

Here are 10 psychological findings that reveal the dark side of human nature

It's a question that's reverberated through the ages – are humans, though imperfect, essentially kind, sensible, good-natured creatures? Or are we, deep down, wired to be bad, blinkered, idle, vain, vengeful and selfish? There are no easy answers, and there's clearly a lot of variation between individuals, but here we shine some evidence-based light on the matter through 10 dispiriting findings that reveal the darker and less impressive aspects of human nature:



❑ We view minorities and the vulnerable as less than human.

One striking example of this blatant dehumanisation came from a brain-scan [study](#) that found a small group of students exhibited less neural activity associated with thinking about people when they looked at pictures of the homeless or of drug addicts, as compared with higher-status individuals. Another study showed that people who are opposed to Arab immigration tended to rate Arabs and Muslims as literally [less evolved](#) than average. Among other examples, there's also evidence that young people dehumanise [older people](#); and that men and women alike dehumanise [drunk women](#). What's more, the inclination to dehumanise starts [early](#) – children as young as five view out-group faces (of people from a different city or a different gender to the child) as less human than in-group faces.

❑ We experience *Schadenfreude* (pleasure at another person's distress) by the age of four.

according to a [study](#) from 2013. That sense is heightened if the child perceives that the person deserves the distress. A more recent [study](#) found that, by age six, children will pay to watch an antisocial puppet being hit, rather than spending the money on stickers.

❑ We believe in *karma* – assuming that the downtrodden of the world deserve their fate.

The unfortunate consequences of such beliefs were first demonstrated in the now classic [research](#) from 1966 by the American psychologists Melvin Lerner and Carolyn Simmons. In their experiment, in which a female learner was punished with electric shocks for wrong answers, women participants subsequently rated her as less likable and admirable when they heard that they would be seeing her suffer again, and especially if they felt powerless to minimise this suffering. Since then, [research](#) has shown our willingness to blame the poor, rape victims, AIDS patients and others for their fate, so as to

preserve our belief in a just world. By extension, the same or similar processes are likely responsible for our subconscious rose-tinted view of **rich people**.

❑ We are blinkered and dogmatic.

If people were rational and open-minded, then the straightforward way to correct someone's false beliefs would be to present them with some relevant facts. However a classic **study** from 1979 showed the futility of this approach – participants who believed strongly for or against the death penalty **completely ignored facts that undermined their position**, actually doubling-down on their initial view. This seems to occur in part because we see opposing facts as undermining our sense of **identity**. It doesn't help that many of us are **overconfident** about how much we understand things and that, when we believe our opinions are superior to others, this **deters us** from seeking out further relevant knowledge.

❑ We would rather electrocute ourselves than spend time in our own thoughts.

This was demonstrated in a controversial 2014 **study** in which 67 per cent of male participants and 25 per cent of female participants opted to give themselves unpleasant electric shocks rather than spend 15 minutes in peaceful contemplation.

❑ We are vain and overconfident.

Our irrationality and dogmatism might not be so bad were they married to some humility and self-insight, but most of us walk about with **inflated views of our abilities and qualities**, such as our driving skills, **intelligence** and attractiveness – a phenomenon that's been dubbed the *Lake Wobegon Effect* after the fictional town where 'all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average'. Ironically, the least skilled among us are the most prone to overconfidence (the so-called *Dunning-Kruger effect*).

This vain self-enhancement seems to be most extreme and irrational in the case of our **morality**, such as in how principled and fair we think we are. In fact, even jailed **criminals** think they are kinder, more trustworthy and honest than the average member of the public.

❑ We are moral hypocrites.

It pays to be wary of those who are the quickest and loudest in condemning the moral failings of others – the chances are that moral preachers are as guilty themselves, but take a far lighter view of their own transgressions. In one **study**, researchers found that people rated the exact same selfish behaviour (giving themselves the quicker and easier of two experimental tasks on offer) as being far less fair when perpetuated by others. Similarly, there is a long-studied phenomenon known as *actor-observer asymmetry*, which in part describes our **tendency** to attribute other people's bad deeds, such as our partner's **infidelities**, to their character, while attributing the same deeds performed by ourselves

to the situation at hand. These self-serving double standards could even explain the common feeling that incivility is on the increase – recent **research** shows that we view the same acts of rudeness far more harshly when they are committed by strangers than by our friends or ourselves.

☐ We are all potential trolls.

As anyone who has found themselves in a spat on *Twitter* will attest, social media might be magnifying some of the worst aspects of human nature, in part due to the online **disinhibition** effect, and the fact that **anonymity** (easy to achieve online) is known to increase our inclinations for immorality.

While research has suggested that people who are prone to **everyday sadism** (a worryingly high proportion of us) are especially **inclined** to online trolling, a **study** published last year revealed how being in a bad mood, and being exposed to trolling by others, double the likelihood of a person engaging in trolling themselves. In fact, initial trolling by a few can cause a snowball of increasing negativity, which is exactly what researchers found when they studied reader discussion on *CNN.com*, with the *'proportion of flagged posts and proportion of users with flagged posts ... rising over time'*.

☐ We favour ineffective leaders with psychopathic traits.

The American personality psychologist Dan McAdams recently **concluded** that the US President Donald Trump's overt aggression and insults have a *'primal appeal'*, and that his *'incendiary Tweets'* are like the *'charging displays'* of an alpha male chimp, *'designed to intimidate'*. If McAdams's assessment is true, it would fit into a wider pattern – the finding that psychopathic traits are more common than average among leaders.

Take the **survey** of financial leaders in New York that found they scored highly on psychopathic traits but lower than average in emotional intelligence.

A **meta-analysis** published this summer concluded that there is indeed a modest but significant link between higher trait psychopathy and gaining leadership positions, which is important since psychopathy also correlates with poorer leadership.

☐ We are sexually attracted to people with dark personality traits.

Not only do we elect people with psychopathic traits to become our leaders, **evidence suggests** that men and women are sexually attracted, at least in the short term, to people displaying the so-called **'dark triad'** of traits – **narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism** – thus risking further propagating these traits.

One **study** found that a man's physical attractiveness to women was increased when he was described as self-interested, manipulative and insensitive.

One theory is that the dark traits successfully communicate *'mate quality'* in terms of confidence and the willingness to take risks.

Does this matter for the future of our species? Perhaps it does – another [paper](#), from 2016, found that those women who were more strongly attracted to narcissistic men's faces tended to have more children.

Don't get too down – these findings say nothing of the success that some of us have had in overcoming our baser instincts. In fact, it is arguably by acknowledging and understanding our shortcomings that we can more successfully overcome them, and so cultivate the better angels of our nature.

► This is an adaptation of an [article](#) originally published by *The British Psychological Society's Research Digest*.

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