

# Inside the Psyche of the 1%

by Don Fitz

Do the rich and super-rich tend to be psychopaths, devoid of guilt or shame? Are the 1% lacking in compassion? Does their endless accumulation of possessions actually bring them little to no happiness? To each of these, the answer is “yes”—but a very qualified “yes” with lots of subtleties. Even more important is what these issues suggest for building a society which does not ravage the last remnants of wilderness and rush headlong into a climate change tipping point.

## Strange concepts of psychopathy

The word “psychopath” often elicits an image of a deranged murderer. Despite Alfred Hitchcock’s chair-gripping “Psycho,” stabbing victims in the shower is not a typical activity of psychopaths. They are more often con artists who end up in jail after cheating their victims. Classic definitions of psychopathy include features such as superficial charm, anti-social behavior, unreliability, lack of remorse or shame, above-average intelligence, absence of nervousness, and untruthfulness and insincerity. [1]

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Most of those in the mental health industry sternly observe that a strict set of consistent rewards and consequences is the only treatment that works with psychopaths. But they admit that even this treatment might not work too well. Progressives may dismiss observations by psychologists because the field tends to explore a behavioral pattern as it exists in a certain Western culture at a given point in history and then imagine that it characterizes all people at all times. Psychology has a long tradition of bending to current race, gender and sexual orientation biases. Its class bias is reflected by the dominant portrayal of psychopathy.

Consider what William H. Reid, MD, from the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Health Sciences Center in San Antonio writes about psychopaths:

I have no wish to dehumanize people when I say that those who purposely endanger others in our streets, parks, and schools, even our homes, are qualitatively different from the rest of us. I care less and less about why they’re not the same as the rest of us; the enemy is at our door... There is no (reasonable) ethic which requires that we treat him as other adults; indeed, to do so is foolish. [2]

Reid cautions his readers: “We must stop identifying with the chronic criminal, and stop allowing him to manipulate our misplaced guilt about treating him as he is: qualitatively *different* from the rest of us. [3]

The author insists that good people must have the stamina to do what is necessary to protect themselves from the psychopathic criminal:

...life is full of situations in which we need to do something distasteful... Most of us agree that we need to slaughter animals from time to time. We do it as humanely as possible, but we get it done... We also agree that some public health needs are important enough to require the suspension of some rights of people who have not been convicted of any crime...” [4]

Reid chides those who recoil at the thought of suspending rights: “While we have been interminably discussing this weighty issue, the psychopaths, who don’t trouble themselves with contemplations, have been gaining ground.” [5]

Where did these insights appear? Not in a transcript of a Rush Limbaugh interview. Not in an Ayn Rand novel. Not from someone fondly reminiscing of Ronald Reagan.

These words are excerpted from an essay in the scholarly volume *Psychopathy: Anti-Social, Criminal and Violent Behavior*. The text is predominantly a collection of reports and syntheses under academic headings of “Typologies,” “Etiology,” “Comorbidity” and “Treatment.” The portions quoted illustrate that intense hostility directed towards victims of the criminal justice system is within the acceptable continuum of published academic thought on psychopathy.

## A demon with two horns

The words from Reid reflect what is called the “categorical view.” It maintains that the difference between “psychopaths” and “normals” is as clear-cut as the difference between left-handedness and right-handedness.

A contrasting perspective, with a large amount of research to back it up, is the “dimensional view.” It regards psychopathy and other “personality disorders” as exaggerated expressions of normal

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behavior. Just as we are all more or less compassionate, we all have the ability to be manipulative and deceitful. We act so when we think that circumstances warrant it.

Some people think circumstances warrant it a whole more than others do. “Pure” psychopaths are

examined in case studies of flim-flam hustlers; they make the evening news; and they become topics of TV shows. But there are many more “marginal” psychopaths who score high on some aspects of the disorder but not on others.

The dimensional view also recognizes that psychopaths can be more or less successful. A fellow psychologist once told me that she feels that the psychopaths she sees in therapy are the less successful ones. While most psychopaths are a little

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more intelligent than average, she thought that successful psychopaths are much more intelligent and run corporations as well as the military, government, and educational and religious institutions.

The concept of “successful psychopath” is not new. An early text described “complex psychopaths” who were very intelligent and included unscrupulous politicians and businessmen. [6] By the 1970s it was more widely recognized that “this category includes some successful businessmen, politicians, administrators.” [7] In other words, the unsuccessful psychopath might go to jail for swindling dozens of people with home improvement scams while successful psychopaths might swindle millions with bank deals, get bailed out by friends in government, and never spend a day in jail.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the medicalization of the disorder is how the psychiatric establishment departed from science in order to grant partial exemption from being characterized as psychopaths to the wealthy. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association*, in order to receive a diagnosis of “anti-social personality disorder” (i.e., psychopathy) a person must exhibit at least 3 of 7 listed behavior patterns. These include “arrest,” “physical fights or assaults,” and “failure to sustain consistent work behavior.” [8] This means that those who can pay off cops (or never have charges pressed against them due to their social status), or pay someone else to commit violence on their behalf, or own companies instead of having to work for a living are all less likely to receive an official label of “psychopath.”

An increasing number of psychologists are becoming aware that traditional research was limited by the bias of only looking at people in jail. One wrote that subjects in psychopathy research “were usually institutionalized at the time of testing, and consequently our research may not accurately capture the internal structure and dynamics of the successful antisocial or psychopathic individual.” [9]

Support for the concept of successful and unsuccessful psychopaths is provided by the discovery that the “Psychopathic Personality Disorder” syndrome actually has two factors. [10]

Statistical analyses have revealed an “emotional detachment” factor, which includes superficial charm and skill at manipulating others, as well as an “anti-social behavior” factor, which includes poor impulse control and the tendency to engage in activities that are illegal.

Multiple studies have confirmed that run-of-the-mill psychopaths (often studied while in jail) score particularly high on anti-social behavior while successful psychopaths score higher on emotional detachment factors. For example, Babiak [11] looked at “industrial psychopaths” and found that they scored higher on “emotional” factors than “deviant life style” factors. Functioning smoothly in the corporate world, they had a “charming façade” that allowed them to easily manipulate others.

In a study of “disordered personalities at work” other researchers [12] were able to give personality tests to business managers and chief executives. They contrasted their personality scores to psychiatric patients and “mentally disordered offenders.” Compared to the mental patients, the corporate executives showed greater “emotional” components of personality disorder and less “acting out” (such as aggressiveness).

The authors concluded that “participants drawn from the non-clinical population [i.e., business managers] had scores that merged indiscernibly with clinical distributions.” There were no clear-cut differences between “psychopaths” and “normals.” The most likely explanation of psychopathy is that, like any other personality dimension, it has a bell-shaped curve: a few people have almost none of the characteristics, most people have some

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characteristics of psychopathy, and a few people have a lot. The most visible outlets for people high on psychopathy scales are petty con artists and corporate conniving. Operating in different worlds, their psychopathy expresses itself in different ways.

Now that it is clear that a streak of psychopathy runs through the 1%, it would be worthwhile to go back to those who espouse that “there is no ethic which requires we treat him [the psychopath] as we treat other adults” and ask if that would apply to corporate psychopaths as well. Will editors of scholarly volumes seek out articles heaping abuse on the 1% with the same vigor with which they find articles despising prison inmates? Will academics proclaim that “public health needs” dictate that we suspend civil liberties of corporate executives even if they “have not been convicted of any crime?” Will professors compare the “needed treatment” of the 1% to the “necessary slaughter” of animals?

Since academics know very well where funding for their research comes from, my guess is that they will be a wee bit less harsh on the corporate class than the jailed burglar who provides no grant money.

We can be confident that the Tea Party will not be proposing that, if corporate psychopaths who blast the tops off of mountains wreak 1000 times the havoc of petty thieves who steal copper wire from air conditioners, then their punishments should be 1000 times as great.

Yet, it is important not to overstate the evidence and suggest that every capitalist is a psychopath. Not all corporate executives score high on scales of psychopathy. This is likely because many actually believe their ideology of greed makes for a better world.

### **What causes human compassion?**

Compassion reflects the opposite of psychopathy. When those with wealth and power plan to strangle social security, they never say they intend to hurt people, but rather they want to help them stand on their own. When corporations drive native people from forests, they tell us it is part of their grand scheme to stop climate change. Are we to believe that they are just as compassionate as everyone else...but that they reveal their compassion

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in their own way? There is now good evidence that there are, in fact, class differences in levels of compassion.

By definition, the rich and powerful have more material resources and spend more of their time telling others what to do. Those with fewer material resources get told what to do. As a result, the rich value independence and autonomy while those with less money think of themselves as more interdependent with others. [13] In other words, the rich prize the image of the “rugged individual” while the rest of us focus on what group we belong to.

How do people explain the extremely unequal distribution of wealth? Those with more money attribute it to “dispositional” causes—they believe that people get rich because their personality leads them to work harder and get what they deserve. Those with less money more often attribute inequality to “external” factors—people’s wealth is due largely to events beyond their control, such as being born into a rich family or having good break in life. [14]

People with fewer financial resources live in more threatening environments, whether from potential violence, being unable to pay medical bills, or fearing the possibility of being evicted from their homes. This means that social classes differ in the way that they view the world from an early age. Children from less financially secure homes respond to descriptions of threatening and ambiguous social scenarios with higher blood pressure and heart rate. [15] Adults with lower incomes are also more reactive to emotional situations than are those with more money.

This means that people with fewer financial resources are more attentive to others’ emotions. Since low income people are more sensitive to emotional signals, they might pay more attention to the needs of others and show more altruism in response to suffering.

This was the thinking behind research linking higher income to less compassion. In one study people either watched a neutral video or one depicting a child suffering from cancer. People with lower income had more change in their heart rate and reported feeling more compassion. But they did not rate other emotions as higher. Social class could be linked to compassion more than to any other emotion. [16]

In another study, people reported their emotions toward a partner when the two of them went through a hypothetical job interview. Lower income people perceived more distress in their partners and expressed more compassion toward them. Again, they did not report more intense feelings of other emotions. Nor did participants show more compassion toward people with the same income level as their own. [17]

Like most psychological research, these findings are limited by their use of university students. This makes it hard to conclude that their findings apply to those not in school. Of course, it is quite possible that effects would be even stronger in situations that are far more intense than the somewhat mild experiences that occur in psychological laboratories. A greater problem is interpreting psychological findings as showing absolute differences between groups rather than shades of grey.

It would not be accurate to claim that research proves that the 1% have no compassion while all of the 99% do. But it strongly implies that the 1% feel less compassion, whether watching a videotape of suffering or participating in a live social interaction. Also, lab studies are consistent with findings that people with fewer financial resources give a higher proportion of what they do have to charity. In economic game research, they give more to others. [18]

This line of research confirms that (1) people with fewer financial resources identify with a larger “in-group;” (2) “attention to and recognition of

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suffering is a prerequisite step before compassion can take place;” and (3) “moral emotion is not randomly distributed across social classes...” [19] Compassion toward the suffering of others is less likely among the 1%.

### **The happiness paradox**

The endurance of the story of Scrooge reflects a deeply ingrained understanding that replacing

compassion with a devotion to accumulating wealth will not bring fulfillment. But it is not that simple. What I call the “happiness paradox” flows from two consistent yet seemingly contradictory findings:

1. At a given point in time, higher income is positively associated with happiness; but,
2. Over time, per capita income can rise greatly with no rise in happiness.

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**... there should have been less depression during times of greater prosperity. Exactly the opposite occurred.**

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Let’s look at the first of these. It is true that there is a positive correlation between income and happiness. People who make more money describe themselves as happier. But the diminishing returns of the happiness curve are profound. The greatest reason for the correlation is the huge jump in happiness as people move out of poverty into the world of survive-ability. At higher income levels, more money is associated with extremely small increases in happiness. In fact, moving from the ninth to the tenth (top) income category only increases happiness 0.02 point on a 10-point scale. [20]

Similar effects occur when comparing countries. Those living in rich countries are happier than those living in poor countries. Again, there are diminishing returns, due to the large effects of moving out of abject poverty. Once an income of \$10,000 was reached during the 1990s, additional income did very little. [21] A 10% increase in income in a country with half the income of the US was associated with an increase in happiness of 0.0003 on a 10-point scale. [22]

While smaller increases in happiness occur with advances to successively higher income levels, even this effect is wiped out in comparisons across time. US per capita income has increased dramatically since WWII, while happiness has not changed or even decreased slightly. Between 1946 and 1991, real income rose from \$11,000 to \$27,000 (in 1996 dollars) but happiness was constant. [23] Another study found that from 1940 to 2000 people in the US earned three times as much with no increase in happiness. [24] The most spectacular growth in the capitalist world occurred in Japan, which saw a six-fold increase in per capita income from 1958 to 1991. Yet, there was no change in happiness. [25]

These portraits are all painted from people’s self-reports of how happy they are. Looking at happiness in a more “objective” way suggests that it could actually have decreased at the same time that material possessions were increasing. Presumably, people who are happy have fewer bouts of major depression. If increased income resulted in more happiness, then there should have been less

depression among Americans who grew up during times of greater prosperity. Exactly the opposite occurred.

Compared to those born in 1925–1935, those born in 1945–1955 had twice the probability of a major depressive episode, and those born after 1955 had the highest rate of depression. [26] Suicide may be the most objective measure of happiness (or unhappiness). Data reveal that America’s economic growth spurt occurred simultaneous with a rise in the suicide rate of 7.6 per 100,000 in 1950 to 12.4 per 100,000 in 1990. [27]

Though it would be false to say that money cannot buy any happiness, it would be even worse to say that money can buy lots of happiness. Why then is having more money at a given point in time associated with more happiness (even if only slightly so) while increases in income over time fail to bring more happiness? It is largely because of class divisions and the obsession of capitalist culture with material objects.

When a generation of objects first comes into being (whether jewelry, cars or cell phones), only a few can afford them. The many who cannot buy them endure a fabricated emptiness. Over the next few decades (or years or months) the price of the object falls, ownership becomes commonplace, and a new fad is concocted to stimulate desire. Though the process predates capitalism by many centuries, it is the glorification of object possession in capitalist society that inflates it beyond reason.

Before the 1920s, give or take a decade or two, capitalism was producing largely for needs, with the luxury items of the rich being the exception. But as it became clear that it was possible to satisfy the basic necessities of the vast majority, the 1% began a brave new adventure into the world of manufactured needs and planned obsolescence. Products designed to go out of style or fall apart became more frequent until they became the norm following WWII. [28]

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**... people who prize material possessions are significantly less happy**

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Of course, people accepted this fetishism of things to a great or lesser degree—some Christians still thought that spirituality was more important than bowing to golden calves. One of the best known psychological critics of the emerging life style was Abraham Maslow, who coined the phrase “deficiency orientation” to explain those who wrap their lives around the illusion that happiness can be found in material goods. [29]

Sociologists wrote of “aspiration level theory,” “positional goods” and “status symbols” to describe the purchase of objects whose major value is to demonstrate that the owner possesses something that most others do not. Studies documented that people who prize material possessions are significantly less happy. [30]

Karl Marx wrote of the prime directive of capitalism being to “Accumulate, accumulate!” [31] Decades before the end of the twentieth century,

capitalism had spread its pathological world view and created a new law of accumulation:

### **Manufactured Needs = Manufactured Unhappiness**

It is well documented that possessions do not bring happiness; but, then, what does? Recent research has confirmed what philosophers have written and religions have preached for millennia. Happiness is associated with close personal relationships and control over essential parts of one's life. [32] One study which interviewed

**obtaining** material possessions as much as **having** them. A major difference between them is that the grand psychopath has the ability to cause so much harm. Even more important, the amount of harm that corporate psychopaths cause grows at an exponential rate. Their financial schemes are no longer millions or billions, but now trillions. Not content to drive individual farmers off their land, they design trade deals that force entire countries to plow under the ability to feed their own people and replace it with cash crops to feed animals or produce biofuels.

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### **... if the worst corporate criminals disappeared, they would soon be replaced by marketplace clones.**

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college students found that those who were the most happy (1) spent more time with others and (2) reported more satisfying relationships. A society dominated by the 1%, however, pushes us in the opposite direction. In 1985, 75% of Americans reported having a close friend, but by 2004 that had fallen to 50%. [33]

One of the more interesting experimental studies had some participants do five favors for people in a single day. Weeks later, they still felt better than those who did not practice altruistic behavior. [34] Life might be less pleasant among those whose urge to get ahead makes them less compassionate and less likely to do unsolicited nice things for others.

### **The exponential addict**

The 1% could easily find compassion getting in their way as their actions affect an increasing number of lives. Gaining enough wealth to move out of poverty makes a significant difference in the life satisfaction of a person who has little. Gaining the same amount of wealth has no effect on the happiness of the very rich. They must grab the wealth of many impoverished people in order to have a perceptible increase in happiness. As for a drug addict, the rush from an increase in material possessions of those who already have more than enough is merely a temporary fix.

Soon they will have to prevent even more from rising out of poverty if they are to get another short-term happiness rush. Whether the rush is from the actual possessions or the power that they manifest, it still won't be enough. They must increase the rate of wealth accumulation that they push through their veins. If those with spectacular quantities of obscene wealth are to get their next high, they cannot merely snort enough happiness objects to prevent masses of people from rising **out of poverty**—they have to manipulate markets to grind an ever-increasing number **into poverty**.

The petty psychopath and the grand corporate psychopath seek happiness through the act of

Finding that the pollution of small communities generates insufficient funds, they blow off the tops of mountain ranges for coal, raze boreal forests for tar sands, attack aquatic ecosystems with deep sea drilling, and contaminate massive natural water systems by mining gold or fracking for gas. While the petty psychopath may become proficient enough to become a godfather, the grand psychopath is driven not merely to planetary destruction but to a frenetic increase in the rate of destruction at precisely the moment when the tipping point of climate change is most haunting.

A natural question might seem to follow: Would getting rid of the current batch of corporate psychopaths benefit the world greatly? Actually, no. It would do no good whatsoever because what psychologists call the "reward contingencies" of the corporate world would still exist. The fact that capitalism prizes accumulation of wealth by the few at the expense of the many would mean that, even if the worst corporate criminals disappeared, they would soon be replaced by marketplace clones.

Progressives should avoid using the same "categorical" model so adored by right wing theorists for its utility in hating the poor. A much

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better explanation for psychopathy among the 1% is that the corporate drive to put profits before all else encourages norms of manipulating people without compassion. The more readily corporate leaders succumb to this mind set, the more likely they will be to climb the ladder. As the corporate mentality dominates society, it reproduces its attitudes and expectations of behavior throughout every organization, institution and individual it touches.

In challenging what the market does to our souls, Alan Nasser said it so well:

A certain kind of society tends to produce a certain kind of person. More precisely, it discourages the development of certain human capacities and fosters the development of others. Aristotle, Rousseau, Marx and Dewey were the philosophers who were most illuminating on this. They argued that the postures required by successful functioning in a market economy tend to



"Monsanto bought FarmVille, and now there's a genetically modified computer virus ravaging the Internet."

insinuate themselves into those areas of social intercourse which take place outside of the realm of the market proper. The result, they claimed, was that the arena for potentially altruistic and sympathetic behavior shrinks over time as society is gradually transformed into a huge marketplace. [35]

As mentioned, there are differences in compassion and types of psychopathy between high and low income people. But the differences are not large. Perhaps, even in the corporate board room, many feel the old norms of group loyalty. It is also possible that differences are small, not because of the unwillingness of corporate executives to be ultra-manipulative, but because capitalism pushes everyone toward a "use people" mode.

Thus, building a new society involves going beyond equalizing material wealth. It means changing the core nature of interpersonal relationships. This requires vastly reducing the emphasis on material possessions. Relationships of people to people can never flourish as long as relationships of people to objects reign supreme.

As long as society continues to be deeply divided between those who tell others what to do and those who get told, it will not be possible to establish the emotional sharing that is the basis of widespread altruism. If the 1% are to develop the same level of understanding of others that the 99% has, they will need to walk in their shoes. If they continue to be the ones who live their lives telling others what to do while the rest of us continue being told what to do, they will not develop levels of compassion typical of the 99%.

This means that in office jobs, they should be able to share the joys of typing letters rather than ordering others to type for them. If we decide mining is necessary, those who are now the 1% should get to know that work life. In work at home, they should not be excluded from washing toilets but should participate in the same human activities as the rest of society. Creating a world of universal compassion requires a world of shared experiences.

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