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House of Cards: Psychopathy in Politics

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Psychopathy is a severe personality disorder that can be defined by a lack of conscience, an egocentric and manipulative character, and charming social skills. Among the general community, images of serial killer Ted Bundy or movie character Hannibal Lector immediately come to mind. Interestingly, however, the recent TV show *House of Cards* appears to introduce a different kind of psychopathic personality to the general public through the character of Frank Underwood. This “successful” psychopathic leadership type has also been an important focus of attention among scholars of psychopathy in the last few years. This article uses an analysis of the psychopathic traits of Frank Underwood to present a new model of this psychopathic leader. Through this illustration, it is postulated that the psychopathic leader has a specific profile with a combination of psychopathic and nonpsychopathic features. Because this profile is different from the “traditional” conceptualization of psychopathy, it is more difficult to recognize such a politician as a psychopathic individual. The question of whether a leader with such a profile is successful or a risk will also be addressed.

Keywords: *House of Cards*, leadership, politics, psychopathy, successful psychopathy

In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness among researchers that most psychopathic individuals may not be institutionalized but actually live amongst us (Babiak & Hare, 2006). Specifically, the subject of psychopathic leadership is of a growing interest to scholars of psychopathy. This is an understandable broadening of focus, because psychopathic leadership and talented leadership can be easily mistaken for one another (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010). As those high in psychopathy are charming, sometimes charismatic, and lack a conscience, they can effectively manipulate and influence other people for their own goals. Because they can hide their lack of loyalty and responsibility effortlessly, they can come across as successful and fearless leaders who know how to represent any company, organization, or country (Babiak, 1995; Dutton, 2016; Lilienfeld et al., 2012). Furthermore, these psychopathic individuals enjoy the power and control they can display in a leadership position (Yildirim, 2016).

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In this article, the authors posit that psychopathy in leadership is hard to recognize, because there is a distinct psychopathic leader profile that is different from the profile of psychopathic individuals in prisons or institutions. Through an analysis of the fictional character Frank Underwood in the series *House of Cards* (Willimon et al., 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017), it will be illustrated and further discussed how to assess this distinct psychopathic profile in the context of politics. Furthermore, the authors will explore the accuracy of the term “successful psychopathy” in this setting, by combining earlier research data with the data from this specific dossier. This case study is part of the Ph.D. study of the first author in which a model of the specific profile of the psychopathic leader is the central focus.

PSYCHOPATHY

The Mask of Sanity

In the general community the term *psychopath* is often used loosely and the idea of what psychopathy entails doesn't usually correspond with reality (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). The image of “a scary and vicious murderer who looks creepy and crazy” could not be further away from the actual outward appearance of most psychopathic individuals. Although those high in psychopathy are callous, lack a conscience, and are unable to form intimate bonds with others, including their own family and children, they can appear to be very friendly, sympathetic, and charming in their behavior (Hare, 1993). What most people see when they encounter a psychopathic individual, especially in the beginning, is a normal, likeable, and friendly person, or as Hervey Cleckley (1941) described it, they see “the mask of sanity.” The outward normality is one of the prime reasons why this psychopathic personality is so intriguing.

Before addressing the subject of psychopathy in leadership positions, the authors will briefly outline the theoretical conceptualization and research of psychopathy that is especially relevant for the understanding of psychopathic leadership.

Research

In the field of clinical psychology, psychopathy is regarded as a personality disorder that is defined through a constellation of features (Glenn & Raine, 2014). Hare (1996), one of the leading scholars on the concept of psychopathy, defines psychopathy as “a socially devastating disorder that is defined by a constellation of affective, interpersonal and behavioral characteristics, including egocentricity; impulsivity; irresponsibility; shallow emotions; lack of empathy, guilt, or remorse; pathological lying; manipulateness; and the persistent violation of social norms and expectations” (p. 25).

Research on the subject of psychopathy was sparse until Hare used Hervey Cleckley's seminal work on psychopathy, *The Mask of Sanity* (1941), to develop what is today one of the most commonly used assessment tools to measure psychopathy. Although there are other instruments aimed at operationalizing the concept, the PCL-R (Psychopathy Checklist Revised) and its derivatives are considered the “gold standard” (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013). The PCL-R is

TABLE 1
Factor Structure Derived from Hare, 2003

<i>Psychopathy checklist revised (PCL-R)</i>	
Factor 1 (Affective and interpersonal traits)	
<i>Affective</i>	callousness, lack of empathy, remorse or guilt, shallow emotions, not accepting responsibility for one's actions
<i>Interpersonal</i>	glibness, superficial charm, grandiose sense of self, pathological lying, cunning/manipulative behavior
Factor 2 (Lifestyle and antisocial traits)	
<i>Lifestyle</i>	need for stimulation/proneness to boredom, parasitic lifestyle, lack of realistic long-term goals, impulsivity, irresponsibility
<i>Antisocial</i>	poor behavioral control, behavioral problems in early childhood, antisocial behavior in adulthood
Independent items	
promiscuous sexual behavior, many short-term marital relationships, revocation of conditional release	

based on a two-factor model that divides the main characteristics of psychopathy into two sections. Factor 1 measures the affective and interpersonal traits: the affective features consist of *callousness, lack of empathy, remorse or guilt, shallow emotions, and not accepting responsibility for one's actions*; the interpersonal traits are defined as *glibness, superficial charm, grandiose sense of self, pathological lying, and cunning and manipulative behavior*. Factor 2 measures aspects of an impulsive lifestyle and antisocial behavior, where the impulsive lifestyle facet is defined through *need for stimulation/proneness to boredom, parasitic lifestyle, lack of realistic long-term goals, impulsivity, and irresponsibility*, and the antisocial characteristics entail *poor behavioral control, behavioral problems in early childhood, and antisocial behavior in adulthood*. Three extra items are also scored that are not part of one of the four facets: *promiscuous sexual behavior, many short-term marital relationships, and revocation of conditional release* (Hare, 2003) (see Table 1). Because of the worldwide use of the PCL-R, the study of this psychological construct has been given a major boost, and new insights have been generated on the concept of psychopathy (Babiak, 2007).

Theoretical Conceptualization

Primary and Secondary Psychopathy

Since the beginning of the theoretical debate on psychopathy, there has been an ongoing discussion on whether this disorder is primarily caused by a biological predisposition or by traumatic events in childhood or by a combination of both (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). A categorization that is often made is the distinction between two types of psychopathy: primary psychopathy (or psychopathy), on the one hand, that originates mainly from biology, and secondary psychopathy (or sociopathy), on the other hand, that is considered to arise predominantly through destructive social experiences in childhood (Lykken, 1995; Yildirim, 2016).

The distinction between different subtypes within psychopathy has been identified in several studies (Lykken, 1995; Poythress et al., 2010; Skeem, Poythress, Edens, Lilienfeld, & Cale, 2003; Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). Although at first sight the subtypes are much alike in outward presentation, primary and secondary psychopathy differ in their etiology and also show other important dissimilarities. Yildirim and Derksen have recently outlined these two types through a review of the literature in a new way (2015). Before portraying these different types, it is important to designate that the primary and secondary expressions of psychopathy all reside on a continuum, rather than being separate categories, and that they comprise a highly heterogeneous group (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). In this article, the focus of attention will be on primary psychopathy and its two subtypes, because this type is most relevant for the conceptualization of psychopathic leadership.

Primary Psychopathy

Yildirim and Derksen (2013) postulate that primary psychopathy is caused primarily by a hyperstable serotonin system that is rooted in constitution. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter in the brain that influences the emotions, and it plays an important role in our attachment to other people; when the serotonin system works adequately, we feel happy when people are friendly towards us, and unhappy when we have a fight with someone. Yildirim and Derksen (2013) propose that in primary psychopathy the hyperstability of this system causes primary psychopathic individuals to be emotionally unaffected by others around them, or by circumstances that would influence most people. In this way, the emotional shallowness, the lack of empathy, shame, and guilt, and the fearlessness (hyporesponsiveness of the fight-flight-freeze response) in primary psychopathy may be understood.

Yildirim and Derksen (2015) differentiate two subtypes of primary psychopathy in their study: the disinhibited primary psychopathic personality and the controlled primary psychopathic personality. The distinction between the two types appears to be caused by dissimilarities in the hormonal system and genes. It is postulated that these divergences may be further exacerbated by differences in social background and educational levels (Yildirim & Derksen, 2013, 2015).

The Disinhibited Primary Psychopathic Type

The disinhibited primary psychopathic type has the same inborn deficiency of the serotonin system as the controlled type, but is not as goal-oriented and conscientious, and lacks the ambition to achieve absolute power and control. Personalities of this type are very impulsive and irresponsible, and are prone to impetuous risk-taking. These traits may be caused by a higher inborn sensitivity to rewards and lower levels of executive functioning (also referred to as Prefrontal Cortex functioning (PFC); these include competencies like: planning skills, holding attention, self-control and flexibility) compared to the controlled psychopathic type (Yildirim, 2016). The personality of this disinhibited type can be portrayed as “insouciant, but fairly happy and optimistic about life.” Most disinhibited primary psychopaths are rather unsuccessful socially and find it hard to hold any job, and are always in some kind of trouble. They oftentimes survive by parasitically depending on others, like family and friends (Cleckley, 1941; Lykken, 1995; Yildirim & Derksen, 2015).

The Controlled Primary Psychopathic Type

The controlled type can be regarded as the most successful of all the psychopathic types (of both primary and secondary psychopathy). This type combines inborn fearlessness and emotional shallowness with high levels of social competency and good (and sometimes even excellent) executive functioning. This combination of features contributes to a personality type that is well-controlled, goal-oriented, intelligent, and charming. This subtype can be highly successful in certain professions where many of these traits are desirable, such as that of CEO or politician (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Babiak et al., 2010; Board & Fritzon, 2005; Cleckley, 1941; Dutton, 2012; Gao & Raine, 2010; Lilienfeld et al., 2012; Lykken, 1995; Widom, 1978). These are also positions that this controlled subtype prefers in life, because such roles can fulfill a need for power and control over other people, which is also an important trait that defines the subtype (Yildirim & Derksen, 2015). The authors postulate that the psychopathic leader will phenotypically resemble this type the most.

Secondary Psychopathy

In contrast with primary psychopathy, secondary psychopathy is considered to be more strongly determined by destructive social experiences and less by genetic background. Secondary psychopathy is regarded as a trait-like coping strategy for regulating intense feelings of inferiority that have become intrinsic in a person's personality after severe abuse and neglect in childhood (Lykken, 1995; Yildirim, 2016). In contrast to the primary psychopathic individual, who is emotionally shallow and fearless, secondary psychopathic people often experience high levels of unconscious fear and conscious neuroticism (a negative and unstable emotional state of nervousness) and, as a result, are often more impulsive and hostile. They lack "the mask of sanity" and the charm and charisma that many primary psychopathic individuals display. When interacting with a person with such a personality, people automatically sense that they should be on guard and often feel intimidated by a constant sense of threat (Yildirim, 2016). Because the features of this secondary psychopathic personality do not fit the profile of a successful leader, this type will not be discussed further in this article.

Psychopathic Leaders

Researchers speculate that most of the psychopathic individuals in the general population are not overtly criminal and antisocial, and can be found in all walks of life, especially in leadership roles (Boddy, 2011; Boddy, Ladyshevsky, & Galvin, 2010; Hare, 1996). Hare was one of the first to state that those high in psychopathy are no rarity in business organizations, and specifically in the boardroom, and speculated that 4% of the leaders in for-profit and nonprofit organizations can be diagnosed with psychopathic personality disorder (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Babiak et al., 2010).

These hypotheses on psychopathy in leadership are feasible because the resemblance between the characteristics sought after in talented leaders and certain features of psychopathy is remarkable. Psychopathic traits, such as charm, charisma, and impressive communication skills, can be great assets in a leadership position. Furthermore, it is understandable that a

psychopathic person, who has no conscience and who lacks feelings of shame and guilt, can come across as a concise but fair leader who can make harsh business decisions when necessary (Babiak, 1995, 1996).

Are Psychopathic Leaders Successful?

Although those high in psychopathy own several traits that are attractive in a leader, the important question is whether their psychological profile is a good fit for a leadership position. Studies on psychopathy in prison settings show that the suffering this specific population has caused in society is often severe. Although only 20–30% of prisoners are diagnosed with psychopathy, this group is responsible for 50% of the crimes punishable with imprisonment. Moreover, the crimes that psychopathic individuals commit are among the most serious, such as murder and rape (Hare, 1993). These psychopathic individuals are often labeled as unsuccessful foremost because they are caught for their crimes, as opposed to those psychopathic personalities who are more successful in society. It appears that many individuals in this last group can make the most of the adaptive traits of the psychopathic personality disorder in leadership positions. Although this group also takes advantage of others, they do not (in most cases) get involved with the law and are oftentimes labeled successful psychopathic personalities by scholars (Glenn & Raine, 2014; Ishikawa, Raine, Lencz, Bihrlé, & Lacasse, 2001; Mullins-Sweatt, Glover, Derefinko, Miller, & Widiger, 2010; Widom, 1978).

Several researchers have postulated that this group may combine the psychopathic traits with good executive functioning, and for that reason they may be primarily successful in keeping up the right appearances (Glenn & Raine, 2014; Ishikawa et al., 2001; Kets de Vries, 2012; Widom, 1978). It is imaginable that in this way they can mask their immoral or even fraudulent behavior in a more competent way than their imprisoned counterparts. In the few studies conducted specifically on psychopathic leadership, findings are that these leaders only appear to be good and oftentimes excellent performers outwardly, but that they are in fact not successful in their achievements. The researched psychopathic leaders were not at all working towards the greater good of the organization (Babiak et al., 2010; Clarke, 2005; Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, & Babiak, 2014), made unethical decisions (Laurijssen, 2014; Stevens, Deuling, & Armenakis, 2012), and in some cases even had a negative impact on the organization's finances and its coworkers (Babiak et al., 2010; Boddy & Taplin, 2017; Boddy, Ladyshevsky, & Galvin, 2010; Mathieu & Babiak, 2015). Not all is bad, it seems: One study, by Spencer and Byrne (2016), did not report a correlation between employees' job satisfaction and their managers' level of psychopathic traits. However, it is important to keep in mind that psychopathic leaders are excellent at impression management, and it is often difficult to see the real face behind the mask (Babiak, 2007, 2016; Babiak & Hare, 2006; Cleckley, 1941).

The authors postulate that leaders with a certain amount of psychopathic traits will in the end be involved in some kind of unethical, antisocial, or unlawful behavior. The combination of the negative psychopathic traits in this psychological profile, such as the egocentric nature, loyalty only to oneself, lack of conscience and empathy, and the desire to have control over other people, causes these types of immoral behavior. These hazards are also posited by Babiak and Hare (2006); they hypothesize that leaders with psychopathic traits will in the end be involved in some form of white-collar crime, such as corruption or fraud. Moreover, Cooke and Michie (2001) postulate that whether or not antisocial and criminal behavior is explicitly

included as a behavioral trait (as it is in the PCL-R), it will eventually be an outcome of the psychopathic behavioral profile.

Psychopathic Traits and White-Collar Crime

Studies conducted on the subject of white-collar crime confirm the hypotheses on some of the negative consequences of the presence in organizations of leaders with a high score on the psychopathic profile (Bucy, Formby, Raspanti, & Rooney, 2008; Kolthoff, 2016; Lingnau, Fuchs, & Dehne-Niemann, 2017). These studies also focused on the personalities of the perpetrators of white-collar misconduct and found that leaders with a narcissistic personality (i.e., a personality disorder mainly characterized by a grandiose sense of self and a constant need for admiration (DSM-IV-TR/5, American Psychiatric Association, 2000, 2013) and a psychopathic personality are at risk for being involved in this type of criminal activity (Bucy et al., 2008; Kolthoff, 2016; Lingnau et al., 2017). Data from the first study indicate that entrepreneurs and leaders who were guilty of white-collar crime exhibited several personality characteristics that are highly similar to the traits of the psychopathic and the narcissistic personality—they were extremely ambitious, obsessed with increasing power and control, and demanded admiration only because they felt they deserved it. In that light, they were also convinced that they were entitled to receive special privileges and additional benefits. The last two aspects are more typical for a specific type of narcissism: the malignant narcissistic personality (Vaknin & Rangelovska, 2001). This personality overlaps with the psychopathic personality on several features, foremost with the primary type of psychopathy (Yildirim, 2016). Ray (2007) points out that traits like egocentrism, exploitative behavior, and manipulative and deceptive behavior are central in the psychological make-up of the white-collar criminal. These characteristics are also typical of the psychopathic personality (Babiak & Hare, 2006). Another striking similarity the white-collar criminal and the psychopathic personality share is that they both surround themselves with people they dominate and whom they seduce into assisting them to commit their crimes (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Bucy et al., 2008; Perri, 2011).

There are a number of possible explanations why psychopathic individuals might feel attracted to white-collar crime and why they have a special talent for it. The opportunity perspective, as described by Benson and Simpson (2015), fits the psychopathic leader like a glove. Such leaders have a predatory eye that enables them to detect convenient opportunities for engaging in a variety of fraudulent practices or other white-collar crime activities. Furthermore, in such crimes, their infamous charm and manipulative behavior can be very beneficial. It is no effort for them to bedazzle people or any organization out of their money, especially because they are not hindered by feelings of loyalty, guilt, or shame (Babiak & Hare, 2006). Another attractive facet of white-collar crime is that the chances of getting caught are relatively small, and the penalties in fraud and corruption cases are often minimal (Hare, 1993).

Psychopathy in Politics

A further broadening of focus of the research on psychopathy in leadership is the psychopathic personality in politics (Dutton, 2016; Lilienfeld et al., 2012). It is not hard to imagine that psychopathic traits could be especially profitable in political leadership. The outwardly

charming and sometimes charismatic self-presentation combined with manipulation skills and callousness are features that can help an individual to flourish in a political leadership position. Before outlining the recent research on this subject, the concept of psychopathic leadership in politics will be introduced through the portrayal of the specific psychopathic traits in the character of Frank Underwood in the popular Netflix series *House of Cards* (Willimon et al., 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). Through this series, it is apparent that the possible existence of psychopathic leadership has become a novel topic not only for researchers of psychopathy but also among the general public.

A Fictional Portrait of Psychopathy in Politics in House of Cards

House of Cards is an American series on American politics that is situated in present-day Washington, D.C., and features the life of a Democrat in Congress named Frank Underwood (played by Kevin Spacey) (Willimon et al., 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). It describes his political ambition eventually to become president of the United States and illuminates from the inside out through which endeavors he achieves this goal. On this path, he is strongly supported by his wife, Claire, but he benefits especially from his manipulative and ruthless dealing with other people. The persona of Frank Underwood is an example of what successful psychopathy in politics may look like. The specific features and behavior of this fictional politician are described in the following section in more detail.

In the series, the character of Frank Underwood is portrayed as a very successful politician, with a harsh and callous personality, who is obsessed with power and control. Nevertheless, he is outwardly utterly charming and charismatic and knows how to manipulate other people brilliantly. In order to fulfill his desire to control other people, he uses all kinds of different skills, comprising charm, humiliation of others, ruthless lying, intimidation, gradually intensifying verbal attacks, feigning empathy and concern, and manipulative communication skills. It is clear that to him, other people only serve one purpose—they are tools through which he can achieve his own goals. The combination of these behavioral traits, together with his ability for ingenious planning and his outstanding foresight, help him in the end to gain the highest position in American politics: the office of the presidency. Frank Underwood's emotional life appears to be stable but shallow, and it seems that he only experiences real emotions when he is angry because he doesn't get his way, or is happy when he does. He is very good at play-acting the whole range of emotions, which he can easily switch on and off and which are fine-tuned to what is most effective in the given situation (Willimon et al., 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017).

The main question that arises when viewing the callous and conscienceless behavior of this feigning politician is: Is the character of Frank Underwood in *House of Cards* a psychopathic personality? Based on the different psychopathic features outlined in the previous section of this article, Frank Underwood does not fit the profile of the psychopathic personality as it is traditionally portrayed through the features of the PCL-R (Hare, 2003): he is not impulsive in his behavior, appears to have a lot of self-control, and is extremely goal-oriented and calculating. This is in contrast with the institutionalized psychopathic person, who scores high on impulsiveness, engages in a parasitic lifestyle, shows poor behavioral control, and lacks any vision of realistic long-term goals or planfulness (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Hare, 1993). The authors will postulate and show, however, that Frank Underwood does fit the model of the psychopathic leader that will be presented in the next section. The most important question, of course, is: Is it possible that

individuals with a psychopathic profile are active in places of political power in real life? This question will be addressed after the presentation of the model of the psychopathic leader in the section in which the research on psychopathy in real-life politics is discussed.

Profile of the Psychopathic Leader: A Model

In response to the scarcity of information on psychopathic leadership, scholars postulate that new data are needed on this particular group of individuals who may be hazardous in their leadership behavior (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Babiak et al., 2010). To gain new knowledge in an accurate way, it is important to define psychopathic leadership correctly. In several studies, it is hypothesized that the profile of psychopathic leaders in high positions may be significantly different from the psychopathic individuals in prison (Bucy et al., 2008; Gao & Raine, 2010; Gustafson & Ritzer, 1995; Hall & Benning 2006; Ishikawa et al., 2001; Lilienfeld et al., 2012; Perri, 2011; Poythress et al., 2010; Ray, 2007; Skeem et al., 2003; Widom, 1978). In this section, a model of the psychopathic leader will be presented, in which the unique set of traits of this specific profile will be outlined. This model is constructed through two pathways. The first route is to determine which of the different psychopathic types outlined in the first section (“Psychopathy”) fits best the profile of the psychopathic leader as such individuals are portrayed through research and in the literature. The second route is to analyze relevant data on white-collar crimes committed by people with a psychopathic profile as outlined in the second section (“Psychopathic leaders”), combined with data on the differences between the personality profiles of blue-collar criminals and white-collar criminals.

The Controlled Primary Psychopathic Personality

As outlined earlier in this article, the authors posit that the psychopathic leader can be regarded as a successful psychopathic personality. Glenn and Raine state that this type may have more of the adaptive traits of psychopathy and define the type as “high-functioning manifestations of noncriminal psychopathy” (2014, p. 158). When comparing this definition with the psychopathic types of Yildirim and Derksen’s review study (2015), the psychopathic leader most resembles the controlled primary psychopathic type.

White-Collar and Blue-Collar Criminals and Psychopathic Traits

This last postulation is further confirmed by data from a study by Ray (2007), who found some remarkable dissimilarities between white-collar and blue-collar criminals. The first group was less impulsive, had more self-control, and was more self-reflective about their own behavior than the second group. Data found by Blickle, Schlegel, Fassbender, and Klein (2006) confirm Ray’s readings; convicted white-collar criminals showed high scores on conscientiousness. It appears that especially the psychopathic type of white-collar criminals score high on conscientiousness; they are better at controlling their impulses and plan their actions in advance. Data suggest that the psychopathic leader type may not be as impulsive as the overtly criminal

psychopathic personality, or that this type is just better at handling his impulsivity by means of a more adequate executive functioning system (Gao & Raine, 2010; Ishikawa et al., 2001).

A Model of the Psychopathic Leader

On grounds of the accounts of the different psychopathic types, the controlled primary psychopathic type can be portrayed as charming, charismatic, and astute, and as someone who can eloquently present himself (or herself) with profound social skills and social intelligence. Not hindered by feelings of shame, guilt, or empathy, one can visualize such a person employing fierce business decisions without losing one night’s sleep over it. Such a leader is goal-oriented and feels content when in a position of power and control. It is not hard to envision that this controlled primary type is drawn to high-profile positions and can present the image of the talented leader perfectly. Data from studies regarding white-collar crime and the psychopathic personality, as well as data on the differences between the personality traits of white-collar and blue-collar criminals, have confirmed this conceptualization further (Blickle et al., 2006; Ray, 2007).

The profile of the psychopathic leader can therefore be described through three defining aspects (Figure 1). The first crucial asset, characteristic of all primary psychopathic individuals, is their *fearlessness* (hypo-responsiveness of the fight-flight-freeze response). The second important aspect, distinguishing the controlled subtype from the disinhibited type of primary psychopathy, is high levels of executive functioning, which is especially determined through *high self-control* (as opposed to the high impulsiveness of the “classic” psychopathic profile). The third facet is a combination of different features that are represented through *Factor 1 of the PCL-R*. The features represented by Factor 1 (affective and interpersonal traits) of the PCL-R are: *callousness, lack of empathy, remorse, or guilt, shallow emotions, and not accepting responsibility for one’s actions, glibness, superficial charm, grandiose sense of self, pathological lying, and cunning and manipulative behavior* (Hare, 2003). This facet is included because these features together define the personality traits that are core to the psychopathic profile, without adding overt criminal and antisocial behavior (Factor 2 of the PCL-R). Most scholars postulate that Factor 1 of the PCL-R (affective and interpersonal traits) best represents primary psychopathy, and that Factor 2 (lifestyle and antisocial traits) overlaps more with secondary

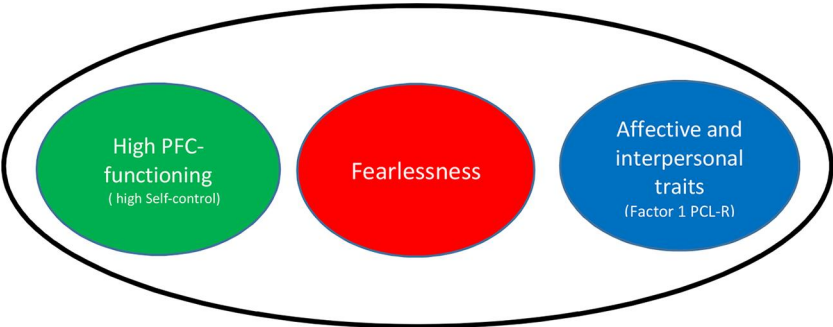


FIGURE 1 The model of the psychopathic leader.

psychopathy (Skeem et al., 2003). Especially the aspects of high level of executive functioning and specifically the high level of self-control of this type makes this psychopathic leader even harder to recognize than the psychopathic personality with the “classic” profile of higher levels of outward impulsivity and antisociality.

With this specific constellation of traits, this leadership type is expected to be very competent in keeping up the right appearances in whatever role has to be played (whether that of a CEO or of a politician).

Frank Underwood Fits the Profile of the Psychopathic Leader

In this section, the authors propose that the different features and behavior of the character of Frank Underwood in the Netflix series *House of Cards* (Willimon et al., 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017) fit the profile of the psychopathic leader as portrayed in the model presented above. The first remarkable observation when screening the behavior of the character of Frank Underwood throughout the series is his lack of physiological response to extreme situations that would leave most people shaken. When Frank Underwood is observed after a severe conflict or fight, he shows no sign of being upset or stressed. This behavior, combined with the sudden mood shifting when he wants to get his way and his unaffected posture when telling lies or admitting to lies, indicates that there could be a hyporesponsivity of the fight-flight-freeze response (*fearlessness*: the first facet in the model). The most profound example of the hyporesponsivity of the fight-flight-freeze response in the character of Frank Underwood is evident in the first episode of the second season of the series, when he kills a journalist with whom he has an affair. Underwood is totally calm, before, during, and after the act (Willimon et al., 2014).

The conduct of gradually increasing intensity in gaze, posture, and tone when verbally attacking another person, or instrumentally shifting his mood to achieve emotional resonance in others to have greater control over their behavior, combined with his goal-oriented behavior, indicate that he may also score high on the aspect of executive functioning and specifically on the facet of *self-control* (the second facet in the model). All these behavioral traits combined can be observed in the tenth episode of the fourth season of the series when Frank Underwood threatens Secretary of State Catherine Durant to stay in office because he needs her as an important ally to achieve his goals. In this scene, he admits to her that he has killed two people, which leaves her in shock, then laughs it off and finally threatens that she should do what he wants, adding he will never forget it if she doesn't. Durant is in total shock and finally complies with his demands (Willimon et al., 2016). The high levels of executive functioning and self-control in the behavior of Frank Underwood are also apparent in the fourth episode of the fifth season, when Frank Underwood is at risk of losing the presidential election to the Republican candidate Will Conway, but “keeps his cool” and fabricates and executes a plot to keep the public from voting in two states, which results in the suspension of the election (Willimon et al., 2017).

Finally, the third aspect in the model of the psychopathic leader—the features of *Factor 1 of the PCL-R* (affective and interpersonal traits)—are observable in Frank Underwood's behavior in every episode in a profound manner.

The callousness, the shallow emotions, and the lack of empathy in his personality are particularly clear in the opening scene of the series, where it is shown how he kills a dog with his bare hands (Willimon et al., 2013). Throughout this act he is rational, explains himself in front of the camera, and is not at all shaken; it is simply a job that has to be done. The trait

of not accepting responsibility for one's actions is apparent whenever Frank Underwood is accused of bad political decision-making or any faulty behavior. For him these events are errors only in the eyes of others. Dealing with such "mistakes" is not to take responsibility for them but as inconveniences that should be swept under the rug or blamed on others. In the fifth episode of the first season, Representative Peter Russo validly blames Frank Underwood for the collapse of the shipyard Russo tried to save. Underwood, however, turns the blame on Russo, convincing him that he (Underwood) is the only one who still believes in him and that he wants Russo to run for Governor of Pennsylvania. Russo accepts the challenge and doesn't mention the shipyard to Underwood again (Willimon et al., 2013).

Glibness and superficial charm define the character of Frank Underwood; he is a master at winning people over by feigning empathy and friendliness or doing personal favors in order to have control over them. One of his best communication skills to control other people is his use of powerful metaphors all throughout the series; he impresses as a strong and intelligent man. In the sixth episode of the fifth season, Underwood rehires his bodyguard Edward Meechum and tells him he should be like a rock, a rock absorbs nothing, says nothing, and cannot be broken. Meechum is extremely loyal to Underwood after this, and in the end loses his own life to protect his (Willimon et al., 2013, 2016).

The pathological lying and the cunning and manipulative behavior in the character of Frank Underwood are evident throughout all seasons of the series; his constant lying to everybody around him (including his wife) appears to be so natural as if he himself believes what he is saying. There is no sense of shame, guilt, or remorse; the web of lies is just a means to an end for Frank Underwood. A good example of this behavior is when Underwood drives a wedge between President Walker and billionaire Raymond Tusk by lying to both of them. Driving these two people apart enlarges Underwood's power over President Walker (Willimon et al., 2014).

The last feature of Factor 1 of the PCL-R, grandiose sense of self, is a trait that characterizes the protagonist of this show. From the first series on, it is evident to Frank Underwood that he should be the president of the United States and he is very convinced he will reach this goal (Willimon et al., 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017).

Based on the analysis discussed in this section, the personality profile of the character of Frank Underwood fits the model of the psychopathic leader.

Psychopathic Traits in Politicians: American Presidents

The next question is whether a psychopathic politician as outlined in the section above could exist in real life.

A study by Lilienfeld and colleagues (2012) on psychopathic traits in 42 U.S. presidents (up to but not including President Obama) demonstrated that psychopathic traits are also present in the personality profiles of political leaders in real life in the United States. This study on political leadership assessed the psychopathic traits of these 42 American presidents and studied which specific features of psychopathy were part of the various presidents' psychological profiles. Furthermore, the performance of each of these presidents was evaluated. In this case, another well-validated psychopathy scale was employed that was specifically constructed to assess psychopathic features in the general public: the PPI-R (Psychopathic Personality Inventory Revised). The first higher-order scale of the PPI-R, Fearless Dominance (represented by the subscales *social potency*, *stress immunity*, and *fearlessness*), correlated

positively with performance, such as starting new projects and being regarded as a world leader. The second higher-order scale, Impulsive Antisociality (represented by the subscales *carefree nonplanfulness*, *impulsive nonconformity*, *Machiavellian egocentricity*, *blame externalization*, and *related psychopathic traits*), was positively correlated with objectives for negative job performance, such as negative character, inducing congressional impeachment resolutions, or not correcting unethical behavior in their staff. One may conclude that some psychopathic traits, such as a lack of nervousness and high dominance in interpersonal relationships (a high score on the scale Fearless Dominance), may be a positive asset in leadership positions. A leader with a full psychopathic profile including self-centeredness and impulsivity (high on both Fearless Dominance and Impulsive Antisociality) is not desirable in such a powerful and responsible position (Lilienfeld et al., 2012).

Why Psychopathic Politicians are a Risk

As outlined above, Lilienfeld et al.'s study (2012) on psychopathic traits in politicians found that the performance of the studied American presidents was related to the level of psychopathic traits on the two different scales of the PPI-R. Another study on the benefits and risks of certain psychopathic traits in leadership positions was conducted by Dutton (2016). He invited historians who are experts on different (in)famous world leaders, such as Saddam Hussein, Adolf Hitler, and Jesus Christ, to assess these leaders on the different scales of the PPI-R. The first scale of Fearless Dominance, was found to be related to successful leadership in Lilienfeld et al.'s study, and the second scale of Self-Centered Impulsivity (in the short version of the PPI-R this is the scale of Self-Centered Impulsivity) was positively correlated with negative performance, as was outlined above (2012). The third scale of the PPI-R, Coldheartedness, was added in the analyses of Dutton's study and is defined through the following traits: *lack of emotions and guilt*, and *no regard for other people's feelings*. The scores of the aforementioned leaders show the same correlations as the Lilienfeld et al. study of 2012: Jesus Christ scored high on Fearless Dominance but low on Self-Centered Impulsivity and Coldheartedness. Saddam Hussein and Adolf Hitler scored high on every one of the three scales (the full psychopathic profile). Whether certain psychopathic traits are an asset in a political leadership position or a risk may depend on the levels of the scores on the different psychopathic traits. The traits of fearlessness, social influence, self-control, and stress immunity, too, appear to be beneficial in political positions, especially in high-power political positions. However, when too many of the negative psychopathic traits, such as self-centeredness, impulsivity, lack of empathy, and guilt, are also part of the profile of a political leader (this would be the full psychopathic profile according to the PPI-R), the leader may be a risk for ineffective (and also unethical) leadership (Dutton, 2016). It is important to note that in the studies described in the last two sections, these public and historical figures were not personally examined by the scholars.

CONCLUSION

Psychopathic leadership is considered an expression of successful psychopathy among researchers of the psychopathic personality (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Dutton, 2012; Hall &

Benning, 2006; Lilienfeld et al., 2012). Although psychopathy is not easily recognized in any person, as Cleckley's description of the disorder, "the mask of sanity," so accurately expresses (1941), in leadership and especially in political leadership this is even more challenging. Particularly the apparent social success of these psychopathic politicians can blind even the most perceptive observer to the unethical behavior, the unscrupulous decision-making, and the callousness behind the mask. These politicians are successful in society because they are very good at controlling themselves in crucial situations (high self-control), planning ahead thoroughly (strategic planning of their careers), and because they are especially charming in their manipulateness. In this article, it is postulated that their psychological profile is significantly distinct from the profile of the "classic" criminal psychopath in prison, where the impulsiveness (in the disinhibited primary type and the secondary type), and in some cases the underlying feelings of inferiority (in the secondary type of psychopathy), may result in overt criminal behavior. The authors illustrated this distinct profile by assessing the elements from this new model in the psychological profile of the character of Frank Underwood in the series *House of Cards*. Some research indicates that psychopathic traits are also apparent in real-life politicians (Dutton, 2012; Lilienfeld et al., 2012).

For future research, it is important to gather further data in organizations and in politics on the specific traits of the psychopathic leader. The correlation between psychopathic traits and white-collar crime should also be a focus of attention in such studies. In the Ph.D. study of which this article is an outcome, the next step will be to collect data through the use of this new model of the psychopathic leader to assess the psychological profiles of real-life politicians and other leaders. This process has been started and the authors expect to publish results in the near future.

The article closes with a debate on whether psychopathic persons can be successful in (political) leadership. The data from several studies, combined with postulations by different scholars about this topic, indicate that unethical and antisocial behavior will be a logical outcome of the psychopathic nature (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Cooke & Michie, 2001; Stevens et al., 2012). This leads to somber expectations on the achievements of such (political) leaders, especially when the morality of the behavior is considered. Laurijssen's study (2014) and the study of Stevens et al. (2012) confirm the risk for integrity issues for leaders with a psychopathic profile. These studies indicated that leaders who score high on psychopathic traits show more unethical decision-making.

The authors conclude by stating that in a democratic government, politicians with high levels of integrity and moral values are imperative, and without these traits, a public representative cannot be regarded as a successful political leader. As politicians who score high on levels of the psychopathic profile lack such traits, they cannot be defined as successful leaders, because a lack of integrity in a political leader undermines our democratic system.

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