

Just Psychopathy and Criminal Behavior

Introduction [00:00:05] Now, this is recording, RTI International Center for Forensic Science presents Just Science.

Voiceover [00:00:23] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. Criminal investigations often necessitate the application of a multitude of forensic disciplines. While some cases can be solved by a single piece of evidence, most have a myriad of evidence types to forward an investigation. In our latest season case studies, we sat down with a variety of experts and talked about their most interesting cases. Join us as we discuss bloodstain pattern analysis, photography, serial killers, and much more in this dynamic season of Just Science. In the case study season opener, we sat down with Mitchell Pilkington, a crime scene manager at Layton City Police Department in Utah, to discuss psychopathy and criminal behavior. This season is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Here is your host, Dr. Mike Planty.

Mike Planty [00:01:29] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Dr. Mike Planty with NIJ's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. Here to help us with the discussion today, is Mitchell Pilkington. Welcome to the podcast.

Mitchell Pilkington [00:01:44] Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate it.

Mike Planty [00:01:45] Mitch is a crime scene manager for the Layton City Police Department. He began his career 2001 with an interest in latent print identification bloodstain pattern analysis of crime scene reconstruction. Mitch is also an adjunct professor for the Criminal Justice Department at Weber State University, where he has been an instructor for over 15 years. His classes cover a variety of topics, including forensic science, theories on crime and serial murder. Mitch's educational background consists of an M.S. in criminal justice from Weber State. He has provided expert testimony in multiple high-profile cases and is regularly called upon to provide forensic support for other law enforcement agencies. Mitch has also been an independent consultant for local therapists working with victims of violent crime. Our topic today is on psychopaths and criminal behavior, specifically. Before diving into that area, Mitch, tell us a little about your work.

Mitchell Pilkington [00:02:41] My career within forensic science was - happened actually quite by accident. I was going to be a marine biologist, so I don't know where the wrong turn happened, but it did - it actually was the right turn. So while attending my undergrad at Weber State University I became interested after taking a few forensic investigation courses, so I followed my education through - down that path and as soon as I graduated with my bachelor's degree, I immediately began teaching for Weber State University as an adjunct, primarily focusing in the areas of criminal behavior - theories of crime and delinquency. And as part of that, I found it was a practical background - it went hand in hand with what I did because it really helped me gain a better understanding towards or for the behavior of most of the individuals that we come into contact with during the course of our jobs. We found that there were quite a few theories that adequately explained certain types of criminal behavior. So, for example, those that are involved in property crime. So we've got a pretty good basic understanding of why those people do what they do, even with violent crime, single murder. There are some very powerful theories out there that

help us understand why those people do what they do. There was a missing link, though, when we started to look or when I became interested in serial murder and I realized that the theories that I had been using to explain the other types of behavior, those typical criminal behaviors, didn't necessarily apply as well or equally to serial murder or multiple murder. So that sort of set me down this particular pathway and sort of a quest of - for better understanding, something that could help me in my profession, something that we could take that information and find a practical application or practical use for that.

Mike Planty [00:04:47] Sure. Absolutely, so a lot of this theory can be translated into better investigations, better interviewing, better recognition of the evidence at crime scenes. That's your ultimate goal?

Mitchell Pilkington [00:04:57] Absolutely, absolutely.

Mike Planty [00:05:00] Right, the topic today is on psychopaths, criminal psychopaths, right? The one thing that I take away right away from our previous conversations is that not all psychopaths are criminals, right? And so set us up here. What are some notable psychopaths that we want to frame this for our listeners?

Mitchell Pilkington [00:05:17] Well, that's a really good point and that's something that I try and drive home in all of my classes is because usually when we throw out the term or the word psychopath, everyone automatically has an image that jumps to their mind. Now whether it's Jeffrey Dahmer who was responsible for murdering and dismembering of at least 17 men and boys through 1978 to 1991, Richard Ramirez, who was responsible for torturing and killing of over 25 victims over the course of just two years, or there's been a renewed interest in, say, Ted Bundy. There have been some newer documentaries and from what I understand, even a movie with the handsome Zac Efron, which I haven't seen, but I've heard it's great. And that's typically what people think of when we use the term psychopath. But it's important to note or to remember that while there are violent psychopaths out there, not all psychopaths are violent. And so it's important to make that differentiation. Just because someone is a psychopath, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're going to be violent.

Mike Planty [00:06:23] So what are some high-level facts? How common is this? And you know what are the typical characteristics of folks who have been labeled as psychopaths.

Mitchell Pilkington [00:06:32] So I want to point out two things first of all - the majority of what we know is research that comes from male psychopaths. So we're - we have a very limited understanding on female psychopathy. So some of the facts and some of the terminologies that we're going to use today may not equally apply across gender. And I think that's important to distinguish. The second thing that I want to note is there are certainly others out there that are much more familiar with this topic than I am. Dr. Robert Hare, Christopher Patrick, David Lykken and a lot of what I have learned, what I've put together, really is - has come from standing on the - quite literally the shoulders of these giants. So, I just wanted to make that clear. There is a certain level of disagreement in terminology and statistics when it comes to different experts and researchers, but what we basically know is that 15 to 20 percent of the more than two million prisoners that we currently have in our system fit somewhere on the psychopathy spectrum. Now, there are other researchers that actually put that number as high as 30 percent, so a very significant amount of offenders within our prison system that fit within that continuum. Now, the other thing we know is the vast majority are males. At least 90 percent of psychopaths are male. Now, if we look at that or broaden that lens and look at the overall American population,

we know that about 1 percent of the overall American population or approximately three million psychopaths walk amongst us every single day. So the prevalence is much more common than what most people what most people would assume.

Mike Planty [00:08:23] So how do we define what a psychopath is?

Mitchell Pilkington [00:08:26] And that's another very good question and I'd like to differentiate between a few different terms, because there is, again, some disagreement and some confusion on the terminology that we use on a day-to-day basis. So I want to point out that, first of all, when we say or use the word psychopath, we are not talking about someone that suffers from psychosis. And that is one of the areas where I think there is the greatest level of misunderstanding. So psychopathy and psychosis are actually two very, very different things so if it's OK, I'd like to distinguish between those two. So psychosis, those that suffer from psychosis, a mental disorder, these are individuals who have quite literally had a break from reality. They're not just able to distinguish the fantasy world from the real world. These individuals - they are delusional, they have hallucinations, they tend to have this uncontrollable, impulsive behavior. I think the most important thing to add along within this definition is that someone that is suffering from psychosis does not know right from wrong. So when we look at a particularly violent crime scene or you hear stories of, let's say, a serial killer. For example, it's let's use Jeffrey Dahmer, and they look at that individual, they look at their acts and a reasonable person would evaluate those actions as being crazy. How could someone be sane and possibly do that to another individual or individuals. They've got to be crazy. When the truth of the matter is, Jeffrey Dahmer was not suffering from psychosis, he actually was a psychopath. And I'll give you a better definition of what that is here in just a second. I'd also like to differentiate between the word sociopath and psychopath. And this is one of those areas where those experts and researchers, there tends to be some general disagreement between definitions. There are some that believe that they mean one in the same. But there are others, for example, David Lykken, who believe that we should actually incorporate the term sociopath and psychopath under the clinical diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder. Now, sociopath or sociopathy and psychopathy, neither one of those are a clinical diagnosis. They're not a formal clinical diagnosis. So two different ways to look at sociopathy and psychopathy is looking at a sociopath as being someone who was created by external or social influences. That's what they're made from. So, for example, we as a sociologist, we look at those environmental factors that may have an influence on an individual's development or those social factors that may have an influence on an individual's development. There's also an important component within sociopathy that involves the idea that competent parenting plays an important role in producing a healthy member, a typical, and I use that word loosely, a typical member of society - the importance that the role of a competent parent plays within that development. So in other words, incompetent parenting may contribute to behavior that's related to a sociopath or the development of a sociopath. Now a psychopath on the other hand, we tend to look at the etiology or the root cause as being more or less a genetic predisposition. So whereas one is social in nature, the other is more physiological in nature. So these individuals had - do have a physiological or biological predisposition towards this type of behavior as opposed to the social influences. The one thing that they do have in common, as opposed to the source of the disorder, however, is that both a sociopath and a psychopath do know right from wrong. They do not suffer from psychosis. So one of the stark differences between someone that is - had that literal break from reality, they can't distinguish right from wrong and a sociopath and psychopath who do know right from wrong at least from a social perspective. They understand that it is - it goes against social norms, the behaviors that they're involved in.

Mike Planty [00:13:36] So would you say, so the sociopath and psychopaths seem to be on a nature nurture continuum. So how much of a mix could of one person have of both of those? Could you have innate qualities that, you know, lead you towards a psychopath but be in an environment that creates behavior associated with a sociopath? Is it - there's not a binary or clean break between those two, is there?

Mitchell Pilkington [00:14:05] No, there's not, and that's another great question. So one of the ways that I like to look at it is basically, if you can imagine a continuum, for example, and let's say on the far left of this continuum we have the sociopath, an individual with those qualities that I just explained. Now, one of the important things about psychopathy is the individual is continually developing. They are progressing. They're moving. Some may progress a little quicker than others and if we have a chance to talk about, say, Dr. Hickey's Trauma Control Model, you know, we know that there are certain life events that happen, traumatic events that happen during the formative years of life when we're children that have a greater impact, that may set us down this road of psychopathy. As those individuals continue to develop, and there are variables that we have to take into account, like age, gender, race is another variable that plays a part, is that individual continues through life experiences, social experiences and maybe some of those internal predispositions, they're going to continue along this continuum towards what we refer to as is primary or true psychopathy, someone that is a true psychopath. And we do have sort of a middle point that we used, and it's simply used as a reference, is a secondary psychopath, and these are those individuals that have progressed from sociopathy more towards psychopathy, and they are a developing psychopath. The individuals that we are primarily concerned with, well I guess it depends on which area, which we're looking specifically at violent crime or in the case of serial murder, those happen to be the primary psychopaths, which we feel are responsible for the majority of these multiple murders, but sociopaths are still a primary concern. These are individuals that do sort of lean or are predisposed towards criminal behavior because of their - the characteristics of their personality and they are actually responsible for the majority of what we would call the lower end crimes. And so the majority of the people within our prison system, that 20 to 30 percent, the vast majority of those are actually going to fit within the sociopath or be towards the sociopathy end of the continuum.

Mike Planty [00:16:35] Maybe we can make clear again about a psychopath. What are those qualities? What are those characteristics? It's about empathy, it's around manipulation, right?

Mitchell Pilkington [00:16:46] Right. And again, there's really no absolute agreement on the definition of a psychopath. So the clinical definition, again, this is not a clinical I mean, well we'll just say the generally accepted definition of a psychopath is an individual who's going to suffer from antisocial personality disorder. So someone that manifests an amoral and antisocial behavior, they show a lack in the ability to love or establish meaningful personal relationships, express extreme egocentricity and demonstrate a failure to learn from past experience. If we look at, say, the key components of how Dr. Robert Hare, who is one of the foremost experts in psychopathy, he points out that a psychopath is callous and that they show a lack of empathy. If we look at the psychopathic personality inventory, which is the PPI, they point out that the psychopath is coldhearted. Different researchers, different experts, different definitions - I think what they're all in agreement with, though, is if we were to try and find some common ground or a common way to describe psychopathy, it would be to say that the individual simply lacks a conscience, that they are missing a moral compass. It's just not there. And I want to point out this is not a choice, and I think that's another misunderstanding. This is not simply a choice that the individual

has made. And again I use the word disorder, and I - when we try to think without going too far off on a tangent, you know, everything is relative and I think disorder - there is an innate inference that there is something wrong with the person, and that's something that I, I do not want to perpetuate that that stigma. The idea that because someone is a psychopath, they suffer from antisocial personality disorder, that there is something wrong with them. That's not necessarily true. Again, there are plenty of people that are diagnosed with this disorder or fit within the definition of psychopathy, and they lead fairly normal lives and contributing members of society. They do have the propensity, though, for criminal and violent behavior, more so than, say, someone who is not diagnosed with that disorder.

Mike Planty [00:19:15] So touch on the trauma control model. I think maybe that would be really interesting.

Mitchell Pilkington [00:19:20] There are different models out there that explain the development of psychopathy and how it applies to criminal behavior. Ann Burgess and Robert Ressler, who were some of the founding members of the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit that came up with an interesting model, which was the motivational model, which really focused more on two primary components, and it was basically the way the individual thinks, thought process, and fantasy. And I think for the most part, experts are in agreement that those are two very important components that play a large role in the development and the continuation, the development of psychopathy and the development along that psychopathy continuum. One of the interesting things that Dr. Hickey has done, though, is he has added in a few other pieces of consideration within his model that we commonly find in violent serial offenders. One of those happens to be that predisposition. Now whether it is a biological predisposition, say genetic in nature, it could be a sociological predisposition, those social environmental factors that may predispose an individual towards psychopathic behavior or it could be psychological in nature. If we were to get into psychoanalytic theory, a unhealthy relationship between the id and the super ego, all of these predispositions may play a role. And that's something that he has addressed and factored into this model. Now, I want to point out they may, or they may not have a role in the development of psychopathy, but it is certainly a consideration. Particularly when we start looking at the role of genetics and the advancements that we've made over the last 10 or 15 years and the role that we know now that genetics plays not just in human development, but human behavior. So the predispositional factors are key. The other additional component that he added within his models is the use of what he refers to as facilitators. Facilitators can be anything from drugs and alcohol to pornography. The role of facilitators is basically breaking down that wall of inhibition that a sociopath or a secondary psychopath may have in place, something that would typically keep them from crossing that boundary from fantasy to action. So it's interesting, I mean, we talked about some notable examples at the beginning of the discussion, and if we look at, say, Jeffrey Dahmer or Ted Bundy and we start looking at their abuse of, say, alcohol, which is the most common facilitator, they were intoxicated during the majority of their criminal episodes. So we believe that those facilitators play an important role within the process. Now, the other primary component, and this is where we see some agreement across the different models out there, and that goes back to traumatic events, the presence of traumatic events during those formative years. And one thing that I found extremely interesting is when we talk about traumatic events and especially when we're children, of course, there are those just horrific traumatic events such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, and I don't think anyone is really surprised that someone that suffers long term physical or sexual abuse as a child - there are going to be some latent or maybe not so latent effects as the individual continues to develop and grow. And we tend to focus on those more dramatic examples of of trauma. But what we have found is there are lesser

forms of trauma that may play a greater role. One of those being abandonment or rejection. So as part of my course at Weber State University, we do some informal research every semester and we rank these traumatic events in prevalence and we try and determine which one actually has the greatest impact and more often than not, rejection, and typically it comes from either a mother or a father or friends, and we found that the rejection from a mother or rejection from friends tends to play a greater role than, say, sexual abuse. Which again, I found is quite interesting. Just the simple, just the simple act of rejection can be extremely traumatic. To kind of continue along the line, if that's OK to explain the consequences of these traumatic events is the effect that it has on the individual's self-esteem. The perception of self. And we know that if we look at someone who is developing a healthy view of themselves, they tend to have more of a healthy fantasy life. Everybody uses fantasy in some form or another as a method of escape. I look out at my classroom and half my students are doing it about a quarter way through my lecture and they're like, oh, I really wish I was on the beach in Cancun right now. And those types of fantasies, those are OK. It's a retreat. But what we found is those that have suffered these traumatic events, they may have these predispositions, they may be using facilitator's, their fantasies tend to navigate towards darker areas, more violent areas, areas where they may have or feel more control over themselves, over their environment. An interesting analogy would be if you have someone that fantasizes all day about helping other people, that's what they dream about. Those people are more likely to go out and help other people. You would be surprised to have those individuals that are having healthy fantasies do something chaotic, destructive or harmful towards their fellow men.

Mike Planty [00:25:41] So it's a co-occurrence of all these factors that put someone on a pathway towards what we would think potentially criminal behavior, right? Violent behavior. And I think that's the next line of this connection here. So having traumatic impact, lack of control, predisposition coupled with these facilitators. So how do we make that next step towards the violent - acting out on violent fantasies? So what puts a Ted Bundy to that next step?

Mitchell Pilkington [00:26:14] It would be the - just the simply the continuation of those increasingly, increasingly violent fantasies. And I guess I want to throw in just very quickly, let's say we have someone that is growing up in a violent household and their understanding or their perception of reality, of what a healthy relationship should look like, it may potentially become skewed. So growing up in a in a violent household, the relationship between, say, mother and father is abusive, that's how I'm going to assume that a typical relationship works. That's obviously going to be problematic. So when we add that in with the issues of control, the individual has - is sensing that lack of control, and then I also want to add in for most healthy individuals, you know, our goal as human beings is to experience a meaningful relationship with another human being. I mean, we see depictions of this in other homes, and maybe this individual is growing up in a in a semi typical household where the parents are getting along. It's on the movies. It's on TVs. This exacerbates or adds another area of frustration for these individuals because they quite literally are unable to develop and maintain these relationships. And we talk about love and hate, and for a psychopath, you know, those two terms are actually quite ambiguous. There's nothing really to distinguish between the two so they become very, very similar in nature. And we talk about the frustration that develops from all of these different factors, all of these variables. Dr. Abrahamsen said it best in that frustration is the wet nurse of violence. And I believe that to be very, very much true. So as we start to see all of these factors, and there are other factors that we could throw in the mix as well, the individual is - he's going to try and develop these meaningful relationships, but he doesn't have the tools, the skills, the means to develop those. So we go further and further into

these increasingly violent fantasies. Now, for a lot of people, for a lot of psychopaths or people that are on that continuum, it very well may stop right there. And maybe the only thing that is keeping that Ted Bundy from acting out on those violent fantasies is that inhibition, that still I know that it's wrong socially. It's socially unacceptable for me to act out on these violent fantasies. However, let's throw in a couple of facilitators. And now that wall that was preventing me from progressing to the next step is no longer in place. There's no safeguard in place. So I've got these fantasies, and by fantasies I want to point out intense fantasies, this is what they think about all day, every single day. Again, skewed perspective on reality, skewed perspective on what's healthy, what's right, and they've got these different fantasies where oftentimes they may have a sexual motive. Other times they may have simply a control motive, but eventually they act out. And another interesting point about these fantasies is if you've got an individual who is continually thinking about an act. Let's say, you know, they develop a specific fantasy that revolves around a - around sexual intercourse. It's a sexual fantasy and it incorporates some violence. Whatever the individual pieces of that fantasy are - in their mind, they've got that fantasy planned out perfectly. They know exactly how it's going to be, how the victim is going to react, how it's going to feel. But that puts them at a serious disadvantage, because when they finally do break over that wall and they do act, first of all, it's not going to turn out exactly like they expected. Their victim is not going to react the way that they assumed it was going to react. It's not a well scripted play. And they're not going to feel that deep level of connection or that love that they were so hoping that they would. So ultimately, this fantasy is going to be a failure. Now, for some of them, they may feel a certain level of satisfaction where they've been able to experience some control. But for the vast majority, ultimately, the act is an utter and complete failure. So what happens? They go back, they continue the fantasy. And the next time - well I need to do this differently or this differently, only to find out when they act again, it's going to be maybe fulfill that same level of control. However, again, failure, disappointment. It never - the reality will never meet those expectations that they've developed in their fantasy world.

Mike Planty [00:31:22] And, you know, we're talking about the most probably the most extreme outcomes. But can this also materialize as an abusive relationship or domestic violence or child abuse? And that's where the - that type of psychopath takes it. So, again, it's about manipulation and control. And you might see this, say, with stalking victims or domestic violence.

Mitchell Pilkington [00:31:43] And there are different models that are out there that deal with those specific types of behaviors and what you'll find as you go through and review those different models, many of them have the exact same components, but yeah, they're oriented towards a sex offense, paraphilic behavior or just violent behavior in general. But most of them have these same components.

Mike Planty [00:32:07] So, Dr. Hare, develop a checklist related to various factors, two factors, the tools and the deficits. Want to talk a little about those?

Mitchell Pilkington [00:32:17] Absolutely. So we mentioned earlier the psychopathic continuum, beginning with the sociopathy, secondary psychopathy and true or primary psychopaths. And the question comes up, how do we determine where an individual falls within that continuum? And there have been a few different tools developed over the years and I think the most popular, to my knowledge, the tool that is used most often, say, within the prison system, would be Dr. Robert Hare's psychopathy checklist revised, the PCL-R. Now again, there are different tools out there, but the psychopathy checklist is oriented towards criminal behavior. There are other measurement tools out there that may branch

beyond that to non-criminal instances, but the PCL-R focuses specifically on criminal behavior. So again, this - Dr.Hare points out that this spectrum or this continuum, there are variances. There are things that can influence where an individual falls out within that continuum again, age, social class, drug and alcohol abuse, et cetera. But one of the interesting things he does is he breaks, he breaks the PCL-R down into two primary categories. There are two factors, if you will. Factor one being the tools that are used by the psychopath to make up for the character defects or the deficits which are measured by the factor two category. Now, as a side note, the PCL-R is a interview based questionnaire that is administered by a trained professional. Once that questionnaire is completed, it is scored using essentially a guidebook as opposed to other psychopathy measurement tools out there that may be self-report surveys. I think between the two we know that there are advantages and disadvantages for different types of research, and these interview-based tools tend to be a little more accurate and a little more reliable. So the different factors, and I'll go over the second the factor twos, the deficits first, I think it makes a little bit more sense to do that. I'll just touch on a few of them, but it starts out with the need for constant stimulation or a proneness to boredom. These are the individuals that constantly have to be moving and doing. They're not going to be able to sit in a classroom. They're not going to be able to hold down a job for a long period of time. Of course, this leads to other issues, such as short-term relationships or promiscuous sexual behavior, lack of long-term goals or realistic goals. And we also tend to see that they have not only a criminal history, particularly as a juvenile, but we see that they tend to lead a parasitic lifestyle. And I think this is a good point to touch on for just a second. And that is because of their character defects, because of their inability to attach, to gain a healthy attachment to another individual, the parasitic lifestyle where they view others simply as being objects to use and abuse. That's what that's what it comes down to. So, I mean, when we look at another human being, someone that is not on this continuum or someone that is on the lower end of the continuum within, say, the sociopathy side - is a sociopath, they may view a human being as having some intrinsic human value, right? A life is a valuable thing, and it should be respected. A true psychopath is again unable to view another human being in that way. So one of the ways I like to describe it is for a true psychopath, another person is nothing more than, let's say, a piece of tissue paper. So when you have that runny nose and you've got that box of tissue paper on your desk, that might be one of the most valuable things you have at the moment, right? So you grab a tissue out of that box and wipe your nose and then as soon as you're done with it, what do you do? You throw it in the garbage. It has zero value to you. So once you have used that object, there's no reason for holding on to it any longer. And then I'm going to go on to the next object and then the next object. So that parasitic lifestyle really comes back to just simply being able to use other people for gain. Whatever they can get out of that individual. So those are a few of the deficits. Now, in order for a psychopath to at least seemingly function or appear to function successfully within society it's important that they develop a certain set of tools to basically act as chameleons, to camouflage their deficits. And of course, referring back to that continuum, what we've noticed is that those that fit in the - within the sociopathy side versus the psychopathy side, those that are true psychopaths tend to be much better at using these tools and these tools are much more developed. They're highly developed and they're simply very good at what they do. So one of those would be the glibness or superficial charm. And you think of someone like, for example, Ted Bundy who had the emotional maturity of a 12-year-old. However he would be - he was able to carry on conversations with people and be actually quite charming. Once again, sort of camouflaging or hiding that deficit. They are excellent, excellent liars. And one of the interesting things that goes along with pathological lying is we consider a true psychopath as being what we refer to as a vagal reactor, meaning that these are the individuals that are able to successfully pass a polygraph exam without saying anything that's true at all.

How they're able to do this is because when a typical or healthy individual lies, we see those physiological indicators, right? Increased rate in breathing, increased heart rate. A true psychopath, actually, their heart rate will slow down, and their breathing will slow down when they're faced with these moments of high anxiety where someone else, their anxiety levels may spike off the charts, they actually become more relaxed, which is absolutely, absolutely fascinating. Aside from being charming, Dr. Hicky added on, I think an important in addition to Dr. Hare's list of tools, and that is that many of them are very, very good at the art of distraction. And I just had a conversation yesterday with a few individuals about Ted Bundy, and they were asking me, well, gosh, how was he able to get away so many times within direct contact with law enforcement? How did Ted Bundy manage to get away when he was right in their grasp? And a lot of that comes down to not just that superficial charm, being able to talk to another person, but it's the art of distraction. Smoke and mirrors. Take their attention from one area to another area and avoid detection.

Mike Planty [00:39:45] That brings up a really great segue. So for criminal investigations, when you're interviewing potential suspects, you know, they have great lying techniques, distraction techniques, manipulation, even manipulation of others. So as a criminal investigator and those interested in this, you know, what are the things that you really need to pay attention to when you're conducting interviews and trying to identify whether this person is a psychopath?

Mitchell Pilkington [00:40:13] Well, I would start off by saying it's something that you have to be extremely careful with. We've noticed that, you know, some people may not be psychopaths, they just may be less emotional by nature. That's just their personality. So charging in there and assuming that someone is a psychopath and interviewing them, as you would a psychopath, actually may be extremely detrimental and defensive. So I would say, first of all, become very familiar with what makes a psychopath, a psychopath. Look for, you know, being able to look for those individual cues. But one of the first observations that I like to make is the emotional level of the individual. For example, and I'll just - we had a you know homicide that we had a couple of weeks ago, it was extremely violent and we brought the individual in for an interview in - and I mentioned earlier, is when we start looking at the definition of a psychopath, you know, that common agreement is that they are they're going to have that lack of empathy, a callousness. During these interviews if they are expressing a complete lack of empathy, that's a pretty good sign. I mean, if they're talking about what happened just very matter of factly, very plainly, there are no emotional words that are being used, those are all pretty good indicators. There are some different studies out there that have helped us narrow down some additional signs of psychopathy and conducting interviews with the psychopath. One of them - the article is titled [Hungry Like the Wolf: A Word Pattern Analysis of the Language of Psychopaths](#).¹ And it was done by Hancock and Woodsworth and Porter from Cornell University. And they pointed out a couple of interesting things. For example, pay attention to verb tense. Pay attention for disfluencies, a lot of uhhs and umms. But again, that doesn't necessarily mean if those disfluencies are present, that the individual is a psychopath. It's just another indicator that they may be. Another thing to look for is they tend to be more concerned with their own basic needs, such as food and water. And so while the interview is being conducted, you may be getting into a very critical part of the interview, part of the interview that may be considered by many a very emotional, intense part of the interview and the suspect is, first of all, they're going to be completely disengaged because of that lack of empathy and they may do a complete 180 and simply ask like, hey, have you got

¹ Hancock, J.T., Woodworth, M.T. and Porter, S. (2013), Hungry like the wolf: A word-pattern analysis of the language of psychopaths. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 18: 102-114.

something to eat? I haven't had anything to eat all day. And you're thinking, OK, we were just about to get into how you repeatedly stabbed your victim and you're asking if you can have a cheeseburger. So there tends to be more of a focus on their own basic needs. Those take a priority over other topics. The other thing that we like to look for is the avoidance or uncomfortable responses when we do use emotionally laden language. Again for them because they have that complete lack of empathy, words that would typically be associated with an emotion for you and I, say, if I say the word love. And usually in a class, I'll have the students close their eyes and I'll give them a list of words and I say OK, if I say the word love, what's the first thing that comes to your mind? And it may be a good emotional reaction. It may be a negative emotional reaction, but usually the individual has an emotional reaction they can associate with that word. Or if I was to say spouse or son or daughter, again, there's typically an emotion that is associated with that word. For a psychopath, whether we use the word love or whether I say pen, there is no difference because once again, there's no emotional attachment to either one of those. So what's interesting is if we see that the suspect has a difficult time expressing or making a statement using emotionally laden language, because again they really don't understand the true definition and you might see some inconsistencies, some really some incoherent responses where they're substituting what they think is an appropriate emotional term in for what they actually should have used. One of the other mistakes that we've noticed is with traditional interview techniques or when we're talking with these individuals, there's the tendency for the interviewer to go in and immediately start using again, emotionally charged, I don't want to say threats, but emotionally charged comments. So using emotionally charged comments like you think of your family, right? What would your family want you to do? Or threatening or using the use of imprisonment. Well, if you don't cooperate with us, then, you know, you're looking at time, if - extra time in prison. If you do cooperate with us, then we might be able to work with the district attorney or the county attorney. It's all about your cooperation. Well, that's not going to work. Neither one of those. Again, the use of, you know, of relationships, it means nothing. The use of punishment, nothing. And so for what tends to work or be a little more effective is simply go in with the facts as clinical, sterile and factual as possible. When you're having those one-on-one conversations, and especially if you're trying to explain the current circumstances that they may have found themselves in so that they're going to respond and understand that much, much better.

Mike Planty [00:45:50] And you make the point that while we're talking about homicide, that psychopaths appear to operate as nonviolent offenders too, white collar criminals. So having this similar approach, such as the Bernie Madoff situation, where there was probably a complete lack of empathy over the thousands of people that he hurt.

Mitchell Pilkington [00:46:09] Absolutely. There's a study called the Great British Psychopath that was that was done by Dutton in England. It's extremely interesting when we start looking at certain areas where we might see a higher concentration of psychopaths and white-collar crime tends to be one of those areas because, I mean, whether we're talking about violent crime or nonviolent crime, they all contain the same components. That lack of empathy. Using other people to get what you want - it's just between the two, one tends to get a little more attention and have harsher consequences - violent crime as opposed to the white-collar crime. So it would be a smart move for a psychopath to actually go into to a career of white-collar crime, probably be much more successful.

Mike Planty [00:46:58] So, yes, it may be a little bit more about that, because the list with the careers of the most or fewest psychopaths, when you talk about the prevalence. So

somebody like a teacher will probably be low on that. They have a lot of empathy, a lot of investment, emotional investment with helping other folks. But maybe other occupations like a salesman or, you know, just general in terms of the prevalence you might find higher prevalence of.

Mitchell Pilkington [00:47:24] Yeah, absolutely. So it's interesting on that list. I mean, the profession you're most likely to find a psychopath is actually a CEO, which is kind of interesting. But what does seem to be sort of a reoccurring theme within that list, that those professions that do require a certain level of empathy, tend to be less attractive to a psychopath as opposed to those that require less empathy and in addition to that, may actually put them in a position where they may easily or more easily take advantage of other people. It puts them in a position of power and control. And that's something that I didn't really clarify on before when we were talking about, you know, that individual really craving control over themselves, over their lives, over the world and how they feel that lack of control. Control does not necessarily - it doesn't necessarily have to be violent. In fact, it is more often nonviolent behavior as opposed to taking violent control or physical control of over an individual. We see mental psychological control much more often than violent control.

Mike Planty [00:48:35] So as we wrap up here, what do you see as a key areas for research or emerging issues in this field? Maybe the use of the checklist as a screening tool or what areas do you see more attention is needed?

Mitchell Pilkington [00:48:48] Just another really good question. And I want to point out the area of psychopathy in general is fairly new. I keep going back to the example of serial murder. But, you know, even though the definition has been around, psychopaths since the late eighteenth hundreds, I want to say 1801, we know very, very little about psychopathy, about sociopathy and sociopaths and psychopaths. In all reality it is just such a new area and there are so many opportunities for research. I think, first of all, if we were able to gather more data regarding female psychopaths, that would be extremely beneficial and answer some of those questions - you know, why is it that 90 percent are male and only 10 percent are female? It's kind of like when we look at the typical crime question, why are the majority of offenders male and why are so few female? And if we can answer that, I mean, before we can, we've got to be able to compare and contrast, that may give us an example or at least some ideas for prevention and treatment. What can we do? Because that's a pretty, that's a pretty stark difference. Aside from that, I think additional research in an attempt to sort of standardize simple things like terminology, you know, definitions and looking at some of these models and maybe doing some fine tuning. Which may mean, you know, taking an interdisciplinary approach. Let's take some experts from biology. I mean, Dr. James Fallon, a neuroscientist who's got his own interesting story regarding psychopathy. But let's take people from these different fields and start putting in some serious effort on addressing what psychopathy is. And I think most importantly, we get treatment and prevention.

Mike Planty [00:50:46] Yeah. Dr. Fallon, just quickly, he was looking at an image of a psychopath and realized it was his brain image, right?

Mitchell Pilkington [00:50:52] Absolutely. It was it was great. I mean, he's got such an interesting story. And, you know, he's published. He's got a few books out there that kind of tell his story. That's another perfect example of how just because someone is a psychopath, it doesn't mean that they are going to be violent. That they're going to be a

criminal. I mean, he's a brilliant neuroscience - contributions to towards the field and within the area of psychopathy and yes, he is a psychopath.

Mike Planty [00:51:20] I'd like to thank our guest today, Mitchell Pilkington, again for sitting down with Just Science to discuss the topic of psychopaths and criminal behavior. Thank you.

Mitchell Pilkington [00:51:28] Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.

Mike Planty [00:51:30] Have you enjoyed today's conversation? Be sure to like and follow Just Science on your podcast platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources in the forensic field, visit ForensicCOE.org. I'm Mike Planty and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Voiceover [00:51:48] Next week, Just Science interviews Erin Simms about how bloodstain patterns can help you determine what might have occurred at a scene. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.