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Psychopathy linked to brain damage

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Psychopaths are known to be characterised by callousness, diminished capacity for remorse and lack of empathy.

However, the exact cause of these personality traits is an area of debate. The results of a new study show striking similarities between the mental impairments observed in psychopaths and those seen in patients with damage to the frontal lobes of the brain.

One previous explanation for psychopathic tendencies has been a reduced capacity to make inferences about the mental states of other people, an ability known as Theory of Mind (ToM).

On the other hand, psychopaths are also known to be extremely good manipulators and deceivers, which would imply that they have good skills in inferring the knowledge, needs, intentions, and beliefs of other people.

Therefore, it has been suggested recently that ToM is made up of different aspects: a cognitive part, which requires inferences about knowledge and beliefs, and another part which requires the understanding of emotions.

Simone Shamay-Tsoory, from the *University of Haifa* in Israel, along with colleagues from The *Shalvata Mental Health Care Centre* and the *Rambam Medical Centre*, tested the hypothesis that impairment in the emotional aspects of these abilities may account for psychopathic behaviour.

Earlier research from the same group had shown that patients with damage to the frontal lobes of the brain lack some of the emotional aspects of Theory of Mind, so they speculated that psychopathy may also be linked to frontal lobe dysfunction.

The emotional and cognitive aspects of Theory of Mind abilities were examined for participants in the new study, says a Haifa release.

Participants comprised different groups: criminal offenders, who had been diagnosed as having anti-social personality disorder with highly psychopathic tendencies, patients with damage to the frontal lobes of the brain, patients with damage to other areas of the brain, and healthy control subjects.

The pattern of impairments in the psychopathic participants showed a remarkable resemblance to those in the participants with frontal lobe damage.

These findings are slated for publication in the May issue of *Elsevier's Cortex* journal.

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