



Case Study : Successful psychopaths learn to control their antisocial impulses



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Article



the british
psychological society
the psychologist

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Some people known as "successful psychopaths" share traits with regular psychopaths, like being manipulative, lacking guilt, and acting selfishly, but instead of ending up in prison, they do well in life and in their careers. While the idea is popular, there hasn't been much solid research to back it up until recently.

A recent study in the journal *Personality Disorders* builds on earlier research from 2010, which suggested that successful psychopaths might have higher levels of conscientiousness, meaning they are better at being self-disciplined and controlling their behaviour. In that earlier study, professionals were asked if they'd met someone who fit the description of a psychopath but was successful. Those who said yes described these people as more responsible and less impulsive than criminal psychopaths.

In the new study, researchers Emily Lasko and David S. Chester studied 1,354 teenage offenders in the US over seven years. All had committed serious crimes, but the researchers labelled those who didn't commit another offence as "successful", and those who did as "unsuccessful".

The team found that the teens who were more manipulative and self-centred to begin with, which are common psychopathic traits, and who also became better at controlling their impulses and aggression over time were more likely to avoid reoffending. This was especially true for the "successful" group.

This suggests that even people with psychopathic traits can manage their behaviour if they improve their self-control, helping them stay out of trouble and function in society. The study supports the idea that "successful psychopaths" really do exist and shows that developing conscientiousness may help explain the difference between them and those who turn to crime.

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Links to Specification

6.1.1 Biological explanations of crime and anti-social behaviour including personality.

6.1.9 Individual differences.

- Personality as a factor in criminal/anti-social behaviour.

6.2.3 Issues of reliability, validity, objectivity, credibility and ethics in research in criminological psychology.

6.2.4 Data analysis

- Analysis of quantitative data: Calculating measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion.
- Analysis of, use of, and drawing conclusions from quantitative data including use of inferential statistical testing.

6.6 Issues and debates.

- Reductionism.
- The role of both nature and nurture in psychology

9.1.8 Additional research methods and techniques: Longitudinal.

Recommended revision and research activities:

What are the main characteristics of a psychopath?

How may the characteristics of a psychopath lead them to engaging in criminal behaviour?

Challenge task:

Summarise the results of 'successful psychopaths learn to control their antisocial impulses'. Explain how they could be used to reduce crime and recidivism.

What are the issues with this study that may stop it being an effective explanation of criminal/anti-social behaviour?

Exam style questions*

1. Describe the use of self-report data in the 'successful psychopaths learn to control their impulses' study. (2)
2. Explain one strength of the 'Successful psychopaths learn to control their impulses' study in terms of reliability. (2).
3. Explain one strength and one weakness of the use of questionnaires in the 'Successful psychopaths learn to control their impulses' study. (4)

[\(Click here to view Model Response sections\)](#)

Additional questions for which the content of the article can be used as part of a response

Evaluate personality as an explanation of crime and anti-social behaviour . (8)

Assess whether psychology is reductionist. (8)

*Exam style questions are not necessarily the exact format of those that will appear in the qualification examination papers but are written to elicit student responses that meet the assessment criteria, which are exemplified by the answers provided. The length of response in the answers is not indicative of expected student responses, and are provided to support centre teaching, student practice and self-assessment.





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Model Responses - [Click here to return to question page](#)

Exam style questions

1. Describe the use of self-report data in the 'successful psychopaths learn to control their impulses' study. (2)

Lasko and Chester used a 50-item scale to measure Youth Psychopathic Traits, which were answered on a four-point Likert scale (1). The youth psychopathic traits scale includes statements such as 'I seldom regret things I do, even if other people feel that they are wrong' (1).

2. Explain one strength of the Successful psychopaths learn to control their impulses study in terms of reliability. (2).

All the youth offenders were given the same three questionnaires, measuring psychopathic traits, ability to self-regulate and offending were given a various planned points in the study which increases reliability(1), as other researchers could replicate the study using the same published questionnaires to check if the results are consistent (1).

3. Explain one strength and one weakness of the use of questionnaires in the Successful psychopaths learn to control their impulses study. (4)

One strength of Lasko and Chester using questionnaires such as the Weinberg Adjustment Inventory is that they collected quantitative data in the form of the answers circled, such as true or false this data is objective (1), as Lasko and Chester did not have to interpret any data, the participants circled true or false, so the data are reliable (1).

One weakness of the use of the questionnaires is that the participants were all young offenders, so they may not have been honest in their answers, especially about their offending rates throughout the years(1), which can reduce the validity of the results as they may not accurately represent the relationship between psychopathic traits and offending rates (1)

Marks awarded and commentary

Q1. This answer gains both marks as there are two clear, and accurate descriptive points the use of self report data in this study. 1 mark for the Youth psychopathic traits scale and the description what it is. The second mark is for the example of a statement from that scale. The answer could have gone on to describe another scale used in the study, it did not need to focus on one scale.

Q2. This answer gets both marks. The answer is focused on reliability and has identified how the task is standardised throughout the time period and across participants for the first mark. The second mark comes from the justification of this point about how this means that the study can be replicated and checked for consistent results.

Q3. This answer gains all 4 marks. The strength gains two marks, 1 mark for identifying how quantitative data is objective, with a clear link to what the quantitative data was in this study. They then go on to justify this as a strength in terms of reliability.

The weakness also gets 2 marks. 1 mark for identifying a weakness as the fact the participants may not be totally honest in their answers. The answer then justifies this in terms of validity and how it may affect the results.





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Model Responses - ([Click here to return to question page](#))

Additional questions for which the content of the article can be used as part of a response

Evaluate personality as an explanation of crime and anti-social behaviour . (8)

The following paragraphs could form part of the answer to this question:

AO1: One explanation for criminal behaviour in terms of personality is Eysenck's personality theory, which says that those who score highly in terms of extroversion and neuroticism are more likely to be criminals, and those who also score highly in psychopathy are more likely to engage in more serious criminal behaviour partly due to their lack of empathy.

AO3: Lasko and Chester found that offenders with psychopathic personality traits who were able to control their impulses were less likely to reoffend and so were deemed as successful, so reducing the credibility Eysenck's personality theory as an explanation of criminal behaviour as other factors also determine if psychopathy leads to criminal behaviour.

Assess whether psychology is reductionist. (8)

The following paragraphs could form part of the answer to this question:

AO1: Reductionism is when psychologists look at small, isolated parts of human behaviour or biology when studying and measuring human behaviour such as just looking at the influence of genes on behaviour. It ignores the interaction between the isolated parts that are studied. Holism is when psychologists study several factors at the same time and look at the whole experience when studying human behaviour. It looks at the interactions between the parts, and says human behaviour is more than the sum of the parts.

AO3: Studies such as Lasko and Chester can be said to be reductionist as they just focus on personality, and only focus on one part of personality, psychopathy, in terms of criminal behaviour. They focus on psychopathic traits and the ability to control impulses and whether this has a relationship with criminal behaviour making it more reductionist than other theories of personality. They ignore other factors such as the effects of hormones on criminal behaviour, therefore psychology can be said to be reductionist.

Level awarded and commentary

Evaluate personality as an explanation of crime and anti-social behaviour . (8)

The first paragraph demonstrates accurate and thorough knowledge about Eysenck's personality theory (AO1). Other similar paragraphs may focus on how high levels of extroversion and neuroticism may lead to criminal behaviour, their role in learning right and wrong and environmental factors. The second paragraph demonstrates a well-developed logical evaluation in the form of and using the study by Lasko and Chester as a criticism of Eysenck's theory. Other similarly structured paragraphs could focus on studies that show the theory is an accurate explanation, how the theory could be used to reduce recidivism, and alternative explanation of criminal behaviour which, if all well developed, could lead to a level 4 response. Further, similarly structured paragraphs making use of supporting evidence or different explanations would lead to a Level 4 response overall.

Assess whether psychology is a science (8)

The AO1 shows accurate and thorough knowledge of what reductionism is, as well as a definition of its opposite, holism (AO1). Other paragraphs could include other factors that make psychology reductionist, such as the type of research that is reductionist, theories that only focus on one aspect, such as genetics, and the type of data.

The AO3 is logical and well-developed with a judgement if the form of whether psychology is reductionist. It uses the data collected by Lasko and Chester. to support why psychology could be seen as reductionist. Further paragraphs with this level of detail and explanation would enable the answer to get level 4, as long as there was a balance between psychology being reductionist and it being more holistic.

