

Of Predators and Preys: Corporate Psychopathy and Employee Burnout as Parallels

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Abstract

Different personalities constitute modern workplaces. One of such personalities is the corporate psychopath, whose presence poses manifold threats to organizational existence. This study examines the personality of the corporate psychopath and specifically investigates the relationship between corporate psychopathy and employee burnout. A total of 104 respondents within a university setting in Nigeria completed measures of corporate psychopathy to establish the existence of the traits in their managers; a self-report measure of employee burnout was also completed. Corporate psychopathy correlates positively and significantly with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and decreased personal accomplishment. Results indicate that corporate psychopathy is an underlying factor of employee burnout. Enhanced whistleblowing structures and ethical regeneration are proffered to mitigate the consequences of corporate psychopathy in the face of cultural complexes that fan its flames.

Keywords

corporate psychopathy, employee burnout, organizational culture

1 Introduction

Thanks to the mass media, the popular profile of a psychopath is deemed to be synonymous with terms like evil, monster, horror, menace, and cold-bloodedness. This profiling may not be far from reality particularly for the criminal psychopath. However, this conception of a psychopath makes organizations vulnerable to the corporate psychopath; a charismatic, eloquent, well-dressed, self-assured individual with destructive tendencies (Boddy, 2011b). The duplicitous façade of the corporate psychopath is hazardous for the typical modern organization, which is a melting pot of diverse personalities.

The origins of psychopathy are ancient. Dein (2012) states that the concept dates back to two thousand years ago, citing St Paul's letter to the early church admonishing the leaders to be careful of 'hypocritical liars whose conscience have been seared with hot iron' (I Timothy, 4:2, NIV). Psychopathy is a personality disorder that is defined by anti-social and dysfunctional emotional, interpersonal and behavioural manifestations (Louth et al., 1998). Psychopaths are predatory and parasitic in their attitude to life (Hare, 1999), defy social conventions, lacking in

conscience, and are unable to forge emotional attachments (Boddy, 2011b). Psychopathy is believed to be related to defects in structure, function, and chemistry of the brain (Weber et al., 2008). It is said to be associated with anomalies in the amygdala, which is the part of the brain that regulates emotions (Fallon, 2013). Also, the concept of psychopathy is subject to the nature versus nurture debate, as specific environmental factors contribute significantly to psychopathic manifestations.

The prevalence of psychopaths in the society is difficult to estimate. It is suggested that psychopaths are about 1% of the general population, 25% of the prison population (Hare, 2003) and 3.5% in the corporate setting (Babiak and Hare, 2006). Cangemi and Pfohl (2009) argue that the percentage in the corporate world is relatively higher. This assertion aligns with the capitalist nature of many contemporary organizations where ruthless competition is encouraged, rewarded and most times, the end justifies the means. Citing the instance of the Enron scandal, Boddy (2011b) theorizes that corporate psychopaths are principally responsible for the unethical practices that

led to the global financial crises in the late 2000s. Large scale Ponzi schemes, frauds, embezzlements (Babiak et al., 2010) and several counterproductive workplace outcomes (Boddy, 2011a; Mathieu et al., 2014; Wellons, 2012) are credited to the sinister presence of corporate psychopaths.

Studies suggest that corporate psychopaths belong to supervisory and management cadres in most organizations (Boddy, 2017; Hare, 2002). In spite of the multiple threats of corporate psychopathy, there appears to be limited knowledge about the subject. The dearth of empirical data makes it necessary to investigate its prevalence and consequences within Nigeria’s workplace contexts. Specifically, the objective of this study is to examine if there is a relationship between corporate psychopathy and employee burnout. Other aspects of the paper entail a review of extant literature with special focus on the conceptualizations of corporate psychopathy and job burnout, followed by the methodology for the study. The results are presented, discussed, and recommendations proffered. The paper concludes with suggestions for further studies.

2 Corporate Psychopathy

As Hare (2002) famously stated, ‘not all psychopaths are in prison, some are in the boardroom’. The term corporate psychopath is an amalgamation of psychopathy from the field of psychology and corporate from the business world, to signify an individual with sub-clinical psychopathic traits or anti-social behaviour, who functions within the corporate context (Boddy, 2005; Stevens et al., 2012). Corporate psychopaths refer to dysfunctional personalities who exist undetected in society and work within organizations (Smith et al., 2014). They are also referred to as executive psychopaths, organizational psychopaths, successful psychopaths or sociopaths and industrial psychopaths. Corporate psychopaths differ from criminal psychopaths because the former are adept in controlling themselves, masking their emotions and appearing to be congenial, charismatic and refined.

Modern organizations are seemingly attracted to energetic, proactive, and confident individuals who have an ability to influence others. Corporate psychopaths appear this way. They are ambitious and ruthless individuals who manipulate people and systems to achieve their selfish goals; and they pass interviews, gain rapid promotions, and climb the corporate ladder quite rapidly. A major difference between corporate psychopaths and ‘normal high-flyers’ is the extent the former will go to achieve their ambitions. They are proficient at fooling others about their competencies and credibility, whilst behaving in a destructive pattern (Babiak and Hare, 2006). The manipulative nature of corporate psychopaths is a least obvious trait that allows them to gain the confidence of other people, expedites their progression in corporate ranks and provides ample leverage to harm their organizations (Mahaffey and Marcus, 2006). Studies by Boddy (2011a), Boddy et al. (2010), found that most corporate psychopaths belong to senior management positions of organizations and their actions at this level can be extremely damaging, especially when organizational culture is weak.

There appears to be consensus in the literature on the traits of the corporate psychopath. Traits identified by Hare (2003) include, grandiosity, pathological lying, cold-heartedness, manipulative, emotionally shallow, lacking in remorse and superficiality (Table 1).

Corporate psychopaths are also egocentric, selfish, power-hungry, have great acting/political skills and are opportunistic. Their strategies are to charm superiors; charm, manipulate or tolerate peers; abuse and manipulate subordinates (Boddy, 2011a). Other traits include; callousness, irresponsibility, impulsiveness, ability to make persuasive arguments, poor decision-making and poor performance. The profile of the corporate psychopath comprises a high number of the following traits; public humiliation of other people; restlessness; flight of ideas; intentional and malicious spreading of lies; devoid of guilt; sabotage other people’s accomplishments; take credit for other people’s accomplishments; social dominance; intimidation; threatening any

Table 1 Traits of Corporate Psychopaths

Interpersonal	Affective	Lifestyle	Antisocial
Glib/ Superficial	Lack of remorse/guilt	Stimulation seeking	Behavioural problems
Grandiose sense of self-worth	Shallow effect	Impulsiveness	Juvenile delinquency and criminal versatility
Pathological lying, Conning and manipulative	Lack of empathy and failure to accept responsibility	Irresponsible and parasitic attitude	
		Lack of realistic goals	

Source: Hare (2003)

perceived enemies with disciplinary actions to taint profile; setting unrealistic job expectations to set subordinates up for failure; promoting disharmony through divide and rule tactics; taking little heed of criticisms and advice (Faggioni and White, 2007). Instructively, not all commentators perceive psychopathy in the negative (Smith et al., 2014). Such commentators argue that corporate psychopaths are the ‘convenient scapegoats’ for the extremes of capitalism (Federman et al., 2009; Gregory, 2012).

The consequences of corporate psychopathy are manifold. Boddy (2014) found that corporate psychopaths are bullies, liable for abusive supervision and increased levels of workplace conflict. Clark (2007) advances that a significant relationship exists between corporate psychopathy, employee withdrawal, disenfranchisement, poor leadership, and suboptimal performance of employees. It is also proposed that the attitude and activities of corporate psychopaths will translate to absenteeism and employee turnover (Houshmand et al., 2012). Empirical study by Mathieu et al. (2014) established that corporate psychopathy will result in decreased employee wellbeing, job dissatisfaction and poor job attitudes. While most of the outcomes mentioned above could be traceable or related to psychopathy, the incidence of job burnout and its relationship to psychopathy, has not received empirical validation. Job burnout which is an extreme form of stress with serious emotional and self-esteem consequences, is a widespread phenomenon in many Nigerian organizations (Oyewunmi et al., 2015a). The section that follows, therefore, provides a justification for testing this relationship.

3 Job Burnout

The term burnout is popular in psychology and organizational behaviour literature. It was first used by Freudenberg in 1974 to describe a situation of physiological and emotional exhaustion (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Maslach and Jackson (1981) reassessed the concept of burnout and designed a generally acknowledged burnout model, which defined burnout as emotional exhaustion, desensitization or depersonalization, and decreased sense of personal accomplishment. The burnout syndrome is a reaction to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, marked by exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. It is the most excessive form of occupational stress caused by protracted exposure to and involvement in emotionally damaging situations (Maslach et al., 2001). The psychological effect of stress is job burnout which indicates the state of exhaustion translating to the loss of esteem

and value. Exhaustion refers to the emotional pressure of the work environment; depersonalization is a conscious effort to distant one’s self from others, whilst decreased personalization is the reduction in personal achievement from work-related activities that leaves the employee with a sense of lethargy or uselessness (Maslach et al., 2001).

Researchers have proposed different models for the concept of burnout. Edelwich and Brodsky (1980) described a series of four developmental stages of job burnout. The excitement stage refers to the enthusiastic beginning of an employee’s career, which is usually characterized by great aspirations and sometimes idealistic expectations. When the employee’s investment in assigned tasks does not meet expectations, a sense of disappointment sets in. In doubt and inertia stage, the employee’s effort to make further investments in tasks does not yield positive results. This stage is succeeded by the disappointment and frustration stage, where the employee begins to revise expectations. The final stage of job burnout is apathy, where little or no energy and drive is invested in assigned tasks; at this stage, the employee works only for financial reasons and is mentally detached from work processes. The Cherniss Interactive Model (Cherniss, 1980) advances that burnout is a three-staged process rather than a singular event. The first stage is work stress which occurs as a result of disruption in the employee’s environment where available resources do not satisfy personal goals and workplace demands. This stage is followed by the exhaustion stage, which is depicted by emotional exhaustion, fatigue, boredom, and apathy. At the third stage of defence suffix, the attitude and behaviour of the employee is altered by cynicism and there is decreased investment in assigned tasks.

Socio-demographic factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, and marital status have been associated with job burnout (Thomas et al., 2014). The work environment is also reported to contribute significantly to burnout. Factors under work environment could include organizational structure (Angerer, 2003), emotional exhaustion, role ambiguity, mergers and acquisitions, downsizing and budget cuts. Other organizational factors could include management style, inflexible policies at work, poor interpersonal relations, and limited opportunities for promotion (Maslach et al., 2001). At the emotional level, the employee exhibits weakness, guilt, anger, anxiety, sadness, increased sensitivity, and depression. The behavioural pattern of the employee is marked by social withdrawal, insomnia and eating disorders. Spiritually, the employee may experience existential concerns. Conflicts,

loneliness and anger may mar interpersonal relationships. At the work level, the employee’s morale is decreased; work performance is marked by pessimism and job satisfaction is adversely affected.

4 Hypotheses Formulation

Empirical findings have reported several outcomes of corporate psychopathy (Clark, 2007; Houshmand et al., 2012; Boddy, 2014; Mathieu et al., 2014). Corporate psychopaths usually belong to the upper echelon in many organizations, and their predatory nature portends adverse effects on employees who may become preys to their antics. The organizational structure is typified by superior-subordinate relationships, targeted at the achievement of specific goals. However, an organization comprising of preys and predators negates intended objectives, impairs competitive edge, and dissipates human capital, a significant outcome of which is job burnout. Therefore, this study hypothesized that:

H1: Corporate psychopathy is a significant predictor of employee burnout.

5 Methods

5.1 Sample

The sample consisted of 104 educated white collar respondents from a cross-section of departments/units/occupations (academic staff, accountants, medical personnel, and administrators) within a university setting in Southwest Nigeria.

5.2 Research Instrument

A self-completion questionnaire was designed to investigate:

1. The perceived prevalence of corporate psychopathy
2. The relationship between corporate psychopathy and job burnout

The research instrument contained items from Boddy (2011b) Psychopathy Measure–Management Tool Research Version (PM-M RV) to determine the presence or absence of psychopaths in a given workplace environment. The scale was developed from Hare’s (1991) Psychopathic Checklist (PCL-R). Respondents were asked to rate their managers/supervisors/team leaders on specific behavioural traits (mentioned earlier) that identified the presence of a corporate psychopath. Boddy (2011b) reports the internal consistency for the research construct of corporate psychopathy at high coefficient of 0.93.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI-ES) was adapted to measure job burnout. It is an extensively used, recognized, and reliable measurement instrument of burnout. The 22 total items are divided into the three themes with nine items relating to emotional exhaustion, five to depersonalization, and eight to personal accomplishment; these items were adapted for the study. Iwanicki and Schwab (1981) report Cronbach’s Alpha ratings of 0.90 for emotional exhaustion, 0.76 for depersonalization and 0.76 for personal accomplishment. The internal consistency of the research instrument is found at Cronbach’s Alpha value of 0.801, which indicates a high level of internal consistency.

6 Results

The respondents were of working age (less than 25 years 3.8%, 25-30 years 28.8%, 31-49 years 66.3%, 50 years and above 1%) and the gender distribution was 49% male and 51% female. Majority of the respondents (46.2%) had 6-10 years’ experience, 23.1% had 11-15 years’ experience, 23.1% had 1-5years’ experience and 7.7% had experience totaling 16 years and above. Based on the corporate psychopathy description provided in this research, 53.8% of respondents indicated that they were working with a corporate psychopath as their current manager (team leader, supervisor or superior) and 46.2% had worked at some time with a manager (team leader, supervisor or superior) who could be categorized as a corporate psychopath.

Respondents rated their managers/supervisors on each of the eight (8) elements in the Psychopathy Measure Management Tool Research Version (PMMRV). The score for each element ranged from 1 (not present), 2 (somewhat present) and 3 (present), according to the perceived presence of the trait in the subject. Findings as seen in Table 2 shows that the mean values for the PMMRV items are

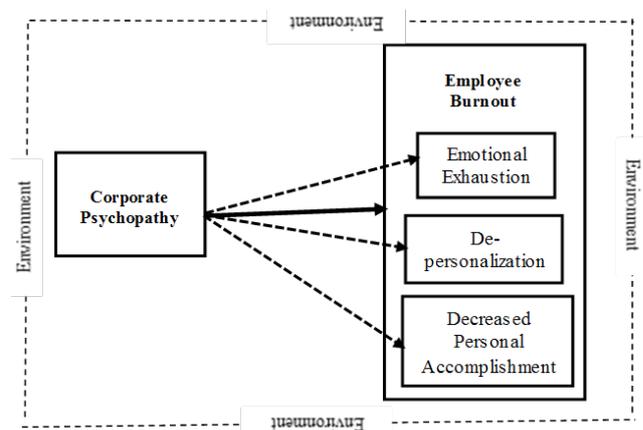


Fig. 1 Schematic Model

Table 2 Corporate Psychopathy Descriptive Statistics (N=104)

	% Not Present	% Somewhat Present	% Present	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pathological Liar	10.6	69.2	20.2	2.0962	0.54895
Superficially Charming and Insincere	14.4	31.7	53.8	2.3942	0.72965
Grandiose Sense of Self-Worth	0	30.8	69.2	2.6923	0.46377
Manipulative and Conning	6.7	49.0	44.2	2.3750	0.61039
Lack of Remorse about Harming or Hurting Others	1.9	75.0	23.1	2.2115	0.45524
Emotionally Shallow, Calculating and Cold	1	45.2	53.8	2.5288	0.52058
Refusing to Take Responsibility for their own Actions	1	42.3	56.7	2.5577	0.51815
Lacking in Empathy	7.7	41.3	51.0	2.4327	0.63497

(N = 104)

Table 3 Employee Burnout Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional Exhaustion Items		
As result of working with the identified individual, I sometimes feel/felt emotionally drained at work	3.6923	0.82529
Working with the identified individual makes/made me feel used up at the end of the workday	3.5385	0.84673
I feel/felt fatigued when I wake up in the morning and have to face another day on the job working with the identified individual	3.5096	1.07030
Working with the identified individual makes/made me feel stressed and burned out	3.8750	0.78441
Working with this individual makes/made me feel frustrated	3.5385	0.63740
Personal Accomplishment Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Working with the identified individual decreased/deceases my sense of accomplishment	3.3077	0.91457
Working with the identified individual reduces my sense of pride	3.1538	0.95296
I do/did not feel that my work is/was appreciated	3.2596	1.14904
Working with the identified individual makes it difficult for me to do a good job	3.3750	0.75283
Working with this individual makes me feel as if I am wasting my time and effort	3.0577	0.82234
De-personalization Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Working with the identified individual hardened/is hardening me emotionally	3.7885	1.01132
Working with the identified individual has made me to be less trusting of people	3.8462	0.95256
I prefer to maintain an impersonal relationship with people	3.5385	0.93397
I would rather work alone than be in a team	2.7692	0.69994

high, indicating a prevalence of corporate psychopathy in Nigerian workplaces.

Respondents rated their levels of emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment, and depersonalization on 1-5 Likert scale. High mean values are recorded across board. The highest mean value (3.8750) for emotional exhaustion indicates that respondents agreed to being burnt out and stressed as a result of working with a corporate psychopath. In terms of personal accomplishments, respondents attributed poor job performance to the presence of corporate psychopaths in the workplace (3.3750). The high mean values for the depersonalization items also indicates a sense of withdrawal and distancing.

Table 4 shows the result of the multiple correlation analyses conducted to ascertain the degree of relationship between corporate psychopathy and employee burnout. It can be observed from the table that the co-efficient of the relationship between corporate psychopathy and emotional exhaustion is $r = 0.620$ at the significant level of $p < 0.001$. The co-efficient of the relationship between corporate psychopathy and depersonalization is $r = 0.467$, at the significant level of $p < 0.001$; and the co-efficient of the relationship between corporate psychopathy and decreased personal accomplishment is $r = 0.616$, at the significant level of $p < 0.001$. The overall coefficient correlation between corporate psychopathy and employee burnout is $r = 0.672$, at the significant level of $p < 0.001$. Since the significant levels of all the items are $p < 0.001$, the

hypothesis can be accepted that corporate psychopathy is a significant predictor of employee burnout.

7 Discussion of Findings

This study found a significant relationship between corporate psychopathy and employee burnout. Corporate psychopathy is associated in substantial measures with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishments in employees. The finding is consistent with previous studies on the negative outcomes of corporate psychopathy (Mathieu and Babiak, 2016; Mathieu et al., 2014; Boddy, 2014).

Respondents in this study reported that corporate psychopaths belonged to mid-level, senior and top management. The severity of the corporate psychopathic situation is that employees in lower cadres may begin to take a cue from the corporate psychopath, as the tendency to imitate behaviour is an inherent component of the leadership process and culture. This is perhaps the reason for poor leadership/management in many organizations and societies; the good examples are often lesser than the bad ones. It is important to note that there may be variations in incidences subject to personality, organizational culture, structure, and other contextual underpinnings.

The perceived prevalence of corporate psychopathy as reported by the respondents may be attributed to several factors. First of which is the cultural malorientation and the acute power-distance dynamic in many organizations.

Table 4 Multiple Correlation Analyses

		CPsych	EmoEx	Deperso	DecPerAc	JBurnout
CPsych	Pearson Correlation	1	0.620**	0.467**	0.616**	0.672**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	104	104	104	104	104
EmoEx	Pearson Correlation	0.620**	1	0.662**	0.583**	0.883**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	104	104	104	104	104
Deperso	Pearson Correlation	0.467**	0.662**	1	0.510**	0.837**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
	N	104	104	104	104	104
DecPerAc	Pearson Correlation	0.616**	0.583**	0.510**	1	0.830**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
	N	104	104	104	104	104
JBurnout	Pearson Correlation	0.672**	0.883**	0.837**	0.830**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	N	104	104	104	104	104

The monarchical structures in many African countries has influenced the conception of positional authority. In this ancient equation, a king is believed to be superior to the subjects. This thought is applied to the organizational context where the leader/manager/supervisor is conceived to be superior to everyone below that cadre. Another possible dimension is the history of socio-economic deprivation, the progressive decline in cultural, moral, and ethical values, as well as the failing of political and educational systems. These have led to the definition of success as the acquisition of the material, encouraged ruthless competitiveness and facilitated the psychopathic pattern.

Based on these cultural paradigms, there is a disconnect of the dimension of service in leadership (Oyewunmi et al., 2015b) and this becomes more apparent as the individual progresses on the corporate ladder. As the individual's profile rises and authority increases, a state of hubris is reached. The seeming mindset of the individual at this point is self-aggrandizement, entrenchment, and entitlement, as the traits of corporate psychopathy are manifested. The power and authority of individuals in this position, is over-amplified by the subservience and tolerance of their subordinates, which is a function of the power-distance cultural paradigm which favors Machiavellian management behaviour. Organizations with strong corporate cultures and values are those which can suppress if not eliminate psychopathic behaviours.

8 Recommendations

Corporate culture must be re-evaluated and re-defined to include robust whistleblowing policies, structures and disciplinary processes that are transparent and equitable. When organizations have defined whistleblowing structures and attendant disciplinary processes, it sends a strong message of a culture that promotes a transparent and non-hostile work environment, thereby reducing the incidence of corporate psychopathy. A contrary situation has multifaceted implications for employees, the human resource management function and the organization. Top

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on the list of these consequences is the burnout and depletion of human resources in the face of unmitigated injustice; the waning of ethical application of effort and the impairment of organizational processes.

Management must be committed and accountable in ensuring that everyone is held to uniform standards. This will give employees a sense of confidence to report any sinister action of corporate psychopaths. At the heart of the cultural re-engineering is the training and reorientation of all employees, which should be aimed at dispelling unfounded notions and educating employees on the multiple ills of corporate psychopathy. Persons in senior cadres will also benefit from self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and leadership training interventions. It is also critical that organizations provide a viable support system for employees who may experience burnout during their careers. The human resource management function must ensure thorough recruitment and selection processes at all levels, which should include background, reference, criminal checks and behavioural tests. Finally, the resolve of the organization must be consistent and undaunted; because if organizations posture like preys, corporate psychopaths will act like predators. Beyond employee burnout, this will perhaps amount to colossal organizational burnout.

9 Conclusions

Future studies may focus on investigating other outcomes of corporate psychopathy in the workplace. An interventionist approach may be adopted to further proffer much needed solutions for the modern organization. The cultural dimensions and complexes to corporate psychopathy may be examined and comparative analyses may be conducted across climes. There is need to explore more about corporate psychopaths in terms of their genders, educational levels, careers, leadership orientations, what makes them succeed or fail, the tactics most often used, their prevalence in private versus public organizations, etc. Methodologically, a mixed methods approach is needed.

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