychopathy is divided into two broad dimensions by most researchers; one which addresses callous unemotionality [CU] (which is also sometimes called Primary Psychopathy) and a factor which addresses anti-social impulsivity (which is also sometimes called Secondary Psychopathy). Callous unemotionality refers to “characteristics of interpersonal callousness such as a lack of guilt or remorse, an absence of empathy and compassion for others, and shallow and constricted emotions that interfere with the formation of meaningful attachments” (Kerig & Stellwagen 2009). There are many different ways of measuring psychopathy; some using interviews and whatever behavioural records are available, others using an array of self-report measures (often used with so-called ‘successful psychopaths’ in the general population who have not committed actions that warrant incarceration, or who have remained undetected by the criminal justice system). Surprisingly, psychopaths are quite willing to be candid about untypical emotions, impulses and actions, unless there is something at stake for them, such as when parole is an issue.

Larson, Andershed & Lichtenstein (2006) define the notion of a disorder as entailing traits that manifest at a very early age. Research addressing whether psychopathy is dimensional or a taxon (a qualitatively distinct categorical difference) has mixed results. Larson et al suggest psychopathy is an extreme constellation of traits within the framework of normal personality. There is very little empirical work on the etiology of psychopathy. They report there were only two twin studies in 2006, with small, all male samples. Genetic determination of the two major dimensions accounted for, at most, half of the variation. One found between 29% and 56% of the dimensions (assessed using the PPI, by Lilienfeld and Andrews 1996), and the other 40% genetic variation for both the callous unemotional and the impulsive anti-social dimension. Larson et al's study used a three factor model of psychopathy and found between 43 and 56% genetic influence on all three dimensions. There were unique genetic effects for CU and impulsivity. This suggests they have separate and different determination. Their third factor, grandiosity did not have unique variance from the overarching factor.

Psychopathically-inclined people seem like ‘creatures apart’ and at their most extreme, do have distinctive neurocognitive profiles which support this suggestion of an inherited callous unemotionality, (Viding 2004) and anxious hyperarousal with deficient

inhibition of anti-social impulses. Research shows that they orient towards pictorial stimuli depicting starving children or mutilated bodies that startle the average viewer into looking away; showing a 'predatory' visual orientation (Levenston, Patrick, Bradley and Lang 2000) and reduced bodily responsiveness to threat (Lorber 2004).

They have early difficulties in discerning certain emotions in others. The difficulties found depend on whether one looks at specific affects or at broad groupings of positive and negative emotions. Psychopaths have difficulties distinguishing positive affect from negative affect in faces (Habel et al 2002), though intriguingly those highest on 'emotional detachment' of Hare's psychopathy checklist [PCL-R] were associated with better discrimination ability. Looking at discrete emotions, specific deficits are apparent. Psychopathically inclined adults have difficulties in processing stimuli relevant to fear. From an early age they also have deficits in discerning vicarious fear and distress; that is difficulty in correctly and quickly naming fear and sadness in the pictorially-presented facial expression of others, (Blair & Coles 2000; Stevens, Charman & Blair 2001) with many children never correctly naming fear from facial displays (Blair, Colledge, Murray & Mitchell 2001). Adolescents have similar difficulties (Blair & Coles 2000). They are also poor at recognising fear in the voices of others (Blair et al. 2001; Blair, Mitchell, Peschardt, Colledge, Leonard, Shine, Murray & Perrett 2004). This has been linked to dysfunctions of the amygdala and ventromedial prefrontal cortex (Glenn & Raine 2009).

Lewis (2005) cautions against seeing the amygdala as a 'fear centre' since it modulates arousal independently of the valence of the elicitor. He suggests there are 'vertical circuits' between the amygdala, the cingulate and the orbito-frontal cortex, the integration of which are important to the development of emotion experience, expression and control. Integration means different things in real time and in development. However if there is an early deficiency in the functioning of one feature of the circuit, this will have consequences for later development of processes relying on that.

### **3. Taking the lid off the brain box**

Recent interest in brain plasticity has opened the lid on the brain-box, with Courchesne et al (1994) suggesting that 'neurones that fire together wire together'. Many researchers now explore the ways in which early social experiences can undermine certain circuit formation and disrupt pathways (via pruning of dendritic connections, and the role that stress hormones like cortisol can play in cell death) as well as promoting the integration and density of connectivity for other pathways.

For example, traumatised children 'exhibit profound sensitization of the neural patterns associated with their traumatic experiences,' (Perry et al 1995, 275). There are no prospective studies of the parenting experiences of psychopathic people. However, a speculative indicator of possible early experiences is evident in the similarity of the two broad dimensions of psychopathy and the two most common responses arising

from living with constant threat at a young age. Karr-Morse and Wiley (1997) note; “the chronic overactivation of neurochemical responses to threat in the nervous system, particularly the earliest years of life, can result in lifelong states of either dissociation or hyperarousal” (1997, 168). Schore (2001) suggests that experiencing relation-induced trauma can result in “a blocking of the capacity to register affect and pain”. (2001, 232)

Balbernie (2001) suggests that connections between the amygdala and the orbito-frontal cortex atrophy in response to ‘scaregiving’ (2001, 248). He suggests this means that the fear/flight response can appear with diminished chance of cortical inhibition - a rupture between behaviour and conscious control. Thus there may be differential myelination of pathways if one lives in early terror, or if one must hide out from the people upon whom one must also depend. Looking at degrees of attachment rather than the actual presence of trauma and ‘scaregiving’, Ontai & Thompson (2002) found that more securely attached children show greater understanding of negative emotions, but this is only true at age 5. At age 3, attachment security has no influence on emotion understanding. At age 3 the highest level of emotion understanding is in the context of pragmatic rather than elaborative maternal discourse about emotion and *less* secure attachment.

Insecure attachment may result in hypervigilance to emotion signals from an early age, but not necessarily greater understanding of them later on without tuition in emotion recognition and coping with emotions. Hiding out may be linked with less emotional expressivity oneself – a definite advantage for manipulative personalities and one that is highly characteristic of them. Gross, John & Richards (2000) considered the dissociation between emotion experience and expression in those who were high or low in emotional expression. They suggest that “emotion regulatory processes of low-expression individuals may be internalised to such a degree that these processes are invoked relatively automatically rather than executed consciously and deliberately (2000, 724), noting that this is especially true of negative emotions. Low expressive people mask negative emotions even more (than positive emotions and more than high expressive people do).

So psychopaths may seem bold and be insensitive to fear. This inability to recognise fear in faces and voices does seem to arise early. Evidence from the few twin studies that exist suggests that both callous unemotionality and the hyperaroused behavioural disinhibition factors of psychopathy have some genetic determination. However, evidence for affective insensitivity hinges on discriminating facial and vocal displays. Developmental evidence suggests that insecure attachment may be associated at 3 years of age with better emotion recognition but with poorer understanding by age 5. Being able to handle emotion without dissociating the experience of emotion from its expression may also have epigenetic contributions. Researchers suggest that traumatic ‘scaregiving’ and suboptimal attachment experiences may have implications for myelination of pathways in vertical circuits integral to the full expressive experience and control of emotion. Insensitivity to fear may epigenetically

unfold in the course of development and socialization. Certainly the knock-on effects suggest that somewhat fearless children required different parental socialization than empathy induction if they are to develop an ability to inhibit violence (Blair 1995) or a conscience (Kochanska 1993).

#### **4. Fearless, affectively constrained children develop less empathy**

Empathy hinges on vicarious, observed experiences of others coming to affect our own bodily economy, feelings and thoughts. It entails the ability to step outside of one's own frame of reference, a kind of decentring where one suppresses temporarily one's perspective on events to take on another's. Historically empathy has been divided into 'hot empathy' or empathic concern which hinges on bodily resonancing (bodily signals which are quick, hot, involuntary reactions) as a source of information as to what another may be feeling – and 'cold empathy' which a more intellectualized ability to recognize the state of another independent of the vicarious experience of that person's state. Psychopaths' incapacity to feel with and for another in a hot, affectively immersed way seems markedly at odds with the broader society.

Psychopaths have a diminished affective sensitivity (resonancing) and a more strategic or controlled expressivity which both have implications for mental time travel and morality. Insensitivity predisposes a person to deficient feeling on behalf of another and without the signals that arise from their own bodily economy may contribute to an inability to discern that another is being harmed from their distress cues. It may also rob them of motivational input that might promote moral sensibility and responsible actions. This lack of awareness of (or possibly an entire lack of) affective responses on witnessing another's suffering means they lack the inner signals that, on self-reflection, might be the basis of the formation of self-reflective moral emotions like guilt and shame. McIlwain et al (in press) found that psychopaths are 'harm blind'. The lack of vicarious emotion means decisions are justified with a focus on the outcome for oneself rather than on minimising harm towards another. The use of moral language masked a deep assumption of 'the other as object' rather than the 'other as knowing, feeling subject' to whom respect and care are to be accorded.

The lack of affective expressivity, contributes to their being successful manipulators, since emotional agitation is not going to alert their victim to the fact that they are being exploited, and, for the manipulator, there is not the bodily clout of affect to overcome when assuming whatever emotional masks the situation requires.

#### **5. Fragmentation: mutually exclusive futures and insincere regrets**

Hare (1999) documents a psychopath telling of his plans on his release; his account entails goals like becoming a surgeon, a pilot, a chef and an architect. Given that the person speaking not only did not have the educational background for any of these,



very few people could pursue all of them in a single lifetime. The goals offered as plans to others are much like a piece of meat one would throw to a dog to keep him quiet; enough to satisfy the demands of the moment.

Psychopaths, even those who are not incarcerated and who therefore may not be suspected of emphasising their good points to maximise their chances of parole, are exceptionally good at conveying the impression of the most sincere regret for their actions. They resolve with utter conviction in the moment that they will not err in the same ways again. This is followed by the most remarkable capacity to err in precisely the same ways again and to find themselves in the same lamentable situations repetitively. This 'sincere resolve' seems like the mark of the con man or the hypocrite. Trivers (2000) suggests that to be really good at deceiving others, it is to one's advantage also to have deceived oneself so that there is no inconsistency in the mask that one presents as one's face socially.

What is remarkable about case studies of psychopaths is that they seem to truly believe that the face they present in the moment to a single other is the full truth about themselves. Cleckley describes being put in a very awkward situation by a psychopath he has been seeing clinically. The man has been living with his mistress in sexual intimacy for some months and has just decided he wants to get back with his wife. He tells Cleckley that he is going to ask the mistress to broker a new accord with his wife. Cleckley demurs. This might not be a good idea, raising the issue of the mistress's feelings about such a task, and suggesting it might not be the best way to win back his wife's affections. The man is confused. Why not? Well, Cleckley remarks (amazed at having to spell these things out), it shows that you have been having extra-marital sexual relations. The patient replies; 'but she knows I would never do such a thing'. Whereupon Cleckley points out that the patient has in fact been having sexual relations with his mistress these last months. "Yes, but she doesn't know that", notes the patient. This example shows what I call the 'nested sense of self' that characterises psychopathic reasoning – 'I am the totality of what I appear to a single other in a single moment'. There is not an integrated sense of self in different contexts, in different moments in time or in relation to a generalised social other.

## **6. An inability to restrain whims and half-hearted desires**

One cannot put this all down to powerful motivations arising from self-interest. It is not as consistent as that. The self-centredness and grandiosity is in truth more of a defensive mask than the sign of a powerful egotism. "While the psychopath seems pathologically egocentric, he is nothing like an enlightened egoist. His life is frequently distinguished by failed opportunities, wasted chances and behaviour which is astonishingly self-destructive." (Elliott, 1992, 210). It is not that he places high value on the things he pursues in his antisocial behaviour, he acts on whims. "Everything about him suggests a casual and weak impulse..." (Cleckley 1964, 160). Fields (1996) adds "he seems to lack the capacity to restrain even half-hearted desires for immediate gratification" (1996, 274).

So the picture is of one who acts upon whims, makes excuses, has little insight into the feelings of others, who can at times use the language of morality but has no other-oriented moral beliefs. A life characterised by failed opportunities. Goals are made in the moment – a story to satisfy whomsoever they are talking to at the time, and they offer, over successive moments, mutually exclusive options. Even the earliest evidence suggests they are incapable of regret and anticipation. It is for this reason I suggest that they live strangely in time. Why that might arise? I have shown that while there may be some genetic determination of fearlessness and callous-unemotionality, many of the other features of the personality may arise from developmental failures in the interpersonal reception of their needs and their sense of self which meant that their own emotions and drives were intolerable to them and from their attempts to avoid having their difference detected. Does this provide a clue to their living strangely in time?

### **7. Being able to tolerate and own one's inner experiences, emotions and memories**

Tolerating emotions and drives is necessary to get their message, reflect on them, soothe and manage them and own them. Inner states can be intolerable to some personality styles such as borderline personalities (Fonagy 1989) who share many attributes with psychopathy. Ownership of impulses, emotions and memories is undermined if one suppresses them constantly. Emotions are more likely to have direct effect on action if one cannot notice them as they arise. Lambie (2009) suggests that it is only reflection that permits emotions to have rational input into decisions. In my research (McIlwain, *in preparation*) I found that the capacity to reflect on feelings was decidedly not a feature of either primary or secondary psychopathy. Psychopathically-inclined people were very unlikely to assent to items such as: 'At the start of an emotional state, I can readily notice when the emotion starts to increase in intensity' and 'I can be in a strong emotional state and still feel myself reflecting on what I am feeling'. This is a small first step towards providing evidence to suggest that psychopaths do not reflect on their inner states.

A major developmental requirement of us for successful collective life is some form of inhibition (Smith 1992; Mischel, Shoda & Rodriguez 1989). One needs a moment's pause when in the grip of an impulse, to become aware of impulses so one can weigh the consequences of acting upon them, bring memories to bear on actions so that one can learn from experience, and anticipate future contingencies so one can avoid courses of action that have been unsuccessful in the past. Fields (1996) notes psychopaths are unable to act for prudential reasons; to act in their own best future interests. As an example he cites Cleckley's (1941/1964) case study of a psychopath who could not avoid repeating immediately upon discharge the very actions that resulted in his being returned to institutional solitary confinement despite of his manifest loathing of such confinement.

I suggest that psychopaths may not be able to tolerate their inner states long enough



to reflect on them. If they have not been taught by parental modelling how to cope with and regulate intense feelings, they may have learned to attend away from and suppress emotions. This compromises the sense of one's feelings and memories as belonging to oneself which means that one's sources of impulse may seem inexplicable and alien to oneself. One is unlikely to own inner experiences if shamed for having them or if, on having them, does not know how to regulate and soothe. This means that rather than an inherited difficulty, they may have become unable to reflect on their inner states, so meta-emotions do not arise, self-reflective emotions like shame and guilt do not arise. Thus they may retain enough sensitivity to know that they differ in their impulses and longings from the wider society, but this promotes hiding their difference from society. This is where the surprising effects of shame need to be considered in a seemingly shameless personality style.

## **8. Tolerating shame**

Shame, as a transient emotion, is an inevitable experience present from birth, and limbically underpinned. Helen Block Lewis (1971) suggests that it arises from the 'unrequited smile'. Its occurrence is linked to the interruption of a social pleasure which causes the signature features of the affect: a lowering of the head and eyes, and a withdrawal (Tomkins 1963). Suggesting that shame is innate does not preclude its having different manifestations at different developmental phases shaped by other acquired abilities and attributes of the child. Tomkins sees it as an affect auxiliary because it arises as a result of interrupted pleasure. He details how this affect can be co-assembled with different beliefs to form schemas and scripts linking shame, contempt and humiliation. One need not vote for whether one views shame as a 'primary feeling' or as 'socially shaped' since, like most affects, it is both and takes many forms throughout the life course depending on the beliefs and motivations with which it is co-assembled (McIlwain 2007).

This transient emotion can become a personality disposition if one has 'internalised shame' which I discuss below. Intimately connected with one's place on the social hierarchy, shame is the affect of deference and pride. At its best shame signals a discrepancy between moral expectations of the collective and one's self-representational system. Sometimes catalogued as a moral emotion, shame inspires very little moral behaviour: it is a highly toxic affect. Smith et al (2002) found that shame is more about exposure and inferiority than morality. Gilbert (2003) suggests that shame and guilt are differently underpinned and evolved from different motive systems: guilt being based on a concern for the welfare of the other the other "such that the (distress) experiences of others matter" (2003, 1206), shame being a "self-focused, social threat system related to competitive behavior and the need to prove oneself acceptable/desirable to others" (2003, 1205).

While psychopaths are clinically portrayed as lacking in shame, remorse and guilt, recent research shows psychopathy is actually associated with shame, (though using a

vignette-based measure of shame Mullins-Nelson, Salekin and Leistico (2006) did not find an association). Morrison & Gilbert (2001) found an association with shame in incarcerated psychopaths. The secondary psychopaths had greater shame levels than did primary psychopaths and the greatest shame levels overall. There was much more acknowledgement of shame than was expected of psychopaths; indicating that “*there is a feeling that, in truth, there is something flawed or worthless about oneself*,” (Gilbert 1997; cited in Morrison and Gilbert 2001, 347). Morrison & Gilbert (2001) also found that secondary psychopaths are more likely to internalize shame than either primary or non-psychopathic individuals.

### 9. Psychopathy: a graded relationship to shame

In my research (McIlwain, in preparation) I found that psychopathy has a highly graded relationship to shame. They are quite prepared to acknowledge shame as i) just the embarrassing sense of a clash between the self-representational system and what the collective requires. Primary psychopaths no longer evince shame when one moves to asking about ii) internalised shame and a less than compassionate set of attitudes towards oneself. Neither form of psychopathy admits to shame when one moves to iii) the deepest level of shame, where one has accepted as true of oneself views that one is worthless, inferior to almost everyone. I found secondary psychopaths in fact are less prepared to endorse such views of self-derogation than the general population. So the relation of psychopathy to shame is complex, as is the construct of shame itself, which merits deeper discussion in a moment.

In detail, I have found that psychopathy is associated with statements that reflect i) awareness of something unacceptable and therefore that they should hide and disguise about themselves. The feelings both Primary and Secondary psychopaths acknowledge having felt often are: embarrassment; feeling ridiculous, stupid, humiliated, laughable, disgusting to others and self-conscious. Primary psychopaths did not endorse statements addressing a more ii) internalised sense of shame (The Feelings about Self Scale [FASS], McIlwain & Warburton 2005) though secondary psychopaths were. Examples of the items that only secondary psychopaths were prepared to endorse include: If I let people know what I’m really like, they would reject me; I wish sometimes I could just disappear, sometimes I feel as though I am in bits and pieces; sometimes I just want to hide.; I am not comfortable admitting (even to myself) how much I would like to let myself need people; and I cannot imagine someone knowing me through and through and thinking me worthwhile. When it came to items assessing iii) self-derogation, neither form of psychopathy was associated with their endorsement. This form of shame is exemplified by assent to items like: I feel I am not a person of worth, and am not on an equal plane with others; All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

As one moves from level i) to level iii) one is tracking the internalisation of shame. Where a person has ‘internalised shame’, (Cook 1996) or developed ‘shame-proneness’

(Tangney 1995) this affects their treatment and views of others, their behaviour and self-views. Claesson et al (2007, 599) note: the action tendency is “withdraw, something is wrong, the contact is broken”; one’s self experience is “there is something wrong with me, I am bad and unattractive, I am alone” (Cook 1996 cited in Claesson et al 2007, 599). Internalised shame may be experienced as an inner attack, as Negrao et al (2005) note: a person “may experience internalized shame following the experience of abuse as an attack on the self; leaving the individual feeling deeply defective and defeated” (2005, 351). Resnick (1997) delineates a ‘recursive loop of shame’ where “in maladaptive [characterological/neurotic] shame the child ... introjects the other’s disapproval and perhaps contempt and disgust for him” (1997, 268). In Helen Block Lewis’ (1971) account, shame is at first experienced in an interpersonal relationship and becomes a relationship to elements of oneself – a relationship of compassion, or harsh judgment.

## **10. Precursors of shame-proneness**

Parenting styles have been explored as precursors of internalised shame. Claesson and Sohlberg (2002) found that internalised shame was correlated with memories of a blaming, attacking and ignoring mother (replicated, across two studies; an all-male sample, and a mixed gender sample). Internalised shame correlates with early experiences of being met with indifference, abandonment and rejection. When such shame is unconsciously activated there are distortions in views of self and perceptions of others, and the person comes to replicate experiences of a neglected self and a dismissing other. Bennett, Sullivan and Lewis (2005) found that early physical abuse (but not neglect) was related to more shame experience. So, some people get massive doses of shame before they have resources to deal with it. Further, some get shamed by those who should be providing those very resources to deal with shame. It can also become a central organising feature of a shame-prone personality where early life contingencies have been conducive to internalising shame.

## **11. The outcomes of shame-proneness**

Gilbert (2003) suggests shame is evolutionarily sculpted to signal whether our view of our self is in accord with how the community views us and to bring us into line with social expectations. While it can motivate us to bring ourselves into line, it can readily backfire. We can evade the required moral growth by withdrawing into splendid isolation, heaping blame on others, by lying to others or to ourselves about what we have done and why, making excuses rather than fully acknowledging the weight of our actions (Hsieh 2004). Shame can only bring a person into line if she or he is open to its message. Since it is a painful emotion, it is often too swiftly dealt with to have that effect, which bypasses it as motivation for self-improvement or moral growth. Tangney, Stuewig and Macheck (2007) suggest shame has contrasting core ‘action-tendencies’ or motivations to guilt, (2007, 350). Tangney’s research suggests that

guilt promotes reparation, while shame promotes withdrawing or hiding. If we are unable to tolerate shame long enough to get its message as to how we have failed to live up to what the collective requires of us, we will tend to hide rather than using its signals as impetus for moral growth.

Shame hinges on a kind of caring for belonging and acceptance (Lewis 1971) where one longs to be accepted not merely for one's efforts and actions, but who one is. Martens (2001) describes the hidden suffering of the psychopath who, sensing that they would not be accepted retreat to lonely isolation, and often take bizarre paths in attempting to connect with others (using Jeffrey Dahmer's cannibalism as an example). So, the social profile is one of deficiencies in interpersonal connectedness: in reality, in anticipation and in the sense of discerning what society as a generalised other requires of them. Psychopaths are clinically defined as being without shame. While they may not be open to the social pressures that "ensure respect for the demands of social morality" (Fields 1996, 275), they are nonetheless very concerned with limited conceptions of shame.

## 12. On not handling shame

Shame is linked to alienation, a hostile view of others, making excuses, and a fragmentation of personality or splitting of a sense of self. Shame is a difficult affect for anyone to handle well. Handling shame well "can also resemble subordinate response strategies, which may also be an adaptive response to shame depending on the context" (Campbell and Elison 2005, 97). These responses entail: acknowledging one's shame, conforming, improving oneself, apologizing, and making amends (Gilbert & McGuire 1998). Accepting a subordinate position is unlikely to be easy with the power and status-orientation which characterise psychopathy (McWilliams 1994). More likely are the more problematic and common responses to shame outlined by Nathanson (1992) in his 'Compass of Shame'. This outlines four possible responses to shame: one can *Attack Self* experiencing self-disgust and a sense of stupidity; *Attack Other* via the outward-direction of anger and blame; show *Avoidance* where one denies the emotional significance of an event via disavowal, emotional distancing and minimization and lastly one can *Withdraw* which is the common tendency to hide.

Using this model, Elison, Pulos and Lennon (2006) examine the scripts activated in response to shame, defining scripts as "sets of ordering rules for the interpretation, evaluation, prediction, production and control" of events (2006, 222). They examine scripts addressing how people reduce, ignore or magnify shame. 'Withdrawing' attempts to limit shame, 'attacking self' is an internalisation of shame, while 'avoiding' is not recognising or accepting shame. Intriguingly avoidance scripts are "most likely to be triggered, and operate, outside of consciousness" (2006, 162). Similarly, 'attacking other' scripts are where "the shame message may not be recognized, typically is not accepted, and attempts are made to make someone else feel worse" (2006, 162).

Bypassing shame by avoiding awareness of it does not totally prevent personal suffering, and the cost falls to others. Bennett, Sullivan and Lewis (2005) note: “where the expression of shame is suppressed, felt shame may still exist (Retsinger 1987) and may lead to increased anger” (1987, 319). They also note that “while anger may be an adaptive emotion, in association with shame it may reflect hostility; a maladaptive, antisocial emotion” (1987, 319). Bennett et al’s research suggests that hostility may arise when anger is linked with shame, a common combination for men. Izard, Ackerman, Schoff & Fine (2000) have found that shame, if co-assembled with anger, can promote attack, and as Erikson (1950) notes, at a more sinister level, destruction of the witnesses of humiliation. Humiliation entails shame where there is also an ascription of blame to the other for exposing weaknesses in oneself (Negrao et al 2005). This kind of rageful attack wiping out the witnesses of humiliation is characteristic of one form of an unfortunately versatile array of psychopathic violence. Psychopaths get the simple message of shame; the socio-emotional signal that something has gone wrong in the social field: do not approach, do not persist in your actions. However, in the face of an embarrassing sense of stupidly having done something humiliating, they are more likely to make excuses, hide, masquerade and/or attack and wipe out the witnesses of humiliation than to get the message of what the collective requires.

### **13. The shattering effect of shame: self-reflection and splitting**

Shame is traumatic. In those who have not learned to cope with it, or do not have the sense of self to accept its message with humility, defense against it goes outward in alienation, cynicism, and the devaluation of others and inwards in fragmentation and splitting (McIlwain, in press). Shame shatters the personality or prevents the self-reflective linking of different drive-affect states into a coherent, self-reflective whole.

This shattering effect is a surprising effect of shame on the psychopathic personality. The ground for such defense may have been prepared by attenuated self-reflection due to an inability to tolerate inner states. Thus they may not remain conscious psychological states for long, as they may readily be translated into action, or suppressed.

Tangney suggests (following Lewis (1971)) that in the experience of shame there is a split in self functioning as “the self is both agent and object of observation and disapproval” (1971, 4). Shame is socially shaped by early experiences and by the development of reflective capacities, as Michael Lewis notes in his view of shame as a self-reflective emotion that arises around 18 months (Lewis 1992).

As Gilbert (2003) notes, threats to self can trigger basic emotions like fear or anger, and these “will be blended with symbolic self-representations that make them into self-conscious emotions of (for example) shame” (2003, 1208). Retaining that reflective emphasis, Andrew Morrison (1997) suggests shame can also be ‘a feeling

about a feeling' – a kind of meta-emotion to use Lambie & Marcel's (2002) term. An example of the kind of nesting of emotions that characterises meta-emotions is as follows: I may experience shame due to the fact that I am uncomfortable with my degree of loving reliance on others.

Absence of self-reflection (since psychopaths may not be able to inhibit long enough to reflect on inner processes) means that no bridging forms between different states of awareness; affective, impulsive bundles remain disconnected. This is different from dissociation, strictly speaking, since it is not the severing of connections that have already been made, but the outcome of avoidant processes which have prevented the connections becoming enduring in the first place. However, this is sufficiently consonant with contemporary use to be allowed to stand as an instance of dissociation (see the work of Negrao & Bonanno, 2002 where dissociation is also used to specify a failure of linkages among component processes).

#### **14. Shame and personal fragmentation**

While momentary experience of shame results in a split between self-as-object and self-as-judging-subject that is in common with all self-reflective experience, extreme and prolonged experience of shame can produce splitting in another sense. It can produce a fragmentation of personality akin to dissociation where a person lacks a single centre of initiative (Kohut 1971). When one is fragmented in this sense it is like housing a number of selves which fly in loose formation. One self or another is in ascendancy as context and circumstances require. People with this tendency within the normal range are termed 'high self-monitors' in the psychological literature. It is an example of how a person can change, chameleon-like, as the situation or audience changes. This is akin to Tucker's use of 'the occasional self' (Lewis 2005, 231). Lewis suggests by bridging psychology and neuroscience we end up with a transformed psychological construct: the self as occasional state "emerging only to the extent that the constituent mechanisms are recreated in the continual flux of psychophysiological processes" (2005, 231). He notes that the self as multiple or polyphonic has already been canvassed by developmentalists and in psychological theory. He suggests "there are several highly familiar selves...each constituted by an anticipated, actual or imagined dialogue with a predictable other and this cluster of selves fosters a family of attractors for self-referential appraisals" (2005, 232). Thus there may be a flexible movement among phenomenal selves that are still interlinked and interconnected. These connections between different states may not arise or may be severed if a person has endured early trauma.

Prince (1914) suggests that due to past trauma a person may have difficulty synthesizing "sentiments and emotions of a certain character, i.e., those which pertain to certain experiences, to certain systems of remembrances" (1914, 499). Some memories and emotions dissociate and then synthesize forming constellations of motivational currents of feeling, impulses and associated memories – particularly



bodily memories if trauma was early experienced. In some accounts of dissociation, these become personality subsystems that have split off and synthesized as more or less autonomous with differing motivations, pursuits of pleasure, intelligence, aesthetic and moral sense (see Thigpen & Cleckley 1957).

Freud (1912) had difficulties with the concept of dissociation, particularly the notion of an unconscious consciousness. He sees it as an abuse of the term conscious; “We have no right to extend the meaning of this word so far as to make it include a consciousness of which its owner himself is not aware. If philosophers find difficulty in accepting the existence of unconscious ideas, the existence of an unconscious consciousness seems to be even more objectionable...” (1912, 269). He did however, have his own theory of a splitting of consciousness and ‘hypnoid’ states arising in neurosis and certain perversions. He preferred to see it as a “shifting of consciousness – that function – or whatever it be – oscillating between two different psychological complexes” (Freud 1912, 263). The latter sense seems particularly apt for the notion of a series of nested senses of self which are not reflectively inter-connected, where there is not necessarily a single “owner”. This is part of the reason why strictly speaking, psychopaths may not be truly capable of hypocrisy, since they are unlikely to have a unified morality.

### **15. Are psychopaths hypocrites?**

Researchers define hypocrisy as “a motive to appear moral in one’s own and others’ eyes, while, if possible, avoiding the cost of actually being moral” (Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman 1999, 525). Psychopaths nakedly privilege their own momentary, whimsical self-interests, and do not disrupt the false and favourable views of themselves that their victims may hold. This is akin however to Batson’s findings that where people were asked to *randomly* allocate themselves or a fictitious other to a task; one a boring lecture, the other entry to a raffle, fully 70%-80% of participants assigned themselves to the reward task. Only 10% rated their behaviour as morally responsible. They are thus not fully hypocritical. As Naso (2006) succinctly states, “they recognized and acknowledged the discrepancy between their actions and moral standards. By capitulating to impulses serving their self-interests, they evidenced superego weakness but not hypocrisy.” (2006, 279). When Batson, Thompson, and Chen (2002) made procedural fairness and morality salient people became more hypocritical; they were more likely to profess views of fairness, masquerade at enacting fairness by electing to use the coin flip, and then *still* assign themselves to the reward condition. So, on this account it seems likely that psychopaths are at least partly hypocritical in so far as they are concerned to leave intact their fictitiously favourable image in the eyes of others. However, whether they are concerned to appear moral in their own eyes requires further research.

### **16. A profile which unfolds: a constellation of attributes arising from cascading constraints**

Psychopathy unfolds from an early fearlessness, they are unwilling to access their own emotions, have a lack of empathy and a lack of sense of other as whole other. They do not spontaneously consider harm to another, but are self-centred in their accounts. They do not own their memories, nor are they willing to reflecting on feelings, so there is the possibility that their own impulses and emotions feel alien and out of control. While shame hinges on a longing to belong, it is also the affect of power – of deference and hierarchy. Psychopaths have some intimacy with shame, but may attempt to deal with it unconsciously via grandiosity or attacking the other. Sensing they would not be accepted, they withdraw, bypassing shame or diverting it out into anger, hostility and the rageful destruction of the humiliating audience. Psychopaths cannot connect, so they dominate using a currency of fear in which they themselves have become bankrupt. Bypassing shame intensifies anger and promotes a wish to diminish others. They cover a fear of worthlessness with convictions of grandiosity. Shame alienates us from others and from the collective and fragments our sense of self through a dissociative process called splitting. Thus, they have a sense of an imperfect self, which is hidden and fragmented. There exist within psychopathically-inclined people somewhat separate bundles of conation feeling and thought which are weakly linked. They can become whatever is needed. This saves them from experiencing failed ambitions and regret, but means they lack a centre of separate initiative (Kohut 1971). This also means that they are temporally spry and may view past actions in the manner of; “That was in another land and besides the wench is dead”. They may not feel accountable for past actions if they were the whims of another self.

### **17. Tripping in the cooler zones: time-travelling without hot cognition**

Psychopaths do not show sincere regret. In one psychopath’s account of killing a waiter when he learned that the man had been an aspiring actor of some promise he had saved the young man from disappointment as most actors fail to realise their ambitions (Hare 1999). Their anticipation of the future is whimsical. Goals are forgotten as soon as they are spoken. They lack the textured access to the past required for planning the future. Imagining the future seems to use much of the same neural machinery as remembering the past (Schachter, Addis & Buckner 2007). The abilities of projecting oneself into the future, theory of mind, episodic memory and navigation seem to share a common functional anatomy and emerge at the same age (4-6 years), (Buckner & Carroll 2006). All are reliant on autobiographical memory.

Psychopaths live strangely in time not because they cannot imagine futures or tell powerful stories about their past. They can entertain any number of possible futures, and regale you with vivid accounts of heroism and terror in their pasts. Only they don’t personally connect with those stories – the stories and goals lack specific, owned personal detail and involuntarily evoked emotional connections.

Textured, emotionally rich autobiographical memories that give us specific access to the past are crucial resources for imagining possible futures (or counterfactuals) in vivid and motivationally compelling detail. It is the hot emotion and the specificity that distinguishes experiential time-travel from merely entertaining possible future situations or having only semantic access to the past, remembering only general categories of events. The closest analog to that cooler more pared-back access to the past is to read a diary entry from too long ago where it could be someone else writing. The emotions fail to connect as one's own. The only details that are in mind are those written; there is no involuntary evocation of other feelings, no previously unrecalled, associated memories that come into mind.

There is a difference between imaginatively entertaining the past and future and the more emotional engagement with prospective or retrospective scenarios that have motivational impact. With regard to prospection, thinking about the future, Boyer (2008) suggests that emotional investment in the future enables us to overcome the motivation to 'act opportunistically and myopically' that arises from temporal discounting where 'later counts for less than now' (2008, 220). Callous opportunism is similarly discouraged by moral feelings provide an immediate punishment for imagining harming others or letting down a friend. In talking about the possible advantages of time travel, Boyer emphasises precisely attributes and abilities psychopaths don't have: "time travel may be functional to the extent that it provides emotions that bypass current goals as well as time discounting and therefore provide us with immediate counter-rewards against opportunistic motivation. The model goes against the common intuitions of 'cool cognition' as adaptive and 'hot cognition' as irrational, a model widespread in traditional decision-making paradigms." (2008, 222).

I suggest the pale affect of the psychopath is part given and part flight from bodily intensity due to scaregiving and a lack of capacity to regulate emotion. This results in a lack of experiential or phenomenal access to the past and future. They entertain futures and pasts without experiential conviction because they do not take an interlinked sense of self into the future, and do not discover themselves in the past. It is as if they are rummaging around in someone else's diary and photographs, making plans the way a travel agent plots a trip for someone else.

The flattened affect and a nested sense of self means that mental time travel is no longer a source of dissuasion from exploitative, myopic and self-defeating action.

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