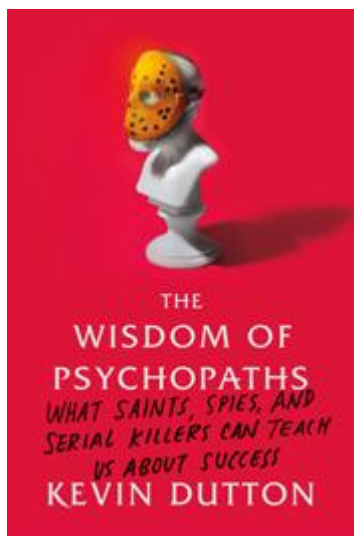


A psychopath can save your life

For a retired academic person it's sometimes hard to resist the temptation to express intuitive ideas about complex matters. So, sometimes I have argued that psychopaths are not necessarily always bad people. It's not an 'all or none' personality trait, I argued, but there are gradations between degrees of psychopathy. Dependent on the constellation of the genes that together form this polygenetic trait, and environmental circumstances, a psychopath can become a mass killer like Breivik, but also a successful business (wo)man, a brain surgeon or a war hero. What these people probably have in common is



lack of fear, and the ability to act ruthlessly, when necessary.

To my surprise Kevin Dutton a researcher of the University of Cambridge, UK confirmed my intuition, based on his clinical research. Kevin explains his views in his recent book 'The Wisdom of Psychopaths'.

According to Kevin we all have psychopathic tendencies, and the trick is to use them when they can be of any help. For instance in negotiating for a salary rise with your boss. Don't be too concerned what

others think of you, just 'go for it' and increase your chances of success.

Dutton even makes the case that the detached psychopathic mind has much in common with the mindset achieved through Buddhist meditation.

Contrary to common belief psychopaths (i.e. people who show high scores on scales that measure 'coldheartedness' or the Psychopathic Personality Inventory: the PPI) recognize emotions better than most normal people. This has been investigated by Shirley Fecteau and her team at the Diaconess Medical center in Boston. Shirley used transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to stimulate areas in the brain that register pain and fear (like the amygdala and somatosensory cortex)

Much to their amazement, Fecteau and her team actually found the opposite of what they were expecting. High PPI scorers - specifically, those who scored high on the "Coldheartedness" subscale of the questionnaire, the subscale that most directly taps into empathy - in fact showed greater attenuation of the

TMS response than low scorers, suggesting that psychopaths, rather than having an impairment in recognizing the emotions of others, indeed have a talent for it.

Normal people (with low PPI scores) usually show strong activation in affective circuits in the brain when they watch a movie with horror scenes. But when these circuits are inhibited by application of TMS, normal people turn into coldhearted psychopaths. They even seemed to enjoy watching the scenes.

Excerpted from The Wisdom of Psychopaths. Copyright © 2012 Kevin Dutton.