

Book Review

The Psychopath: Emotion and the Brain

James Blair, Derek Mitchell and Karina Blair

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The media is increasingly giving the label “psychopath” to a range of individuals showing any antisocial tendencies. In this book, the authors aim to examine the definition of psychopathy, its prevalence and the theories behind its cause. In doing so, they achieve their aims very well indeed. The book summarizes current thinking on the aetiology and phenomenology of psychopathy thoroughly and clearly, and goes on to present a new causal model of psychopathy based on a dysfunction of one particular part of the brain: the amygdala. The first chapter gives a pleasant introduction to the basic concepts around psychopathy and related areas, arming novices with the key conceptual distinctions such as that between antisocial personality disorder and psychopathy and between reactive and instrumental aggression. From here, the reader is led on a tour of the field, beginning with demographic considerations such as the effects of gender or socio-economic status on psychopathy and moving through a consideration of genetic and environmental effects on antisocial behaviour generally and to a critical chapter on the specific deficits in emotional and linguistic/semantic processing that they argue make up the psychopathic disorder.

There follows an exposition of the main cognitive and neural accounts of psychopathy propounded by other researchers in the field over the years. These provide an excellent summary, but I did feel that some of the criticisms they made were somewhat suggestive of their having a competing model rather than difficulties with the work of earlier theorists *per se*. The last building-block chapter, before their main argument is presented, is an intriguing look at a neural basis for reactive aggression, which is provided as a counterpoint to their model of psychopathy, which they characterize as being distinctive by virtue of the involvement of instrumental aggression. This section is easily understood and there are sound links to developmental and environmental factors such as childhood abuse and dominance hierarchies.

Their main argument presents a model of psychopathy, which links psychopathy with amygdala dysfunction. This model suggests that the dysfunction is associated with problems in learning in relation to aversive conditioning. That is, there is a reduced ability to learn to avoid negative events, stimuli and outcomes. The relevant chapter did make me glad that I had been well grounded in previous chapters, as there are a lot of empirical results to digest and brain areas and connections to remember. Struggling readers are rescued throughout by the summaries that appear after each key point. In the book’s closing, the authors attempt to work through difficulties thrown up by the model, such as accounting for psychopathy co-occurring with ADHD, and they are candid about their model’s failure to explain the results on impaired processing for language meaning in psychopaths. They present six bullet-point

conclusions, which range from the fresh, “the distinction between reactive and instrumental aggression must not be ignored”, to truism, “the diagnoses of conduct disorder and antisocial personality disorder are severely limited”.

Overall, this book provides an engaging and individual introduction to explanations of psychopathy and antisocial behaviour. It does require some background knowledge of psychology, although the initial chapters should be accessible to all. Police or prison officers and others working with psychopaths looking for practical know-how will be disappointed – this book seeks to explain, not to treat or manage. Of those with an interest, newcomers will devour the summary sections of the book and old hands could benefit from exposing themselves to a new angle.

I would recommend the book very highly to individuals new to the area. The theory they present at the close of the book logically builds up from these early chapters and so those individuals who do find themselves skipping ahead may still benefit from the cogent summary they provide.

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