International
Journal of
**Human
Sciences
Research**

FIT TO BE UNETHICAL: FUNCTIONAL PSYCHOPATHY IN ORGANIZATIONS

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http://lattes.cnpq.br/1997027402860999

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Abstract: In this article, we carry out a theoretical analysis on how the person with characteristics similar to those of Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) has the social skills to thrive in an individualistic and greedy society. We show that the ability to adopt unethical behaviors can be crucial for these people to appear as assertive, capable, and accomplishing professionals. They are not only able to achieve individual results but, above all, to lead teams aimed at achieving the ambitious goals of their organizations. Such individuals are known as functional psychopaths. From a psychological point of view, a large part of the indicators related to functional psychopathy seems to be associated with changes in the regulatory function that emotions play a part in the human decision-making process. Functional psychopathy represents a challenge for organizational managers and staff in human resources sections. Furthermore, the evaluation processes, primarily based on organizational results, are not very sensitive to differentiate between (1) lack of empathy and courage; (2) selfishness and zeal; and (3) manipulation and leadership. It can be concluded that only more sophisticated, laborious, and costly processes could be sensitive enough to identify those people and their perverse work strategies during the selective and evaluative processes in the business environment. So, they are all around us, and, given the cultural orientation of companies toward individualism and greed, they are probably here to stay.

Keywords: Functional psychopathy; beliefs and values; psychopathy assessment; Functional psychopathy in organizations.

In this article, we carry out a theoretical analysis of how a person with characteristics similar to those of Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) becomes able to be successful in a society that prioritizes the values of individualism and greed. We show that the ability to behave unethically can be crucial for those to appear as assertive, capable, and accomplishing professionals. They are not just only able to achieve individual results but to lead teams to achieve ambitious goals, through manipulative strategies. Such individuals are known as functional psychopaths.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, scientific research on psychopathy has amassed a considerable number of studies in the context of public safety and the justice system (DeLisi, 2019; Helfgott, 2018). However, it is in the business world that functional or subclinical psychopathy flourishes and is valued for hiring managers (Unrau & Morry, 2019; Du & Templer, 2021). The adjective "functional" seems suitable to define what kind of person we want to characterize. It emphasizes the operational dimension of the profile of those individuals, as it highlights the functions they perform and their suitability for certain jobs.

Not only ASPD, but also other mental disorders are diagnosed through the intensity and frequency of their indicators (Lebreton et al., 2006). In the same direction, some research demonstrates the discrete nature of the characteristics that make psychopathy unique (Gustafson & Ritzer, 1995; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). So, these conditions manifest as a variety of behavioral markers that do not disqualify individuals to work.

The term psychopathy does not appear in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), nor the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10). It is a designation mostly used in scientific research and common sense. Despite being a controversial topic (e.g. Albin, 2022; Jurjako & Malatesti, 2022), it refers to a spectrum of mental illnesses generically called antisocial or dissocial ones.

In the DSM-V (2013), ASPD is classified as a personality disorder. This concept will

probably be questioned by scientific advances in the field of Psychology. Personality is a scientifically outdated concept in the context of theories that emerged in the 19th century. It is, in short, the result of the interaction between certain psychological processes and functions that show the characteristics presented by persons in their way of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Costa et al., 2019; Crocq, 2022).

Such a view represents a fragmented conception of human psychological processes, an aspect that has been confronted by the most recent Theories of the Self. According to this new perspective, the self can be understood as an integrative and expanded synthesis of psychological processes and functions, including new dimensions, such as real and imagined social interactions as constituent elements of the person (Konopka, Hermans & Gonçalves, 2019).

Nowadays, it is possible to say that the characteristics that guide the diagnosis of Antisocial Personality Disorder are related to problems in the regulatory role that emotions play in the decision-making process (Baliousis et al., 2019; Marsden, et al., 2019). In the near future, there will be a profound debate about the current classification, taking the issue to the territory of the psychopathology of emotions.

All these reflections are important to highlight the provisional and fragmented nature of the current scientific knowledge, even though the study of psychopathy is more than a century old. It is a key point that shows the need for further research in the area. Ahead, we will see how beliefs, values, and emotions participate in the human decision-making process and guide people's behavior in corporate environments.

BELIEFS, VALUES, AND THE HUMAN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

A set of core meanings guides human behavior. The dynamics of its creation, availability, negotiation, and transformation is quite complex. Beliefs and values constitute important psychological affective-semiotic constructs that guide human action, and conscious and intentional behavior (Branco, 2021b). Beliefs and values stand out from other semiotic elements for the role they play among the sets of meanings operated by human beings. By guiding the perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and actions of the subjects and, synthetically, the conscious social and psychological processes, they become essential elements for the understanding of the decision-making process itself (Branco & Valsiner, 2012; Brinkmann, 2021; Valsiner 2014, 2021b).

At the collective level, cultures, including organizational ones, provide a semiotic set of meanings that guides human behavior through cultural canalization (Madsen, 2020; Zittoun, 2021). Since Vygotsky (2008). There is an understanding that individuals conduct a process of appropriation and reconstruction of meanings among what is culturally available. This symbolic and personal appropriation is known as internalization and the dynamics of its occurrence have been corroborated by several recent studies (Branco, 2021a; Budwig, 2021).

Explanations and examples of the internalization process appear in several studies that used the theoretical framework of Cultural Psychology (e.g. Branco, 2018; Freire & Branco, 2016; Rengifo-Herrera & Branco, 2014; Roncancio-Moreno & Branco, 2017). From this point of view, internalization can be understood as an active and continuous process of meaning reconstruction characterized by the interaction between the

social and the personal poles. Therefore, it is through the collectively available affective-semiotic elements that humans internalize beliefs, values, and patterns of action prevalent in their context(s). Also, we build, little by little, our personal version, as we interact with others in our environments (Branco, 2021a; Valsiner, 2021, Zittoun, 2019).

The constitution among individuals and the collective culture is mutual (Valsiner, 2012, 2014, 2021; Zittoun, 2019). Considering this intricate network of meanings, the personal culture is actively elaborated by the internalization of the suggestions and meanings of the collective culture, while the personal cultures also contribute to the transformation of the former. However, it seems to us that this process is broader than just bidirectional and could be called multidirectional. If we take into consideration the active and simultaneous participation of various subjects, there would be a diversity of interactions leading to possible new personal and social meanings in a given culture.

To exemplify some scenarios of active internalization of the suggestions of the collective culture, let's consider an organization primarily oriented by profit and the mere interest in enhancing its sales. Despite the existence of a beautiful picture, at the entrance of the company, in which the high objectives, values, and mission of the organization are portrayed, the managerial orientations to the collaborators point to a different direction.

The social (maybe "invisible") practices guide the appropriation process, far from what is signaled on the walls of such a company. Therefore, an employee can adapt, hiding commercial information from other teammates, and adopt any kind of unethical behavior in order to excel in terms of sales. That same employee may, in another scenario, work on behalf of his small team, once the financial benefits from business success are shared collectively. This hypothetical example serves as an indicator of how real business practices, translated by management guidelines, can have different behavioral effects on its employees. In addition, it also serves to understand that social and individual practices may differ from the formal signs of beliefs and values that may exist in some parts of the cultural ecosystem.

For a deeper understanding of this web of meanings, and the influence that the affective-semiotic dimension exerts on decision-making, it is necessary to differentiate between beliefs and values. Beliefs and values are hyper-generalized affective-semiotic fields that guide our perception, feelings, thoughts, the human decision-making process, and, ultimately, our actions (Branco, 2016, 2021a, 2021b). This is the common ground between these two constructs. The main difference between them is that values are much more powerful and hyper-generalized than beliefs and are deeply rooted in the whole emotional process.

As a result of this deep rooting, they tend to prevail as guides in the decision-making process and to be more resistant to change throughout ontogeny, even though they can also be the object of transformation (Paula, 2019; Valsiner, 2021). This explanation helps us understand the resistance that can be observed, in some organizational environments, between the collective practices promoted by the managers and the employees' individual conceptions. For example, the tensions that can occur between an environment oriented towards the recognition of individual work and the beliefs of employees who defend the valorization of the joint effort of small teams.

The understanding of how beliefs, values, and emotions influence the decision-making process is paramount. The affective dimension, feelings, and other emotional responses play a key role in the sense of mobilizing significant

changes in the disposition, motivation, and concrete actions of individuals. In addition, as functional psychopaths have issues in their affective system (Marsden et al., 2019; Sedgwick et al., 2017), it is expected that their performance in the corporate environment will also change. On the other hand, these emotional changes can facilitate the performance of some business functions, as we will see later.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF PSYCHOPATHY?

Bearing in mind the need to highlight the characteristics of functional psychopaths, we will bring, below, a description based on the work of Babiak and Hare (2007).

From the point of view of how they present themselves to others, psychopaths display overconfidence and superficial charm. They present a grandiose talk about themselves. They are verbal exhibitionists and often use lies.

When it comes to affective behavior, functional psychopaths demonstrate irresponsibility and minimize harm when a problem arises. There is a lack of remorse or guilt in their behavior. They feel an excessive need to perform intense activities and are always prone to boredom if activities do not occur. In the organizational environment, they are a huge source of ideas, always for other people to carry out.

From the point of view of social behavior, they are excessively impulsive. They typically deceive or manipulate others. They show difficulty becoming emotionally intimate and get caught up in situations where they show insensitivity or lack of empathy. It is noticed that they can parasitize other people with relative ease. They show difficulty in taking responsibility for their own actions. The blame for any difficulty is always attributed to someone else, with a tendency to adapt the rules in their favor, in a very versatile way.

From these characteristics, it is possible to infer that, in functional psychopaths, there are issues in the empathy system. We can understand it as the ability of a human being to put himself in the place of another, by simulating someone's affective experiences (Marsden, et al., 2019). The emotions and cognitions that result from such a process are reflected in human decisions. In the organizational environment, such an empathic regulatory process is powerful enough to trigger solidarity for employees to offer temporary, disinterested, reciprocal help to co-workers who are experiencing difficulties in conducting their tasks. In this context, current scientific research indicates that psychopaths have varying degrees of diminished ability to experience empathy (Marsden et al., 2019; Rhee, 2021; Van Dongen, 2020), which does not prevent them from simulating the outcome of this process if it benefits them.

This inhibition, albeit partial, of the role of emotions in regulating decision-making processes underlies the aptitude of functional psychopaths to be unethical. For the purposes of our argument, we consider unethical behaviors to be those that are contrary to the code of social rules that is symbolically made available for internalization by members of a given culture (Fehr, Fulmer, & Keng - Highberger, 2020; Ripoll & Ballart, 2020).

It is precisely the adequate regulation carried out by the emotional system that guarantees certain consistency of the human decision-making process, based on prosocial and altruistic social and personal rules.

FUNCTIONAL PSYCHOPATHS IN THE CORPORATE ENVIRONMENT

Using current knowledge, Foster and Land

(2018), when debating the adequacy of the word "functional" to psychopathy, indicate that there is a need to distinguish two types of people who present psychopathic behavior: (1) those who are violent and (2) the non-violent ones.

Violent behaviors are not in the scope of this study, as those people are more focused on committing crimes of greater offensive power and antisocial behavior itself. About non-violent psychopaths, Babiak and Hare (2007) argue that they are able to exercise professions in which there is a higher level of stress. They also indicate that their selfish profile and their capacity for persuasion and manipulation, as mentioned above, allow them to build a facade of normality. Historically, this important feature has been highlighted in the scientific literature. Cleckley (1941) was one of the first to contribute to the popularization of the subject and to discuss how the characteristics of certain people facilitate their professional rise. In addition, he opened a broad debate on the free movement of such individuals in everyday tasks and in day-to-day environments and interactions.

In this context, for more than 80 years, several studies (e.g. Forster & Lund, 2018; Mathieu, Babiak, & Hare, 2020; Leeper-Piquero et al., 2021) and best-seller books (e.g. Cleckley, 1941; Babiak & Hare, 2007; Babiak, Neumann & Hare, 2010) have been written about psychopathy, which has had a significant impact on the popular imagination. Furthermore, we amass knowledge about functional psychopathy and how these individuals feel at ease in organizations in which they find social practices oriented to beliefs and values that facilitate their selfish actions. The lack of empathy and the high capacity for manipulation enable them to deal with situations that people, devoid of such characteristics, would experience a high degree of emotional difficulty to get used to.

Let us consider the following example: a functional psychopath, who is a middle manager, is pressured by his superior to meet the monthly goal. Two days before the deadline, he realizes that, on regular working hours, it would not be possible to meet it.

Considering the scenario, he comes up with a solution that allows him to obtain personal gains within the whole situation. He gathers his team and, through a well-crafted and ambiguous oratory, suggests having knowledge of a possible dismissal of people, information that is kept secret. The subordinates, feeling afraid of being fired and subtly threatened, started performing free extra work.

Two days later, the goals, initially set, are exceeded. The functional psychopath presents the results to his superior, implying that his leadership allowed the team to exceed the collective goal and also prevent the company from being burdened with overtime payments.

From our hypothetical example, it is possible to highlight how functional psychopaths are important to companies. By prioritizing their personal gains, they manage to manipulate others' emotions, and consequently their decision-making process. In our example, the fear of being fired, subtly instilled into the team members´ imagination, provided the company with additional work at no cost.

The verticalization of the organizational structure can provide possible cover that the superior leadership would be never aware of a such unethical strategy being used by those individuals. However, this same management compartmentalization provides the opportunity, which the functional psychopath took advantage of, by presenting the efficient, competent, and economical way to solve the issue of exceeding goals. Additionally, his work reputation with his superior was strengthened, appearing as (1) courageous,

given the short deadline for achieving the goal; (2) a leader, as he managed to exceed the predicted goal; (3) zealous, since, in addition to exceeding the goal, he also saved valuable resources on overtime. The organizational orientation to get results may be at the root of this confusion, since, not infrequently, the processes or paths to obtain certain results are not equally considered in the managerial evaluation. Such a situation, commonplace in the business environment, shows how a functional psychopath can manipulate to take advantage. Without feeling the embodied effects of the negative emotions (fear or guilt) underlying the unethical behaviors used to manipulate the teammates, it is much easier to achieve any kind of goal.

The organizational subtlety and invisibility of these strategies and the aptitude of these people to be unethical are indicators of the need for increasingly in-depth, transversal, and specific research.

Functional psychopaths can then operate like modern-day taskmasters, and their lack of empathy helps them not to feel guilty or stressed from the hardships they might put other people through. Under the logic of the mere accumulation of wealth and greed, functional psychopaths are excellent collaborators in enforcing order and extracting results from their subordinates. From this point of view, hiring such individuals for intermediate positions in a corporate structure proves to be profitable, as long as their personal gains are guaranteed (Du, & Templer, 2022). This last aspect is extremely important since a functional psychopath who is dissatisfied with the company is a great liability risk.

At this point, it seems obvious to us that, in order to deal with this type of employee, it is necessary for the top of this organizational pyramid to be filled by people of an equivalent profile. Perhaps a profile well beyond the functional one would be necessary, since

the indicators are discreet and visible by several degrees in the spread spectrum of this psychopathology, not always easily identified. Only a major psychopath can successfully manage middle psychopathic managers.

So, if the system selects people according to their ability to be individualistic and ambitious, the potentially most perverse and greedy of them reach the end of this subtle Darwinian selection process. For a society that induces such values, these individuals will be considered efficient. In this context, Boddy et al. (2021) point to how psychopathic leadership is associated with low concern for the well-being of employees. The orientation of organizations towards profit and ambition promotes an environment conducive to the flourishing of this type of leadership. We will see below some difficulties that may identify these almost invisible people in the organizational environment.

THE LOW SENSITIVITY OF CORPORATE EVALUATION PROCESSES TO FUNCTIONAL PSYCHOPATHY

As previously discussed, the action of functional psychopaths can be quite subtle and their strategies perversely underhanded. In addition, the verticalization of organizational structures contributes to the invisibility of the actions of such people within companies. A reassessment is needed on how to improve evaluation methodologies to enable the identification of unethical behavior in the corporate environment. Typically, an inventory of behaviors that were statistically associated with the ASPD spectrum is performed.

From the characteristics of psychopathy, it is possible to notice that a central element that serves as a differential indicator is the lack of empathy. This characteristic can be referenced during the life history, for example, by the

cruelty with which someone treats living beings, first animals and plants and then people (Johnson, 2019).

As previously seen, the cruelty in behavior can be perceived in low intensity. It is not correct to interpret that such characteristics are always manifested in their maximum expression. A much more expected scenario is that such people manifest their perversity in personal and work relationships, phenomena that may be at the origin of the expression "toxic people" (LeBreton et al., 2018).

Many strategies used for selection derive from those used in a well-known instrument for the diagnosis of ASPD, The Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised. The instrument consists of a series of questions that are answered in a semi-structured interview. This methodology seeks to analyze people's moral judgment and their lifestyle to, from there, compare it with a trait scale whose purpose is to allow inferences about the existence of characteristics or indicators for the diagnosis of psychopathy. The same type of strategy, with another format, was used by Bartels and Pizarro (2011). The researchers investigated how people responded to moral dilemmas such as:

> "A runaway trolley is about to run over and kill five people, and you are standing on a walkway next to a stranger; your body is too light to stop the train, but if you push the stranger onto the tracks, killing him, you will save the five people. Would you push the man? (p. 155)."

The research team indicated that those who responded to the dilemmas with an "ethics of utilitarianism" – the claim that the morally correct action is the one that produces the best overall consequence – had more psychopathic personality traits. In the above question, the choice to push the man will have more in common with those made by individuals who have manifested characteristics of psychopathy. Other studies have also addressed the same issues and reached similar conclusions (e.g. Gao & Tang, 2013; Greene, 2016; Patil, 2015).

The shortcoming of the moral judgment approach is that it fails to distinguish between a conscious utilitarian choice guided exclusively by cognition, or whether the person decides because of the lack of emotion. When answering a questionnaire, the functional psychopath will deliver what he believes to be the right answer, and that will bring him the greatest benefit. Also present in this type of assessment are the disadvantages of making inferences from a scale fragmented into characteristics.

From this example, we can get an idea of how primitive our evaluative methods are. To improve the assessment, we must add other instruments and use other strategies such as (1) observation of behavior; (2) interviews with people known to the appraisee; (3) the analysis of personal interaction in social networks; (4) the survey of their life history. We must, therefore, value the investigation of the role of emotions and their expression throughout the life of the person being evaluated. This complementation is very laborious, not to mention the ethical-professional challenges that need to be addressed, but they are essential measures for conducting a more complete assessment.

So, from the point of view of an integral evaluation, it is necessary: (1) to reduce the weight of the self-narrative that occurs in the survey of behaviors and moral judgments; (2) to increase the weight of interviews with family members, acquaintances, and co-workers' narratives; (3) increase the weight of the survey to be carried out in the midst of social networks, the written and artistic production of the subject; (4) increase the weight of observation of their personal practices and interpersonal behavior in different environments.

Considering a corporation in which efficiency is interpreted in the context of the values of individualism and greed, the corporate selection process may confuse (1) lack of empathy with the courage to make difficult decisions; (2) rigidity in decision-making with zeal in preserving the organization's objectives; and (3) manipulation of team emotions with high leadership skills.

CONCLUSION

The presence of people with functional psychopathy indicators is a reality in the corporate world. This phenomenon is not only confirmed by several scientific studies, but also by the personal experience of each of us throughout our professional lives. In this context, a large part of the indicators related to functional psychopathy seems to be associated with changes in the regulatory function that emotions exert, through beliefs and values, on the human decision-making system. Among other processes, the importance of empathy is highlighted for prosocial and altruistic behaviors to occur. By being deficient in this regulatory circuit, functional psychopaths do not experience the autonomous and aversive emotional power of their own conscience in violating a belief or value.

For certain organizations focused on greed, individualism, and the accumulation of assets, this profile can appear as being efficient and resolute. Many companies can also consider them to assume the role of modern taskmasters, in charge of achieving ambitious goals and imposing conditions for other employees to also achieve them.

Due to the suitability of such people to the social practices of individualistic and ambition-promoting environments, in addition to their subtle and perversely ambiguous strategies, functional psychopathy becomes difficult to assess. In this context, management evaluation processes, based on the results, are not overly sensitive to identify them. The strategies used by these people are remarkably effective to deceive.

It is important to point out that, in some cases, there is a possible lack of organizational interest in intervening in the strategies of employees that, in some way, benefit them. Amid the manipulation they promote in the work environment, it is easy to confuse (1) lack of empathy with courage; (2) selfishness with zeal; and (3) manipulation with leadership. Taking this into account, only more sophisticated, labor-intensive, financially costly assessment processes could be sensitive enough to identify functional psychopaths. This indicates that they are all around us and that, keeping the cultural orientation of the companies to individualism and greed, they are probably here to stay.

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