

Science AMA Series: Hi reddit! I'm Alice Jones, an expert on antisocial behaviour and psychopathy at Goldsmiths, University of London. I research emotion processing and empathy, focusing on childhood development and education. AMA!

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Abstract

Hi reddit! In series one of Dexter, we learn that signs of Dexter Morgan's psychopathic behaviour began to appear in childhood. In one flashback, he confesses to killing a neighbour's dog and to thoughts of escalating to murder. But how do psychopathic traits develop and manifest in reality? My work focuses on emotion processing and empathy in children and adolescents with antisocial behavioural problems. I am interested in emotional development in children with severe and chronic behavioural difficulties, including those with signs of early psychopathic behaviour. I work with young offenders and study children and adolescents in schools. My current work includes 'The Social Life of a Psychopath', a project that looks into how people with psychopathic personalities navigate social situations. I am also evaluating an experiment where a school for children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties has removed all forms of punishment. I am the Director of the Unit of School and Family Studies in the Department of Psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London. I'm really sorry that I have to finish now. My PhD student has just finished a viva, and I must go and find out how it went! Huge thanks to all of you for your interesting questions

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DR_ALICE_JONES [R/SCIENCE](#)

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If you are a psychopath, or believe that you are one, what should you do? What are some direct signs to look out for a teenager who may be a psychopath? And finally, are there any other psychopathic behaviors other than wanting to kill someone?

Thank You.

[Samuel-pena](#)

If you think that you have psychopathic traits, then I think that seeking out a psychologist would be a good starting point. The signs that would alert us to the possibility that someone has elevated psychopathic traits are: lack of guilt; lack of care about others' feelings (particularly distress); seeming fairly shallow in own emotions; and working to own agenda – so possibly not caring about certain aspects of work or school. None of these are necessarily about wanting to kill someone – individuals with psychopathy are rather diverse in their antisocial behaviour. It's also the case that we see an increased incidence of substance use in those with psychopathy.

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Since you mostly work with children, I'm not sure if this is your area, but I'd like to ask.

Whenever there's a mass shooting or other similar event, people often assert "the killer must have been a psychopath/sociopath, because only a psychopath/sociopath could do such a thing." Do you agree with that assessment?

[MrCapitalismWildRide](#)

College shootings or similar are really interesting. There is always speculation about whether the young person is a 'psychopath' or has autism or similar. There is usually a history of mental health issues, but not enough is known about the young person (in the public domain) to be able to say whether or not they would fit the profile of someone with high levels of psychopathic traits.

From what I've been able to read, there is some evidence that these young people have a history of social difficulties, and also often difficulties processing information, but it's just not enough to be able to be clear about psychopathy.

What are the tell-tale signs that you're dealing with a psychopath? Do you have any advice for dealing with someone if you believe they are a psychopath?

[bmbustamante](#)

So, as I wrote about above - psychopaths don't usually feel guilty about things that they do wrong, or worry about causing hurt to others. These people are often rather self-driven - working to better their own life rather than the people around them. Often psychopaths are drawn to leadership, they are motivated by power - but there's little evidence to suggest that they have good leadership skills. It takes good people skills to be a good leader.

Can psychopathic behavior be cured? Are there therapies that are helpful with children showing these tendencies?

[yearsgoby](#)

I don't think that psychopathy is curable – the evidence suggest that a psychopathic style of thinking and behaving develops as a result of differences in processing information in the brain, and that these differences have a cascading effect through the lifetime – these aren't things that can be readily cured. However, I DO think that we can intervene to direct individuals with these difficulties to develop those skills – so, we work on developing emotion understanding and demonstrating that behaving in a non antisocial way to get your goal is a better way of working; simply, it's worth your while working for a living, rather than robbing a bank.

In terms of therapies, there are several that have been shown to be effective - functional family therapy, parenting training, some summer camps with focus on these traits have all been demonstrated to have at least some impact. We don't know yet how long-lasting those effects are, this research area is still really new - but each these studies I think offers us a cause for cautious optimism that there is something we can do to help steer behaviour.

Are all psychopaths sociopaths? And are all sociopaths capable of becoming psychopaths?

[Rampant777](#)

I'm never quite sure what a sociopath is. Oftentimes, they are used interchangeably. The American

Psychiatric Association who publish the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), doesn't use sociopathy as a label. But does include psychopathy as a specifier label within its definition of 'Antisocial personality disorder'.

Is trolling a new psychopathy? Is it just a manifestation of something else we had pre-internet?

[geeohgeeegeh](#)

This is a really good question. There are lots of assumptions about trolling - that it's done by loners, or people with limited social skills. In fact, we don't KNOW any of those things yet. There is some evidence to suggest that psychopathic traits are associated with cyberbullying (there aren't many studies that only look at trolling yet). This study outlines some of the main factors:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17405629.2011.643169>

I think these behaviours are another manifestation of something that's always existed, but social media platforms seem to allow these behaviours to really 'come out' - anonymity? lack of personal interaction?

Is psychopathy a physical damage to the brain? How accurate would you say that high prenatal testosterone is a good predictor of psychopathy?

[xRedStaRx](#)

I don't think of a psychopathic brain as being damaged, rather it works in a different way. The brain is less responsive to emotional information, likely because it doesn't pay attention to it in the same way that most of us do. The research so far on prenatal testosterone isn't conclusive – and may interact with other factors, including baseline level of cortisol.

Thank you for doing this AMA! I have a few questions.

- Is there a way for return *from* psychopathy and antisocial behavior back to a stable, social state?
- What are some of the practices that have been effective? What has been more effective than others?
- Is there anything that can be practiced at a large scale across a large amount of psychopaths?

Again, thank you for doing this AMA.

[hooph00p](#)

Hi, I don't think we can change people from someone who would receive a diagnosis of psychopathy, to someone who is pretty typical - that's a lifetime of behaviour and learning to change. However, there is a growing research base focusing on young people that seems to suggest that behaviours can be changed. This area is still really new, so we don't know how long-lasting those effects are, or how long those interventions need to be in place for any meaningful change to occur (ie. when treatment finishes, will the antisocial behaviours start again?) The adult treatment research is less optimistic, there seems to be little in the way of effective intervention, and historically some interventions that make people 'better' psychopaths - increasing criminal recidivism.

Regarding the experiment you're evaluating, how does the school correct unwanted behavior? How is

unwanted behavior defined? It's hard to imagine the children have zero social cues to pick up on what's within acceptable behavior, but maybe they do.

Also, do you believe it's a combination of nature v nurture? Or one or the other?

Thanks for doing this AMA!

edit: typo.

[KennaT](#)

All behaviour is a combination of nature/nurture. Some young people are aware of what is acceptable, but have difficulty regulating their own behaviour (especially when they feel stressed or emotional); others don't really care too much about social rules. Sometimes you can see a family history which means that it's adaptive to be 'on guard', although it's rarely useful to be that way in a safe environment like a school.

Behaviour is modelling by adults in the school, and there are many opportunities to discuss better ways of approaching a situation, or for the young person to problem solve their way out. Punishment rarely allows for this. It seems better for us to have students work towards something positive, and to take responsibility for their own behaviour.

What drew you to this line of work?

[Littledipper310](#)

Good question... I've always been interested in working with children, and I spent most of my time working in special education. I've worked in clinics mainly working with children with autism, and it was interesting to me how much misunderstanding or possible cross-over there was between psychopathy and autism. My earliest work aimed to address this, and try to pull apart the similarities and differences. The young people I work with often have a lot to contend with, and they're interesting, smart and worthwhile people - I think it's important to best understand what's going on for them, so that we can improve their outcomes (and also lives of the people around them).

What things cause depression in people with ASPD/psychopathy?

[roboq6](#)

This is interesting. In terms of cause, I'm not certain. I think it's first useful to think about whether we might expect psychopathy and depression to co-occur - there is some recent research that suggests psychopathy and depression can co-occur, and that if they do then the outcomes for those individuals are much worse.

Are there any indications that psychopathy may be genetic?

If you were concerned or believed that your child may be psychopathic or have other emotional issues, what first steps would you recommend to support them?

[Be26](#)

Yes, there is. Rather, there's a good deal of research that suggests that psychopathy is a heritable trait, by which I mean that there is a genetic component. However, there are no identified genes that contribute to psychopathy.

If you were worried about a child, then I'd ask a GP to refer to a Child and Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHS). I'd also talk to the child's teacher to get an idea about their behaviour or any areas for concern at school too. It's best to go prepared with as clear an idea as you can about what the main areas of concern are.

How do you know someone has empathy? How is empathy measured?

[Mouse_trap1](#)

Empathy is measured in different ways, and honestly I think it's one of the hardest things to measure effectively. We can break empathy down into cognitive and affective empathy; essentially understanding and being able to accurately identify others' emotions and then having your own emotional response to others' emotions (that is appropriate). Cognitive empathy is easier to measure – that's about identification and understanding, and we can do that using tasks that look at faces, or ask questions about hypothetical situations. Affective empathy is much harder – we really rely on the reports of individuals themselves (although research suggests that people are usually quite honest about themselves), and/or using psychophysiological measures like skin conductance or heart rate etc. None of these are without their limitations though.

When you say that the school has removed all forms of punishment, does that mean there is no discipline or consequences? What is an average day of school like for these children, and how do they handle conflict?

[WTFoxtr0t](#)

No discipline never means no consequences. It's really important that consequences are meaningful, and are directly related to actions. So, a detention at the end of the day for something that happened in class in the morning is arguably neither of those things.

The school works hard to think about how their young people can best learn to handle conflict. So, lots of talking through situations, developing stress-management skills, emotion understanding etc. Not all of these students have psychopathic traits, but many really need help in navigating the social and emotional worlds.

Is it true that all children lack an inherent sense of empathy and have to be taught empathy for them to not become sociopaths? It's my understanding that, if the definition for sociopathy did not require the person being diagnosed to be eighteen or older, most children would technically be considered sociopathic. Is this true?

[naw1423](#)

I don't think this is true. I see two years old able to demonstrate empathic responses, but also able to behave in ways that seem very unempathic - children are still learning. Their brains are still developing, and for sure - we are teaching them how to behave appropriately, taking other people's feelings into account. But most children, I would argue, have a natural capacity for empathy - babies are interested in eye contact, they smile (and know that it usually elicits a smile back), and copy facial expressions from a very early age. I would argue that these skills are the fundamentals of empathy.

In young children, how can you tell the difference between psychopathy and something like Aspergers?

What are some key signs to look for in young children and if caught early enough, is there anything that can be done to teach empathy or "correct" psychopathic behaviors?

Thanks for doing this AMA!

[pexandapixie](#)

I answered a similar question elsewhere, so I'm pasting it here again because it makes sense to.

It's common for people to feel a bit confused about the two disorders, because both are seen as 'disorders of empathy'. However, the type of difficulties with empathy seen in each group is rather different - so people with autism have difficulties with more cognitive empathy (identifying others' thoughts and feelings), while those with psychopathy can do this, but lack the affective empathy. So there's a kind of dissociation between the two disorders and their empathy profile. There's also no increased risk of criminal behaviour in people with autism; unlike psychopathy...

I think that you can do something useful to help children who display these traits to learn to manage the world appropriately; by modelling appropriate behaviour, by demonstrating that behaving in a prosocial way is a good way to get things done etc. As I've said elsewhere today, this research is really only in its infancy, so there is still so much that we don't know. But it's definitely a work in progress.

Is psychopathy an exclusively learned behavior or is an innate behavior; or could it possibly be different for each individual?

Secondly, could psychopathy be for an individual's self preservation, that is, would that behavior derive from traumatic psychological events in an individual's life, thus, the behavior would serve to protect the individual?

[Treeloot009](#)

I don't think that psychopathy can be a learned behaviour, but it might be interesting to consider primary and secondary variants. Secondary psychopathy is characterised by anxiety, which is usually absent from psychopathy definitions. There may be an environmental basis to secondary psychopathy in particular, and there is also a good argument that behaving in a psychopathic way might be useful if you are experiencing a very aversive environment - if you're able to pull yourself out (even if it's at the expense of others), or overcome situations that might make others too anxious etc.)

Are people born or raised as psychopaths? And is there a spectrum of psychopathy? If there is one, what exactly does it encompass?

[theoatmealansonist](#)

I think that there IS a spectrum - that makes sense to me. I see psychopathy as a personality trait, that we all might have to a greater or lesser extent. The things that happen alongside this; upbringing, education opportunities, ADHD, cognitive ability etc will all impact on how far someone also demonstrates antisocial behaviours.

Can person with ASPD be emphatic toward animals?

[roboq6](#)

There is surprisingly little research on this area. What there is suggests that cruelty to animals is predicted by psychopathic traits. However, not everyone with antisocial personality disorder is a

psychopath, so I think it's plausible that some might be empathic, and show empathy towards animals.

Around the world there is something of a mental healthcare crisis with extremely poor outcomes in many countries. If you could give one piece of advice to a UN special committee on improving care for these people what would you say? (Particularly those in your subfield)

[bostwickinator](#)

I think I'd offer support to families. There are many stresses on families; and I think that equipping them with skills and resources to help their children could be really important.

Can empathy be taught to older children? Or is it one of those things that if not developed early then the child will be out of luck for the rest of their life?

[lumpytrout](#)

I think we can develop some facets of empathy - so we can demonstrate the worth in understanding people's thoughts and feelings, and behaving in an appropriate way to make people feel happier. I'm not sure that we can necessarily do much about real affective empathy - can we make someone feel more than they ordinarily do? I don't know, and I suspect our capacity to do so might be limited - but I think that's ok. We work with what we can, and we accept and find ways to work around those things that we can't change.

[deleted]

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I don't think we really know much about this. It's a good question though. Some people have talked about 'organised psychopathy' in relation to terrorist organisations, but I really don't know enough about that to be able to give you a good response.

What methods do researchers use to measure psychopathy and other anti social behaviors? And are there any journals or anything dedicated solely to this type of research?

[soulboogers](#)

This work is usually published in clinical psychology/psychiatry and forensic journals. There isn't a journal of psychopathy or similar. The methods used are really varied: interview; brain imaging; neuropsychological; genetic; psychophysiological - pretty much anything you can think of. Our aim is to work out how antisocial behaviour/psychopathy can be best understood - with an eventual aim of developing treatment programmes that can be more effective, or more individualised.

Can something trigger psychopathy or sociopathy in adults? Drugs? Brain injuries? Stress? Have you ever seen someone with a dormant antisocial personality disorder suddenly lose their inhibitions and start acting on their antisocial impulses?

[lxalmida](#)

There are incidences of acquired brain injury where people start to behave in a more psychopathic way

than they did before. People with damage to their ventromedial prefrontal cortex in particular may start to look more disinhibited, less caring etc - are you familiar with the ever-present tale of Phineas Gage? There are more recent accounts of this kind of brain injury and personality change too.

Have you ever encountered a psychopath who was not evil? I.e. someone who isn't bothered by the pain of others but at the same time has morals. A surgeon may feel nothing when slicing into someone, and never did: or an executioner may trust the legal system and thus cheerfully take out the metaphorical trash.

What do you think of the tendency to conflate "psychopath" and "evil"? Is it based on the assumption that people are only good because empathy makes it uncomfortable not to be?

[IsThisNameTaken7](#)

This is really interesting. I don't like 'evil' - it's unscientific, and so using it to explain behaviour isn't useful to me. It's perfectly possible to have psychopathic personality tendencies and not harm others (or criminally harm others anyway; we might argue that we all hurt people sometimes). Society finds it really hard to empathise with psychopaths, and so we should - it's really hard to think about what it's like to not understand distress in others. If we subscribe to this, then empathy is pretty much a building block of society. Perhaps we ARE mainly good because empathy means that we feel too bad if we aren't - but that's likely a good thing isn't it?

I don't believe I'm a psychopath, but I did sympathize with Dexter and his reaction when his girlfriend tried to engage him sexually.

I was told by a therapist that she thought I was a schizoid personality type. Are there any treatment or therapy options that might help me engage with other people and be more successful in relationships?

[powercool](#)

I think that a therapist would always be best placed to make those kind of recommendations.

Would an intelligent psychopath not hide their psychopathy, and thus the number of psychopaths is vastly underestimated?

How do we know that everyone isn't a psychopath and just hiding it?

[_Hopped_](#)

Psychopathy might be best thought about as a trait, with various dimensions. So, I think it's plausible that there are plenty of people who have the interpersonal traits (cold, not really feeling guilt, unempathic to distress), but not the antisocial/criminal behaviours that go alongside them. There are many studies on 'blue collar' or 'successful' psychopaths, and I'm sure you probably know people who you might characterise like this. I think it's very hard to really hide your personality completely, and I might argue that someone who has learnt the right social rules, and isn't (usually) antisocial isn't someone we should necessarily worry about.

Hi Dr. Jones,

Thank you for your time and effort to do this AMA. If my teachings of history are correct we, humans have been warring for 5,000 years or more. I do not see PTSD as a modern ailment. Therefore, putting

together these two thoughts about our history and PTSD creates much concern are my part. Great Violence and PTSD are synonyms in many ways and war is right there on the top. Multiple generations of PTSD affected people have been having children for 1,000's of years.

Have you thought of this idea? How do you think this contributes to a culture that helps create psychopathic behavior? The age old question comes to mind, how do you get a man to charge a machine gun?

Thank you and make a great day...

[Althekemist](#)

I'm glad that you don't see PTSD as a modern problem - there's a brilliant book called ShellShock by Wendy Holden who provides a historical perspective on this (although by civilisation standards, still is rather a modern perspective).

I'm not sure that psychopathy comes from PTSD - although it's an interesting hypothesis. There is an argument that individuals with psychopathy are less likely to suffer PTSD, and that it might be adaptive to have these traits under some conditions, so you can see how the traits have survived.