

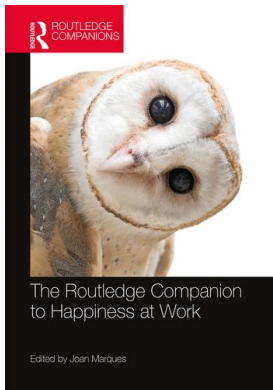
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## The Routledge Companion to Happiness at Work

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### Happiness and Adaptive Psychopathic Traits in the Workplace

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# HAPPINESS AND ADAPTIVE PSYCHOPATHIC TRAITS IN THE WORKPLACE

*Guillaume Durand*

## Introduction

Happiness in the workplace is important. When an organization's employees are happy, both the employees and the organization benefit. Many studies on happiness in the workplace have been done over the recent decades, and they all point to the benefits of workplace happiness (Wesarat, Sharif, & Majid, 2015). But what, exactly, does the term "happiness" mean? Although it is sometimes used in a wide sense to include any positive emotions, most scholars use it more narrowly to mean an individual's subjective well-being or life satisfaction (Angner, Hullett, & Allison, 2011; Wesarat et al., 2015). Hence, a happy individual is defined as a person who frequently experiences a wide range of positive emotions such as joy, satisfaction, contentment, and enthusiasm (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008). It should be noted that happiness comes from the frequency of these emotions and not their intensity (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991). Indeed, low to moderate intensity of positive emotions on a regular basis is considered a stronger predictor of happiness than intense positive emotions (Diener et al., 1991). Throughout this chapter, I use the terms happiness, well-being, positive emotions, and positive affect interchangeably to describe the condition of individuals who feel positive emotions notably more often than negative emotions (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008; Wesarat et al., 2015).

Most findings show a positive association between the happiness of employees and their workplace success, such as earning more money, displaying superior performance, and helping others (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008). One might assume that success in the workplace causes employees to feel happy. However, recent evidence suggests that on the contrary, happiness is a necessary precursor for professional success (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Based on this hypothesis, people with specific personality traits associated with happiness may achieve more professional success than their peers who lack these traits.

## The Personality of the Happy Employee

Happiness at work can be interpreted in two ways: a person can be happy or make others happy. Fostering happiness within oneself and within others at work is particularly important. After all, the average person will work over 116,000 hours during their lifetime (or the equivalent of 13 years and two months, 24/7) (Campbell, 2017). Considering that employers generally expect high productivity and performance from their employees, maintaining one's well-being in the

workplace helps one meet the expectations of their employer (Hales & Williamson, 2010; Samnani & Singh, 2014).

Many personality traits can influence an employee's happiness at work. In a sample of university employees, self-esteem and self-efficacy were associated with higher well-being (Williams & Smith, 2016). In another sample of managers from public organizations, authenticity was the trait associated with it (Ménard & Brunet, 2011). In more general samples, subjective well-being was associated with higher levels of extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, and lower levels of neuroticism (four of the traits known as the Big Five, the fifth one being openness) (Aghababaei & Arji, 2014; Soto, 2015). In other words, individuals who are outgoing, approachable, mentally stable, and diligent in their work are generally happier than those who are not. Objectively, all these personality traits are positive and beneficial: only rarely does someone's conscientiousness or agreeableness become a problem. While these traits are generally responsible for one's own happiness, some employees also have traits that can positively impact other employees. For instance, managers who develop a culture of belonging and provide organizational support can lower dissatisfaction in their employees, reducing turnover (Mitchell, Holtom, & Lee, 2001). Alternatively, some traits are exclusively negative. For instance, narcissistic leaders who are highly charismatic tend to coerce followers into accepting abusive behaviors (Sankowsky, 1995). However, other personality traits are more of a double-edged sword—both beneficial and harmful, depending on the circumstances. For example, individuals with high levels of psychopathic traits can display either extroversion (Durand, 2019b), which is beneficial, or indirect aggression (Warren & Clabour, 2009), which is harmful, depending on the type of psychopathic traits expressed.

### Definition of Psychopathy

Following established conventions, we will use the term “psychopathy” to refer to the diagnosed disorder, while “psychopathic traits” will refer to the personality traits observed in psychopathic individuals. Psychopathy is commonly defined as a personality disorder encompassing characteristics associated with interpersonal-affective features (e.g., egocentricity, callous-unemotional traits, superficial charm, lack of empathy) and antisocial features (e.g., aggression and impulsivity) (Berg et al., 2013; Gao, Glenn, Schug, Yang, & Raine, 2009; Perez, 2012; Smith, Edens, Clark, & Rulseh, 2014). Both genetics and environmental factors are thought to contribute to psychopathy (Hicks et al., 2012). About 1% of the population are estimated to be psychopathic individuals (Cooke, 1998). In popular culture, “psychopath” is synonymous with “violent criminal” (Edens, Davis, Fernandez Smith, & Guy, 2012). However, this is largely a myth. While many prison inmates charged with violence, domestic abuse, assault, and drug use have in fact been diagnosed with psychopathy (Camp, Skeem, Barchard, Lilienfeld, & Poythress, 2013; Hall, Benning, & Patrick, 2004), recent findings do not show that psychopathy necessarily leads to criminal or violent behaviors (Berg et al., 2013; Camp et al., 2013; Hall & Benning, 2006). Psychopathy is also often wrongly considered synonymous with antisocial personality disorder (ASPD). While the disorders share similarities (e.g., impulsivity, lack of remorse, irresponsibility), psychopathy is distinguished from ASPD by its traits related to interpersonal-affective features (Berg et al., 2013; Murphy, Lilienfeld, Skeem, & Edens, 2016).

### Framework for the Study of Psychopathy

Scientific literature usually describes psychopathy as extensively maladaptive. But some adaptive traits are also associated with the disorder. These include social dominance, thrill seeking, fearlessness, low stress-reactivity, and other characteristics related to fearless-dominance and boldness (Anderson, Sellbom, Wygant, & Edens, 2013; Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009). Scholars do not agree how central these adaptive traits are to the definition of psychopathy. Some researchers

argue that psychopathy is exclusively maladaptive, and adaptive traits do not play an important part (Lynam & Miller, 2012; Marcus, Fulton, & Edens, 2012; Miller & Lynam, 2012; Miller, Maples-Keller, & Lynam, 2015). Others claim that, while psychopathy is predominantly maladaptive, adaptive traits are nonetheless central to its definition (Lilienfeld et al., 2012; Lilienfeld, Watts, & Smith, 2015; Patrick, Venables, & Drislane, 2013; Smith, Watts, & Lilienfeld, 2014). Due to the different conceptions of psychopathy, researchers use different questionnaires to examine psychopathic traits in the population. This leads to inconsistent results on a wide range of constructs, including well-being.

The diagnosis of psychopathy is commonly done with the use of the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) (Hare, 1991, 2003). The PCL-R is a one-on-one interview by a trained assessor, approximately 90 minutes long, as well as a review of files and/or other third-party information (e.g., criminal record, correctional reports) (Ray, Weir, Poythress, & Rickelm, 2011). Due to its emphasis on criminal behaviors, the PCL-R is unsuitable for investigating psychopathic traits in the general population or for identifying adaptive psychopathic traits (Hall & Benning, 2006).

Partly in response to the concerns associated with the PCL-R, several self-reported instruments were developed to measure psychopathic traits in non-institutionalized samples. Some of these instruments focus exclusively on maladaptive traits. For instance, the Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy (LSRP; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995) is a questionnaire of 26 items assessing several traits related to meanness and impulsivity. Other self-report measures, such as the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996) and the Triarchic Psychopathy Measure (TriPM; Patrick, 2010) include elements related to both maladaptive traits (e.g., meanness and disinhibition) and adaptive traits (e.g., fearless-dominance and boldness).

### **Psychopathy and Happiness**

Are psychopathic individuals more or less happy than the general population? There is no simple answer to this question. Egocentricity and lack of remorse—traits central to all definitions of psychopathy—could conceivably make a person happier (most likely at the expense of others). A recent study by Love & Holder (2014), however, suggests otherwise: the authors conclude that the presence of psychopathic traits is negatively associated with well-being, positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that this study was performed with the LSRP, an instrument that does not include an adaptive component. Subsequently, another study was done, this time with an instrument measuring both adaptive and maladaptive psychopathic traits (i.e., PPI—short form). In this study, Durand (2018b) found that adaptive and maladaptive traits were correlated with different happiness levels. The maladaptive side of psychopathy was associated with lower levels of stable happiness and higher levels of fluctuating happiness, and also with lower levels of personal growth, hope, and meaning in life. On the other hand, the adaptive side was associated with the opposite: higher levels of stable happiness and lower levels of fluctuating happiness, and with higher levels of personal growth, hope, and meaning in life. These findings suggest that, at the very least, a portion of highly psychopathic individuals are happier and report higher levels of subjective well-being than most other people.

While these results pertain to the happiness of the psychopathic individual, the effect of one's psychopathic traits on the well-being of others has been observed mostly in an organizational context.

### **Psychopathy at Work**

How do adaptive and maladaptive psychopathic traits manifest themselves in the workplace? And how do they influence workplace happiness? To answer these questions, we first need to examine how psychopathy in the workplace is usually studied.

In the past, studies of psychopaths in the workplace have focused on the psychopath as a predator, both for the organization and for the other employees (Michalak & Ashkanasy, 2018). Psychopaths are usually thought of as toxic employees or workplace bullies. Indeed, the studies do show that the presence of psychopathic traits in an employee is associated with numerous sources of unhappiness in other employees, such as lower levels of ethics, creativity, and teamwork, and higher levels of passive leadership (Neo, Sellbom, Smith, & Lilienfeld, 2018); lower levels of emotional intelligence (Howe, Falkenbach, & Massey, 2014); high levels of abusive control and mismanagement (Boddy, Miles, Sanyal, & Hartog, 2015); workplace bullying (Boddy, 2014); and sexual misconduct (Van Scotter & Roglio, 2018). In the book *Snakes in Suits*, Babiak & Hare (2007) give the example of Helen, an energetic employee who convinced the executive board that the chief operating officer was guilty of mismanagement, and quickly obtained his position.

No one was surprised when Gus was moved out of this position—except, perhaps, Gus—after Helen made arguments to the executive committee members that implicated him in the original business letdown. ... With the government fiasco behind her and Gus out of the way, Helen let loose some of her domineering management style. Histrionics were common during staff meeting ... She would [be] barking out orders and generally intimidating, frightening, and pushing people around.

(p. 11)

Nevertheless, psychopaths are often considered exemplary employees by their supervisors. There are two reasons for this. First, corporate psychopaths can coerce many other employees to do their bidding (including illegal activities), and then take credit for their work. As Boddy and colleagues (2015) report,

The top managers of the business regarded [the corporate psychopath] as being an extremely able manager who was highly efficient at running his department and at saving money for the firm. This expertise at cost cutting was actually from another manager—the manager who had been coerced into the fraud. ... Only when presented with specific evidence did the directors bring in fraud accountants.

(p. 535)

The corporate psychopath was seen as a *superstar*, while actually relying on the knowledge and skills of other employees. He got away with it until the fraud was discovered by the upper management.

The second reason why psychopaths are often seen as model employees is that often they are, quite simply, successful professionals—at least by some measures of success. Psychopathic traits in the workplace have been associated with such indicators of success as self-reported job performance, likelihood of receiving a performance bonus, and monthly salary (Pavlič & Međedović, 2019). An employer, satisfied with these superficial signs of high performance, might not notice that the individual in question is also a source of tension among staff. Consider the following situation:

Mark has been the best seller of the company for four years in a row. This year, he has sold more units than the three other best sellers, combined. Wherever he goes, Mark manages to sell large quantities of his company's products and obtain commissions on his sales. He has received several promotions and raises from his supervisors for his achievements. Meanwhile, the other sellers are growing discontented. Eventually they realize that Mark has been peeking in their agendas to obtain information about their leads and meeting those leads first. When the sellers confronted the director of the company, she told them that she did not want to upset her best seller and that they had to do better.

In such a case, the best seller is only considered the best because he steals potential clients from the other sellers. However, because he seems significantly more successful than the others, the management chooses to ignore the problem. Although this situation might benefit Mark and the company for a short time, eventually the other sellers can become discontented and quit, which would prevent Mark from obtaining so many leads.

### Psychopathic Traits and Happiness in the Workplace

Up to now, we have examined the negative effects of a psychopathic employee on the workplace and on the other employees' well-being and happiness. However, there are situations when the presence of psychopathic traits in an employee can be an advantage with limited inconvenience. One example is a situation where an employee is supervised by an abusive boss. Negative behaviors from a supervisor have been associated with job stress and absent-mindedness at work in the employee (Gilbreath & Karimi, 2012). However, psychopathic traits have been associated with stress resilience (Durand, 2019a; Durand & Plata, 2017). Does this mean that psychopathic individuals are better equipped to handle abuse? Hurst, Simon, Jung, and Pirouz (2017) investigated how psychopathic traits could act as a protective factor from abusive supervisors in work environments. The authors concluded that, under high levels of abusive supervision, psychopathic traits related to meanness (i.e., proneness to lying, lack of empathy, and manipulative behaviors) were associated with positive affect and engagement, and negatively associated with anger. In other words, in abusive work situations, highly psychopathic individuals reported higher levels of well-being and lower levels of anger than did most other people. This seems to support the adaptive nature of some psychopathic traits in the workplace. However, when the authors studied non-abusive environments, they observed a different trend: highly psychopathic employees showed lower levels of positive affect and engagement. These findings suggest that in psychopathic individuals, happiness *depends* on negativity in the environment: they are actually *happier* in abusive conditions.

Another study focusing on psychopathic traits, professional satisfaction, and material success also provided interesting results. In an occupational sample, individuals with high levels of traits associated with fearless-dominance also displayed higher levels of career, salary, and promotion satisfaction, as well as higher overall material success (e.g., annual salary, promotion frequency, etc.) (Eisenbarth, Hart, & Sedikides, 2018). This study highlights the positive association between well-being and specific adaptive psychopathic traits. These findings are supported by a subsequent study, which examined the relationship between fearless-dominance and vocational success (Blickle & Genau, 2019). The authors reported that highly educated individuals displaying high levels of fearless-dominance reported higher income and vocational satisfaction four years after participating in the study for the first time. The authors also noted that fearless-dominance was a predictor of vocational satisfaction after four years. These results suggest that, from an intraindividual point of view, psychopathic traits associated with fearless-dominance can be associated with happiness and well-being in the workplace. However, this study does not measure how the happiness of the psychopath's peers would be affected.

While it is undeniable that some highly psychopathic individuals can make other employees unhappy in the workplace, this may not always be the case. Considering how Durand (2018b) had examined adaptive and maladaptive traits separately to challenge the findings from Love & Holder (2014) (that psychopathic individuals are less happy than others), it is possible that adaptive psychopathic traits may also be associated with positive well-being in others. For instance, individuals with high levels of extroversion and social potency may raise the morale and well-being of other employees by regularly engaging in dynamic and humoristic conversations at work. The positive impact of a psychopath on the workplace has very rarely been studied before now.

As mentioned previously, ineffective leadership from highly psychopathic managers is one of the causes of dissatisfaction in the workplace. While many psychopathic traits have been associated with ineffective leadership, some are actually beneficial for leadership. For instance, one study used personality reports completed by historical experts to investigate psychopathic traits in 42 U.S. presidents (Lilienfeld, Waldman, et al., 2012). The authors reported that traits associated with boldness were positively associated with presidential performance, leadership, persuasiveness, crisis management, and Congressional relations. These findings are in line with a meta-analysis investigating the association between psychopathy and leadership (Landay, Harms, & Credé, 2019). The authors of the meta-analysis reported a gender difference, where psychopathic traits were weakly positively associated with leadership effectiveness in men but negatively associated in women, hence challenging the notion that psychopathic traits are systematically associated with poor leadership. While the attitude of others towards one's leadership may not be an integral component of well-being, it remains an important factor.

While to date there is insufficient research on the effect of a supervisor's adaptive psychopathic traits on the happiness of employees, ongoing research suggests a weak positive association between fearless-dominance and traits related to well-being in the workplace. Preliminary data from a study by this chapter's author, derived from a small sample of 51 senior managers in private organizations, suggest that higher levels of fearless-dominance are associated with a welcoming attitude towards change in organizational settings, proactive conflict resolution strategies, and inspirational motivation of followers. While all these associations are derived from weak correlations ( $r < .30$ ), these preliminary findings are encouraging. They suggest that some very specific psychopathic traits may be beneficial for the well-being and happiness not only of the psychopathic individual but also of the other employees.

### **Identifying Employees with Adaptive Psychopathic Traits to Foster Well-Being at Work**

In some situations, employers may benefit from hiring individuals displaying specific psychopathic traits. In the finance and commerce sectors, an individual who is fearless, aggressive, and moderately manipulative may be able to strike financial deals more easily than someone without these traits. It has also been cautiously suggested that employees working in the military or police force should display lower levels of empathy and emotions in order to increase their resilience to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Anestis, Harrop, Green, & Anestis, 2017). Indeed, considering that these professions have some of the highest rates of PTSD as a direct result of employment (Pearson, Zamorski, & Janz, 2014; Shields, 2018), selecting employees with specific psychopathic traits could reduce the adverse psychological effects of work in these sectors, raising the overall well-being of the employees. It goes without saying that this suggestion comes with multiple ethical dilemmas. For instance, identifying and selecting individuals based on their psychopathic traits to reduce the likelihood of PTSD could significantly affect the well-being of the employees outside the workplace (Bassil, Rutten, & Horstkötter, 2019). Furthermore, employees who know that they are resilient to trauma may start intentionally engaging in dangerous work-related activities. This could impair their overall well-being, negating the original purpose of selecting those individuals. In any case, the active selection of employees based on psychopathic traits should be considered with great caution.

Setting aside ethical considerations, how would one go about identifying and selecting individuals with potentially beneficial psychopathic traits? One recently developed self-reported questionnaire measuring adaptive psychopathic traits is associated with the personality traits observed in happy employees, namely the Durand Adaptive Psychopathic Traits Questionnaire (DAPTQ; Durand, 2019b). The DAPTQ is not a measure of psychopathy or psychopathic traits, but rather an instrument measuring adaptive traits known to be associated with the psychopathic personality

(e.g., leadership, logical thinking, composure, creativity, fearlessness, focus, extroversion, and management) (Durand, 2019a). In this context, an adaptive trait is defined as a trait “that maximizes an individual’s survival probability within a set environment” (Durand, 2019b). The DAPTQ shows that adaptive factors are positively associated with indicators of well-being such as positive affect ( $r = .34$ ), satisfaction with life ( $r = .23$ ), and self-esteem ( $r = .56$ ) (Durand, 2018a). Ongoing research on the DAPTQ suggests similar associations between the DAPTQ and measures of well-being in employees with or without managerial duties. However, similarly to instruments of psychopathic traits with an adaptive component, the association between the DAPTQ and the happiness of other employees remains unclear.

### **Recommendations for Future Work**

The presence of the psychopath in the workplace can have a devastating impact on the happiness and well-being of the other employees. Highly psychopathic individuals actively manipulate, bully, and control other employees with complete disregard for their well-being. However, these observations were made while approaching psychopathy exclusively from a maladaptive point of view. When psychopathy is defined using both adaptive and maladaptive traits as core components of the disorder, specific psychopathic traits may actually be beneficial in the workplace.

There is some evidence in support of this view. Indeed, several traits, mostly those considered adaptive (and hence not recognized by every researcher as core psychopathic traits), have shown positive associations with measures of well-being in organizational settings. However, these associations are mostly from an intraindividual perspective, and do not directly challenge the notion that psychopathic traits in an employee in a position of authority compromises the happiness of other employees. Nevertheless, considering that preliminary evidence suggests a positive association between adaptive psychopathic traits and traits related to collective well-being at work (i.e., effective leadership, crisis management, welcoming of organizational changes), it is possible that some such traits may not cause unhappiness in others. This hypothesis is still largely untested and requires multiple studies in various organizational settings.

The majority of the research on psychopathy at work has focused on the idea that psychopathy is maladaptive. The debate on the inclusion of adaptive traits in the concept of psychopathy remains ongoing (Patrick et al., 2013; Visser, Ashton, & Pozzebon, 2012). However, it is a fact that some individuals display high levels of traits related to fearless-dominance and boldness, regardless of whether these traits are considered psychopathic or not. To gain a better understanding of the effect of those traits on employees’ well-being in the workplace, future studies should include one or multiple instruments focusing on adaptive psychopathic traits, such as the PPI and the TriPM. Such instruments may offer valuable insights into the effect of adaptive traits on well-being, as instruments focusing on maladaptive traits have already highlighted their detrimental effect on workplace happiness.

In conclusion, it is undeniable that the behavior of a psychopathic individual in the workplace does, more often than not, severely compromise the well-being of other employees. Irrespective of the definition of psychopathy, highly psychopathic individuals are often a source of unhappiness at work due to their lack of empathy and lack of concern for others. However, when one considers psychopathy as a combination of adaptive and maladaptive factors, it is possible that specific adaptive traits may contribute to happiness at work, at least for the individual presenting these traits. Because of the shortage of research on adaptive psychopathic traits, it remains unclear whether specific psychopathic traits could be beneficial for employers, from either an economic or a humanitarian point of view. Nevertheless, the evidence presented in this chapter does challenge the notion that *all* psychopathic traits are *always* negatively associated with well-being.



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