

Ponerology 101: Snakes in Suits

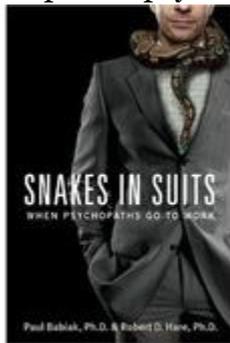
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The criminal psychopath has been observed and studied for almost a century. But except for a short mention by Cleckley, the idea of a successful psychopath - ordinary by almost all external standards - has remained shrouded in that pervasive "conspiracy of silence". As this series progresses, it will become clear why this is the case and what exactly are the ramifications of such a dangerous gap in knowledge and awareness. So far the only in-depth presentation of the problem of successful psychopaths has been Paul Babiak's and Robert Hare's book [*Snakes in Suits*](#), published in 2006. The book is essential reading, and has the potential to save your life, literally. The information it contains is universal and can be applied to interactions on any social level.

Babiak, as an industrial and organizational psychologist, encountered his first corporate psychopath in 1992. By studying operators like "Dave" in the corporate environment, Babiak not only brought into focus the methods by which psychopaths infiltrate and ascend the corporate ladder of success, he shattered previous illusions about what was and wasn't possible for psychopaths to accomplish. Many in the industry thought psychopaths wouldn't be able to succeed in business. They thought that psychopaths' bullying and narcissistic behaviors would be off-putting to potential hirers, and that their abuse and manipulations would inevitably lead to failure within the company. In fact, the so-called "experts" couldn't have been more wrong. They seemed to have neglected the uncanny ability of psychopaths to present *an image of extreme normality, and even excellence*, to their victims. And that is what we are to them: victims, potential "marks", suckers.



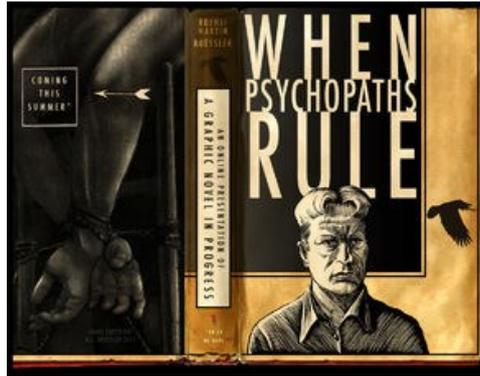
Against the prevailing beliefs and hubristic assumptions, Babiak found that psychopaths were *readily accepted* into the management ranks of prominent companies, and were even experiencing career success.¹ Their extreme narcissism was apparently mistaken as a "positive leadership trait", and the murky morality and internal chaos typical of the mergers, acquisitions, and takeover environment seemed perfect for their type. Not only would they do well under the pressure - not having the ability to feel fear or stress - the potential personal rewards were too great to refuse, for the business *and* the psychopath. As Babiak put it, "the lack of specific knowledge about what constitutes psychopathic manipulation and deceit among businesspeople was the corporate con's key to success."² Ironically, the very traits sought by corporations and other powerful entities are often the ones that *do* bring about their inevitable demise (witness the fall of Bernie Madoff, Enron, Nazism). And they are the traits we have been conditioned to see as ideal. For example, through the "rose-colored glasses" of those who do not know better, conning and manipulative become "persuasive" and "influential"; coldhearted behavior and lack of remorse become "action oriented" and the "ability to make hard decisions"; fearless and impulsive become "courageous" and "high-energy"; lack of emotions

becomes "strong" and "controls emotions".³

In short, when we call a psychopath "persuasive and courageous" we should actually be charging a commission for doing the psychopath's PR for him, because that is all it is. It's like selling bleach and calling it holy water! On paper these qualities may look promising, but as coworkers, and especially as bosses, psychopaths are domineering, intimidating, frightening, and dangerous. Quick to take credit for others' work and to hire and fire employees on a whim, they tolerate only praise, are extremely short-sighted, and genuinely lack the insight that makes a good leader. One psychopath, described by Babiak, was "unwilling and perhaps unable to acknowledge that any of her decisions could have any negative consequences for the business."⁴ Even when leading superficially "normal" lives, psychopaths still cause problems in ways that fly under the radar of the law - economically, psychologically, emotionally.

How do they do it? By analyzing corporate cons, Babiak discovered the basic methods psychopaths use to operate in a hierarchical, corporate environment. But no matter in what environment the psychopath finds himself - a romantic relationship, a corporate strategy, a planned heist, an election campaign, a political coup ... the list of possibilities is endless - he uses the same, three-phase "Assessment - Manipulation - Abandonment" routine on his victims. In the first phase, the psychopath assesses the value of his "ally" and potential patsy - what he or she can do to further the psychopath's aims. Psychopaths are experts at identifying and pushing others' "buttons", their "likes and dislikes, motives, needs, weak spots, and vulnerabilities."⁵ Others' strengths are utilized and weaknesses exploited. Next, the psychopath uses messages carefully crafted for the specific target, utilizing information gathered in the Assessment Phase. He then adapts his manipulation to accommodate any new feedback from the target in order to maintain full control. As Babiak and Hare write: They often make use of the fact that for many people the content of the message is less important than the way it is delivered. A confident, aggressive delivery style - often larded with jargon, clichés, and flowery phrases - makes up for the lack of substance and sincerity in their interactions with others ... they are masters of impression management; their insight into the psyche of others combined with a superficial - but convincing - verbal fluency allows them to change their personas skillfully as it suits the situation and their game plan. They are known for their ability to don many masks, change "who they are" depending upon the person with whom they are interacting, and make themselves appear likable to their intended victim.⁶ Sounds an awful lot like the work done by intelligence agencies, doesn't it?

Psychopaths also use a variety of manipulation techniques, for example, *gaslighting*. When told a lie often enough, and with seemingly absolute certainty, normal people tend to doubt their own perceptions. "Amazingly, more often than not, victims will eventually come to doubt their *own* knowledge of the truth and change *their* own views to believe what the psychopath tells them rather than what they know to be true."⁷ In this phase, the psychopath ruthlessly exploits his victims, using them to acquire money, position, control, and power. When a person has ceased to be useful, they are discarded in the final, Abandonment Phase. Loyal to none, this often has devastating effects on those who were deceived by the psychopath's façade of lies and "good intentions". Whether a spouse who has been drained emotionally, an old woman whose bank account has been emptied, or a "friend" whose connections have finally paid off, the psychopath inevitably throws them out and moves on to the next target.



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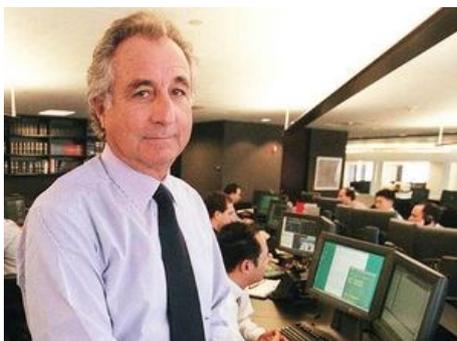
Within the corporate world, Babiak identified a more elaborate *five*-phase variation of this dynamic. First, psychopaths use their charm and gift of gab to feign leadership qualities, thus gaining *entry* into the company. Once hired, they identify possible targets and rivals among coworkers - from talented but naïve peers whose work can be stolen to secretaries who control access to important executives - in the *assessment* phase. Babiak describes the four groups of people that psychopaths employ in their games. *Pawns* are ordinary coworkers who have "informal power and influence", and who are deftly manipulated by psychopaths into wanting - or needing - to support and please them. *Patrons* are high-level individuals with formal power. By developing rapport with patrons, psychopaths secure protection from the attacks of lower-level workers who see through the mask. *Patsies* are pawns who have lost their usefulness and have thus been discarded. Lastly, *organizational police* are individuals like auditors, security, and human resources staff who are more experienced in detecting manipulation in the work place.⁸

In the third, *manipulation* phase, psychopaths create and maintain their "psychopathic fiction", setting up positive disinformation about themselves and negative disinformation about others using the network of pawns, patrons and "useful idiots" that they create. By creating conflict among the other employees, they divert attention away from themselves, preferring to operate behind the scenes and above the storms that they create and manage. In the *confrontation* phase, psychopaths discard rivals and pawns (now patsies), frequently using techniques of character assassination, framing, and other tactics using so-called "facts" that deviate significantly from the truth. They get away with this by relying on the highly placed patrons with whom they are now cozy. And in the final, *ascension* phase, they ultimately unseat their patrons, taking for themselves the positions and prestige of those who once supported them.⁹ In the psychopath's game, people exist solely to be manipulated, and he pursues his aims at any cost, even if that means backstabbing everyone who supported him in his ascent.

Interest in corporate psychopaths has risen significantly in the last decade, largely due to the publicity of corporate frauds and scandals like Enron in 2001 and Madoff in 2009. Oddly, given the number of political scandals and their striking similarities to their corporate cousins, the idea that psychopaths infiltrate governments - with disastrous results - has yet to receive the attention it deserves. In fact, the political massacres that are occurring today - the dark aspects of human history that both fascinate and repel us - and the corruption that inevitably leads to them, have their roots in the presence of psychopaths in positions of power and influence.

Psychopaths can be found in prison for all sorts of violent and predatory crimes against individuals, including white-collar crime. University programs, academic societies, conferences, professional textbooks and manuals, all exist to get a handle on the problem and aid in prevention of these sorts of crimes. *But what about their role in crimes against humanity?* I haven't been able to find one academic paper examining the role of psychopathy in politics, whether in so-called democratic systems or overt dictatorships. Just as researchers at first doubted the ability of psychopaths to succeed in business, and the problem remained unexamined, the problem of psychopathy in politics remains steadfastly ignored. Political scientists refuse to look at psychopathy, and psychopathy experts refuse to look at politics. The results of such blindness are evident in history - and the *present* - for anyone to see. Genocides, dictatorships, state-sanctioned torture, "war without end", political assassinations, death squads, corruption, blackmail, spying on civilians, "state secrets", illegal "espionage", and on and on.

The situation is odd, considering the fact that experts have made it increasingly clear that psychopaths can occupy prominent positions in all professions: law, business, medicine, psychology, academia, military, entertainment, law enforcement, even - and perhaps especially - *politics*. As Babiak and Hare explain it, "Many [psychopaths] do manage to graduate from college or obtain professional credentials, but in most cases it is less through hard work and dedication than through cheating, getting others to do their work, and generally 'working the system.'"¹⁰



Bernard Madoff

The Madoff case offers a great many implications concerning not only the Wall Street in general, but the political scene as well. Interestingly, the list of his victims lacks any US banking names or other serious institutional investors, who normally require the type of information that Madoff's firm kept off limits. In fact, the business was suspected as a fraud for nearly a decade, with evidence of misconduct from as far back as the 70s. And yet serious investigations were held off until his sons turned him in. Many knew for years, but remained silent, allowing Madoff to continue the scheme that would ruin thousands. Conveniently, Madoff's niece was married to a senior compliance official at the Securities and Exchange Commission in 2005 and Madoff himself bragged about his close relationships with SEC regulators. Madoff's firm had close ties to Washington's lawmakers and regulators, with Madoff sitting on the board of the Securities Industry Association, and Madoff's brother sitting on the board of the Securities Industry and Financial Markets Association (SIFMA). In Creswell's and Thomas's piece for the *New York Times*, a close associate of Madoff's relates that "He once mentioned to me that he spent one-third of his time in

Washington in the early 1990s, late 1980s."

Not only was Madoff's fund a perfect money laundry for potential co-conspirators, he was protected by his close ties to the "organizational police" of the SEC and his domineering control over his employees. "Nobody left because they could never get another job that paid as well as this one. Some people, after his arrest, speculated that it was kind of like hush money; nobody asked any questions because the Madoffs were nice, protective, generous." ([The Daily Beast](#)) According to Babiak and Hare, "The level and intensity of psychopathic intimidation often keeps those who have been abused from coming forward."¹¹ By controlling underlings and wooing regulators, Madoff protected himself from exposure. It was only after his arrogance got the better of him that it all fell apart.

But Madoff is only a symptom of a systemic problem that affects humanity from the level of interpersonal relationships to heights of political control. The "garden-variety psychopath" maneuvers for control and power in a relatively limited sphere of influence: from his immediate family to the wider group of coworkers and chance victims. Criminally versatile psychopaths move from victim to victim, acquiring a tally of women emotionally and physically destroyed; elderly people bilked of their life savings; charities robbed of their donations; children tortured and mutilated. The corporate psychopath not only affects everyone in the company's staff; his misdeeds have the potential to ruin the lives of *thousands*. But the *political psychopath*, in a position of the utmost prestige, power, and influence, has the potential to rule - and *ruin* - empires. His influence reaches level of society and his decisions have the potential to affect billions.

Notes

1. Babiak (2007, 413).
2. Babiak & Hare (2006, xiii).
3. Babiak (2007, 419).
4. Babiak & Hare (2006, 12).
5. Babiak & Hare (2006, 37).
6. Babiak & Hare (2006, 38).
7. Babiak & Hare (2006, 51).
8. Babiak (2007, 417).
9. Babiak (2007, 418 - 20).
10. Babiak & Hare (2006, 47).
11. Babiak & Hare (2006, 52).