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Antisocial Behavior

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Synonyms

[Dysfunctional](#); [Maladaptive](#); [Undesirable](#)

Definition

Antisocial behavior is a description for all behaviors, attitudes, and personality traits that people engage in that appear to be dysfunctional, in that they often have negative interpersonal and societal outcomes.

Introduction

Antisocial personality traits like psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism are correlated with sexual coercion (Figueredo et al. 2015), criminality (Hare 1985), and deception (Azizli et al. 2016). Antisocial behavior can be presented alone or in the context of antisocial personality disorder (see Hashmani 2019a). Unsurprisingly, traits, like these, and the behaviors that may manifest from

them have led professionals to strive to reduce these traits and their behaviors to relatively little avail. It may be that attempts to reduce antisocial behaviors and traits have generally failed because efforts to do so are based on a faulty premise. This premise is the often implicit, but dominant, cultural and academic epistemology known as the standard social science model. This model is built on philosophical “insights” from Rousseau who considered people to be “noble savages” corrupted by society and can be seen in modern clinical and social psychology in the form of “environmental determinism.” Environmental determinism is a philosophical position that places contextual, cultural, and circumstantial factors as the primary and immediate cause of behaviors and values (including antisocial ones) and attempts to dismiss or downplay the role of genetics, biology, or physiology in accounting for human (but generally not nonhuman animal) behavior. Much of this work in psychology and the social sciences has been fueled by explicit and implicit blank slate thinking, which has been portrayed as flawed (Pinker 2003). In essence, when people who adopt this framework are asked why there is “evil” in the world, they reply: because of conditioning, bad childhood experiences, or modeling “bad” behavior.

Over the last 30 years, a challenge has been brought to this type of thinking in the form of evolutionary psychology (Confer et al. 2010), referred to as an interactionist paradigm (Crawford and Anderson 1989). That is, evolved

and genetically rooted psychological adaptations interact with contextual factors to drive behaviors (i.e., solutions) that over evolutionary time have resulted in positive fitness benefits on average (populations evolve, not individuals, and in each generation variation is born. Therefore, the presence of individual differences in antisocial behavior does not challenge this model in a serious way.). These solutions may not fit modern concepts of “good” or “evil” as they can come at the cost of the group, which is implicitly treated as more important than the individual (Jonason et al. 2012). From this perspective, “bad” behavior or “evil” (There is an implicit rejection of religious notions of the origins of evil.) – antisocial behavior – might be considered pseudo-pathologies (Crawford and Anderson 1989) whereby they benefit the individual at the cost of the group. For example, deception, a common antisocial trait, often involves an individual engaging in a selfish act, without the concern of another’s well-being (Gneezy 2005). Although socially frowned upon, agentic pursuits and their motivations are of utmost importance to evolutionary researchers. In essence, this model makes one question what is meant by “evil” and suggests defining evil as anything that does not fit our group’s interest, even when such actions might serve the individual’s adaptive or social goals.

Evolutionary Models of Antisocial Behavior

This entry aims to detail modern thinking on evolutionary models of antisocial behavior. The authors will review how life history theory redresses the (relative) theoretical vacuum in classic and most modern research on antisocial behavior and traits. We will also attempt to review research on antisocial behavior (broadly construed) and highlight that while such behaviors might have undesirable consequences, they also have potentially “positive” outcomes as well.

A characteristic limitation of work on antisocial behavior has been its rather atheoretical, descriptive nature. Only recently have authors made attempts to understand antisocial traits and

behaviors using a strong theoretical framework in the shape of life history theory (see Del Giudice 2014). This theory – taken from evolutionary biology – holds that organisms make trade-offs between efforts dedicated to mating and survival. The idea is that life is a zero-sum game whereby any energetic resources dedicated toward one task (e.g., mate searching) cannot be reallocated to other tasks (e.g., finding food). Researchers using a life history paradigm to understand antisocial traits and behaviors suggest that what is really reflected in these traits is trade-offs for short-term, mating (i.e., *r*-selected) decisions at the cost of long-term, survival (i.e., *K*-selected). This can explain some of the apparent illogical behaviors associated with antisociality. For instance, when presented with a smaller sum of money today or a larger sum of money in 1 year, those high on antisocial traits choose the former over the latter (Jonason et al. 2010). From a life history perspective, it is possible that people high on these traits have cognitive biases that nudge them to take smaller, immediate outcomes, because they are trading off “mating” needs against “survival” needs.

Informed by life history theory, there are a number of potential reasons for the emergence of apparently antisocial traits and behaviors. For instance, life history theorists (Frankenhuis and Del Giudice 2012) have identified three key dimensions to modulate how organisms allocate their resources: *resource availability*, *extrinsic mortality-morbidity*, and *unpredictability*. Higher mortality-morbidity and unpredictability shift organisms toward *fast* life history strategies (e.g., a focus on reproduction, reduced investment in long-term bonding, and increased investment in short-term mating), which thereby promote risk taking, aggression, and other forms of antisocial behavior. Additionally, from an evolutionary perspective, natural selection favors mechanisms that produce risk taking when the fitness benefits outweigh the costs, even if these may be deemed socially unacceptable. Though these behavioral strategies may have unfavorable consequences to a subset of individuals, natural selection will still favor the traits if they increase fitness adaptability on average. Additionally, developmental

mismatch contributes to the development of antisocial behaviors. An evolutionary developmental mismatch approach (rather than a developmental psychopathology model) suggests that children's negative stressors increase the adaptive fit between organisms and their environment. This perspective suggests that environmental mismatch in either direction (i.e., moving from a supportive to harsh environment and vice versa) evokes fitness costs (Cameron et al. 2005). More specifically, individuals who develop in harsh environments may on average achieve lower fitness than individuals in flourishing environments; nonetheless the former group should be better adapted to environmental harshness than the latter group (Frankenhuis and Del Giudice 2012). These aforementioned reasons are based on the premise that heritable tendencies interact with environmental contingencies in an adaptive heuristic framework to produce some output or response that attempts to maximize one's fitness given contextual limitations (Crawford and Anderson 1989).

Take, for instance, the commonly used distinction of "externalizing" and "internalizing" disorders (Del Giudice 2014). Externalizing disorders (e.g., oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, and antisocial disorder) may represent *fast* life history trade-offs that result in impulsiveness, aggressiveness, and antisocial behaviors (Krueger et al. 2002). Moreover, these fast life strategies are correlated with numerous pathological antisocial traits, such as negative affectivity, detachment, antagonism, and psychoticism (Jonason et al. 2017). Such traits may stem from harsh and unpredictable environments in childhood (Clark 2005). Conversely, slow life history strategies entail restricted sociosexuality, planning, responsibility, and altruism, with a tendency toward long-term romantic relationships. Rather than the externalizing spectrum, slow spectrum disorders often consist of obsessive-compulsive pathological traits (i.e., dysfunctional protective responses and hypersensitivity; Del Giudice 2014), anorexia nervosa, and depression (e.g., chronic guilt and hyperactive altruistic concerns; O'Connor et al. 2002).

The life history model also provides a priori reasons for sex differences in these types of behaviors. Ancestral men and women faced asymmetrical costs and benefits for how they solved adaptive problems. The benefits (e.g., more offspring) are greater for men who engage in exploitive social/sexual behavior (Jonason et al. 2009), whereas women who engaged in such behavior pay for reproductive costs (Jonason and Lavertu 2017). Unsurprisingly, men (compared to women) are more competitive, tend to seek dominance over others, and use physical aggression (Archer 2009), whereas women tend to be better characterized by antisocial behavior that acts to upregulate women's protective defenses (McGuire and Troisi 1998), as seen in obsessive-compulsive disorders, eating disorders, and depression (Del Giudice 2014).

The most fundamental implication of this model for antisocial traits is that even the most abhorrent behaviors can have adaptive benefits and adaptive costs (see Table 1). For instance, interpersonal aggression (e.g., Jones and Neria 2015) may have costs to both the victim (e.g., potential physical harm) and the perpetrator (e.g., punishment and possible jail time) but can result in increased reproductive fitness by protecting one's fitness interdependence partners and improving survival with the accrual of resources (Archer 2009). On the other hand, coalitionary aggression in chimpanzees can lead to numerous benefits to one's fitness including increased social bond strength, health, and number of offspring (Gilby et al. 2013). Moreover, psychopathy (see Table 1) can bring about numerous benefits, such as a reduction of *primary emotions* (e.g., guilt, shame, remorse), which may be emotionally exhausting and disabling, while also facilitating crime through depersonalizing the victim (Hashmani 2019b).

While it is easy to fixate on the costs, a more balanced model of antisocial traits and behaviors must include the benefits as well. Such a full understanding – while often unpalatable – has implications for theory and treatment. Understanding the function of the behavior and its correlated traits should give better insight to "fixing" or reducing such tendencies in societies/

Antisocial Behavior, Table 1 A summary of ten common antisocial behaviors and their hypothetical adaptive costs and benefits

	Costs	Benefits
1. Aggression	Possibility of death from injury. Possibility of incarceration leads to being relinquished from society and, thus, reproductive opportunities	Increases attention from the opposite sex – seen as “competent.” Means of gaining power and having increased access to resources and potential mates
2. Bullying	Lack of mutual relationships formed – loss of protection/support if in danger or need of resources	Rising to the top of social hierarchies by gaining popularity. Reduces competition from others for desired resources. Develops physical self-protection from one’s “tough” appearance
3. Casual/exploitive sex	Increased risk of disease. Passing on poor/unwanted genes	Increased reproductive outlets. More offspring
4. Deception	If discovered as a liar, one may be socially shunned and ostracized by society	Self-deception: we deceive ourselves to protect against attacks to our happiness and well-being. Deceiving others is a means to achieving one’s goals, at the expense of others’ success
5. Domestic violence	Possible repercussions or attacks by other members of society. Possible physical injury from victim	Means of keeping one’s reproductive partner, rather than spending resources looking for another mate
6. Future discounting/impulsivity	Long-term needs and desires possibly ignored. May have chosen a smaller reward, rather than waiting for a larger reward (i.e., less gain if ignoring future discounting)	Short-term/immediate gains. If limited quantities of resources (e.g., scarce food), the impulsive individual will obtain the reward, while others fail
7. Psychopathy	Lacks ability to create close connections with others – can be viewed as an outcast by society. Can scare off potential mates	Lack of “normal” emotions (guilt and shame) can assist in selfish advantage. For example, these emotions can be disabling and mentally exhausting. Lack of empathy depersonalizes the victim and facilitates crime
8. Prejudice/racism	Limits reproductive outlets to one’s own race/social group. Limited options lead to less success and less possibilities to spread genes	In social living, one must respond functionally to the affordances of others. In order to obtain cooperative groups, one must recognize outsiders with potential threats
9. Substance use	Increased risk of death by substance abuse. Can lead to addiction, and, thus, one must allocate financial resources for more substances	Substances lower one’s inhibitions and fears. Can lower and mask physical or emotional pain
10. Theft	Possible risk of attack by victim. Risk of incarceration	Increased accumulation of resources and assets

individuals. For instance, although antisocial behavior can lead to negative consequences such as social rejection and criminality, there are also adaptive qualities that provide clarity on why these behaviors still persist in today’s society. For example, engaging in physical fights carries the potential to cause harm and the possibility of death; however, men who do not participate in fights increase the likelihood of being shunned from reproduction and, therefore, decrease

reproductive success (Del Giudice 2014). Alternatively, by exploiting and deceiving others in order to obtain a high social status, one can increase their own reproductive success, thereby providing evidence for these adaptive yet socially unwanted traits. These traits, in the eyes of society and clinicians, are deemed as dysfunctional and abnormal, yet from an evolutionary standpoint, they provide a way of maximizing reproductive success (Brüne 2014).

Conclusion

This entry approached the topic of antisocial behavior from an evolutionary perspective in order to accentuate the adaptiveness of these socially undesirable traits. We briefly discussed life history theory, where organisms must allocate their time to either mating or survival, and how these actions correlate with fast and slow life strategies. While highlighting numerous insights provided by an evolutionary approach (e.g., pseudopathology, externalizing disorders, and heritability), we discussed the adaptive costs and benefits of antisocial traits. The hope of this entry is to facilitate awareness to evolutionary psychologists in exploring the adaptive benefits of antisocial traits while also facilitating a framework for clinicians to understand the ancestral sex differences when treating men and women.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Personality Disorders](#)
- ▶ [Psychopathy \(Mealey\)](#)

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