

# SELECTING FOR ADVERSE CHARACTERISTICS

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the reasons that employers, perhaps unconsciously, might select for adverse characteristics in job applicants and in decisions concerning personnel assignments. Our research is based on the Hare P-Scan instrument which was designed to assess psychopathic tendencies. Although the diagnostic scale was originally intended for use in the criminal justice and mental health fields, the developer is currently adapting and validating it for use in a business context. Our research compliments his new endeavor in business decision-making and may be a timely study in light of the plethora of corporate meltdowns, perhaps due to in part to selection for adverse traits in managers and executives.

**Keywords:** Psychopath, Hare P-Scan, Productive Neurosis

## Introduction

Attempts to explore and explain the destructive tendencies occasionally encountered in organizations have been hindered by assumptions of rational actors, overly-optimistic views of human nature, and by limited interdisciplinary collaboration with scholars beyond the business disciplines. The emergent field of behavioral economics has brought the irrational closer to the quotidian in management research, yet more collaboration with psychology, neurology, and other areas of endeavor might help to understand why organizational decision-makers often act against their best interests. This article explores the reasons that employers, perhaps unconsciously, might select for adverse characteristics in job applicants and in decisions concerning personnel assignments. The Hare P-Scan instrument, originally designed to assess psychopathic tendencies in institutional populations (Hare & Hervé, 1999), provided the creative inspiration for our study.

## The Invisible Psychopath

In his scathing critique of management education, Greenhalgh (1973) made perhaps the first unambiguous reference in organization science to the psychopath at work. The assumption of a fictitious rational economic actor, he argued, tacitly contained a corollary assumption that this idealized employee was also psychologically well-adjusted. It would be easy to dismiss

Greenhalgh's (1973) critique because, from an academic perspective, the paranoid neurotic boss of his narrative can be aseptically packaged as a Theory X adherent, while the boss' enabling psychopathic assistant falls neatly into the Machiavellian leadership camp. Hence, clinically recognized personality disorders can be conveniently reclassified as assumptions about human nature that merely influence styles of management, thereby removing them from the purview of organization science. Hare (1993) might disagree with the practicality of such assumptions of convenience, as varying degrees of psychopathic tendencies have been unmasked in nearly every sector of life in our postindustrial society.

Howell and Shamir (2005) offered a slightly more realistic model of organizational life than previous researchers by giving followers an active role in shaping and empowering their charismatic leaders. Such leaders are chosen and encouraged, they argued, because of a resemblance at least in part to the followers' prototypical image of a leader. The leader's attributes grow by both positive reflection from followers and political support from organizational power brokers. Thus, if the dark side of charisma emerges, the followers are to blame because their active role comes with the added responsibility for the consequences of their leader, whom they chose and encouraged. Although this model represents an improvement on conventional thinking, Howell and Shamir (2005) stopped far short of suggesting that organizational decision-makers might intentionally select personnel for adverse characteristics. Hence, the psychopath's role at work remained clandestine, perhaps masked by the assumption that "people with personality disorders cannot get a job" (Greenhalgh, 1973, p. 197).

There is an implicit rational assumption in the active follower scenario that the dark side of charisma is indeed dark and easily recognizable, especially in contrast with the good attributes of charisma. An effective charismatic leader has "a high sense of self-worth, self-esteem, self-consistency, and self-efficacy" (Howell & Shamir, 2005, p. 106), attributes which are also coincidentally characteristic of the psychopath (Hare, 1993). Cleckley (1964, p. 32) notes that the failure to consider that these socially desirable traits might indicate a psychopath "springs from a lack of awareness in the public that he exists." The condition is difficult to identify, damages are hard to predict and legally prevent, and there are no effective means to treat offenders if they happen to be discovered.

Decision processes which rely on the assumption of rational actors may also be burdened by the unrealistic assumption of information transparency. In relation to our research topic of selection for adverse characteristics, a rational decision process would likely assume that potentially harmful personality disorders are indeed clearly recognizable and, therefore, could be avoided. Yet, medical science indicates otherwise. The clinical profile of the asymptomatic psychopath differs markedly from that of the psychotic, who is prone to demonstrable episodic delusions, paranoia, and other stereotypical symptoms of mental disorder. By contrast, Cleckley (1964, p. 366) describes the psychopath in terms of a masked personality disorder:

The results of direct psychiatric examination disclose nothing pathologic – nothing that would indicate incompetency or that would arouse suspicion that such a man could not lead a successful and happy life. Not only is the psychopath rational and his thinking free of delusions, but he also appears to react with normal emotions. His ambitions are discussed with what appears to be healthy

enthusiasm. His convictions impress even the skeptical observer as firm and binding. He seems to respond with adequate feeling to another's interest in him and...he is likely to be judged a man of warm human responses, capable of full devotion and loyalty.

Good natured people tend to search for or construct behavioral explanations in line with their unwavering faith in humanity (Hare, 1993). For instance, Schwartz (1986) created an elaborate model of commitment to an immoral organization to rationalize his cognitive dissonance and to confirm his disbelief that a manager could consciously act against the broader society's best interests. At the other end of the spectrum, symptoms of social dysfunction may be trivialized into buzzwords such as "toxic leadership" with accompanying naïve beliefs in the efficacy of training workshops to help managers who naturally must sense the need to improve themselves, their relationships with co-workers, as well as overall organizational performance (Fitzpatrick, 2000, p. 4). Unfortunately, an appropriate strategy for dealing with the psychopaths among us cannot be found in the middle ground between denial and naivety. Lubit (2002), a psychiatrist and executive coach, acknowledges that "destructive narcissism" can fuel the ambitions of charming manipulators for power and advancement. However, his solution of 360° feedback for diagnosis, executive coaching for treatment of mild cases, and "copious emotional support from consultants and superiors" for severe cases (Lubit, 2002, p. 136) indicates a pre-packaged consulting solution with little concern for the true nature of the problem. Hare (1993) suggests that a psychopath may actually learn from treatment how to improve their techniques and how to strengthen the mask of sanity.

### **Practical Considerations**

Hare and Hervé (1999) developed an instrument to screen for psychopathic behavioral traits in institutional populations and, perhaps not surprisingly, the Hare P-Scan may find a useful role in explaining many of the recent corporate scandals (Deutschman, 2005). However, an adaptation of this instrument as a pre-screening tool may have limited utility because there seems to be an implicit assumption that if we only had a method to detect the potential for psychopathic tendencies in advance, then we could prevent the white-collar criminal damage of the Skillings and Fastows of the world. Kopelman (1986) notes that performance appraisal interviews are often counterproductive because managers are reluctant to give unfavorable feedback due to the fear of adverse organizational politics, emotional reactions, and diminished employee motivation. If we add the possibility of a career-ending retaliation by a skilled manipulator, the practical problems of using a psychopathic diagnostic instrument become quite apparent.

Hare (1993, p. 168) directly states that "psychopaths might be helped up some success ladders by their distinctive personality traits," thereby implying that some of their characteristics might actually be attractive to recruiters. The Hare P-Scan is divided into three sections: interpersonal, affective, and lifestyle (Hare & Hervé, 1999). Thirty items are included under each dimension, but the entire scale would likely cluster into approximately twenty constructs.

A number of items describe behaviors and traits that decision-makers could reasonably be expected to perceive as criminal, destructive, or simply undesirable for an employee. Some examples include:

- #53. Easily turns to violence to achieve goals
- #77. Deals drugs
- #81. Is cruel to animals

If we discarded the most obvious negatively perceived items, we would still have more than enough potentially desirable indicators to describe successful businessmen such as Jack Welch, Bill Gates, and Bob Nardelli. Some examples include:

- #12. Dominates/controls interactions with others
- #17. Sees self as a leader, others as followers
- #29. Believes people get what they deserve

We do not mean to suggest that these leaders are psychopathic, even though there are sufficient biographical details available on all three to rate a moderately high score on the Hare P-Scan. So, other than the potential for destruction, what might this score indicate? In a general sense, the interpersonal dimension could simply describe a strong or persuasive leader, the affective dimension could indicate the ability to make tough decisions without undue emotional involvement, while the lifestyle dimension might capture some facets of an entrepreneurial spirit. Lacking sufficient and relevant data, we can only speculate as to whether some combinations and magnitudes of the items on Hare's P-Scan might indicate the potential for productive neurosis as opposed to destructive psychopathy.

Realistically, the great mass of decisions facing the businesses and organizations of the world must be made without benefit of detailed historical and biographical information on all of the implicated actors. How can we improve our screening and personnel decision-making processes to reduce the likelihood of unconsciously selecting for adverse characteristics? Further research to explore the questions posed in this article would benefit from data from human resource professionals, managers, and other organizational decision-makers on their perceptions of the behavioral traits included in Hare's diagnostic scale.

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