PART I

THE PSYCHOLOGY
OF SERIAL VIOLENT CRIMES
Chapter 1

Normalcy in Behavioral Characteristics of the Sadistic Serial Killer

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Abstract

Sadistic serial killers have been widely diagnosed as sociopaths who are lacking in empathy and inordinately concerned with impression management. We propose instead that many of the behavioral characteristics thought to be distinctive of these serial murderers are actually shared widely with millions of people who never kill anyone. By focusing so much on sociopathic characteristics, researchers may have downplayed the importance of the existential processes—compartmentalization and dehumanization—that permit serial killers to rape, torture, and murder with moral impunity. Moreover, by uncritically accepting the sociopathic designation, researchers may have ignored the interaction between sadism and sociopathy that causes empathy to be heightened rather than diminished.

INTRODUCTION

In popular culture, as in serious writing on the topic, serial killers are frequently characterized as “evil monsters” who share little, if anything, with “normal” human beings. This image is represented, for example, in the title of Robert Ressler’s insightful book, Whoever Fights Monsters and Carl Goldberg’s Speaking With the Devil: Exploring Senseless Acts of Evil, just as it is in the cinematic depiction of serial killer Aileen Wuornos in the popular film Monster. The same image is reinforced by excessive media attention to grisly crimes.
involving Satanic human sacrifice, the sexual torture of children, and acts of cannibalism and necrophilia.

In the professional literature, a similar impression of the sadistic serial killer is encouraged by researchers and authors who focus on certain characteristics that have been widely regarded as psychologically distinctive of sadistic serial killers—in particular, their lack of empathy for the pain and suffering of victims, their inordinate concern with impression management to maximize personal pleasure, and their lack of remorse.

Those who seek to understand sadistic serial murderers may have accepted uncritically the conventional professional wisdom depicting sadistic serial killers as suffering from a personality disorder variously labeled as sociopathy, psychopathy, or antisocial personality (1,2). A closer examination of this kind of psychopathology suggests, first, that at least some sadistic killers may not require possession of an antisocial personality disorder to kill with moral impunity. Instead, they are able to overcome the forces of conscience in the same way as most other human beings—by compartmentalizing and dehumanizing their victims. Moreover, some characteristics attributed to serial killers and widely regarded as part and parcel of a personality disorder may actually overlap with abilities shared by millions of other human beings. Indeed, these “distinguishing characteristics” are hardly distinguishing at all from the vast majority of human beings who never kill any member of their own species. Finally, certain characteristics associated with sociopathy and found in sadistic serial killers may be profoundly modified in the presence of sexual sadism. In particular, their empathy may be heightened rather than reduced.

**Sociopathy and Serial Murder**

Mental health specialists seem to agree that the sadistic serial killer tends to be a sociopath, which is a disorder of personality or character rather than of the mind. He lacks a conscience, feels no remorse, cares exclusively for his own pleasures in life, and lacks the ability to empathize with the suffering of his victims. Other people are seen by the serial killer merely as tools to fulfill his own needs and desires, no matter how perverse or reprehensible they may be (3–5).

In the literature, the term sociopath is often employed interchangeably with psychopath and antisocial personality disorder. Initially, the word psychopath was widely used by psychiatrists and psychologists to identify the syndrome of character traits involving an impulsive, reckless, and selfish disregard of others. During the 1950s, however, the psychiatric profession recommended the use of the diagnostic term “sociopath,” in part to distinguish the psychopathic
personality from the much more serious psychotic disorders. Then, during the late 1960s, psychiatrists once again proposed a change in terminology, replacing both the sociopathic and psychopathic diagnoses with the antisocial personality disorder (APD). Some experts in psychopathology maintain fine distinctions among the three diagnostic categories, even offering various subtypes for each (6). To understand sadistic serial murder, however, these differences are not particularly important because the fundamental characteristics prevalent among these offenders are, for the most part, common to all three terms.

**Presentation of Self**

Usually as an aspect of their presumed sociopathic disorder, serial killers are often characterized as being extremely skillful at impression management. They are seen as unusually capable of looking and acting beyond suspicion, of appearing to be more innocent than a truly innocent person, of being able to lure their victims with charm and cunning.

For example, Derrick Todd Lee, the 34-year-old man who raped and murdered a number of women in the area of Baton Rouge, stayed on the loose at least in part because he was able socially to blend in so well. To many he came across as “friendly” and “charming.” He cooked barbeque and led a Bible study group. Those who got to know him informally regarded him as more a preacher than a killer. Green River Killer Gary Ridgway, who in 2004 was convicted for the deaths of 48 prostitutes in Washington State, brought his young son with him to a crime scene to look “fatherly” and give his victim a false sense of security. John Wayne Gacy, who brutally murdered 33 men and boys, was regarded by his suburban Chicago neighbors as a gregarious chap. He often played the part of a clown at children’s birthday parties and organized get-togethers for the people on his block. Gacy frequently lured victims to his home by offering to interview them for a job with his construction company.

Even if serial killers seem to be skillful at presentation of self, they are certainly not alone in their concern for projecting an image that is acceptable to others. Sociologist Erving Goffman (7) long ago suggested that managing the impression that we wish to convey to others was a normal, healthy human characteristic. In fact, *successful* individuals in many legitimate occupations seem to have a particular knack for using self-awareness to their personal advantage. This is true, for example, of effective politicians who come across as “one of the guys,” of skillful actors who base their entire professional lives on their ability to stage a character, and of sales personnel who are able to convince their clients that they really do have their best interests at heart.

Even in the most mundane areas of everyday life, normal people stage a character. Goffman distinguished between the *frontstage* where the performance
is given from the backstage region where it is rehearsed. In a restaurant, for example, the wait staff stages a scene in the dining area by their cordial and hospitable demeanor with customers. In the kitchen, however, the same waiters complain about their working conditions and swap unflattering stories about their experiences with customers.

The difference between serial killers and other “successful” people may lie not so much in the greater effectiveness of the serial killers at impression management as to an end but in their greater willingness to torture and kill as a result of employing the tactic. When individuals use techniques of self-presentation for benign purposes in everyday life, it escapes our attention; or we might characterize our friends and family members in a complimentary way, emphasizing their polite manners, attractive smile, or charming style. When a serial killer is polite and charming for the purpose of luring his victims, however, we characterize him as inordinately manipulative and devious.

In a diagnostic sense, is the serial killer who flatters his victims into modeling for his photo shoots any different in his manipulative skills from the sales clerk who wants to convince a shopper to buy the most expensive dress on the rack? Does the serial killer who kisses his wife goodbye as he goes off to troll the streets for prostitutes to rape and murder really differ in his role-playing behavior from the loving family man who brutally mistreats his employees at work but loves his family? It may be a different playing field—but a similar game.

Compartmentalization

Serial killers typically target absolute strangers (8). On a practical level, this creates a more difficult challenge for law enforcement without the benefit of knowing the motivation or the relationship between victim and killer. This may be only half of the story, however.

Compartmentalization is a psychological facilitator that serial killers use to overcome or neutralize whatever pangs of guilt they might otherwise experience (9). It may be an immense exaggeration to suggest that most serial killers are totally lacking in human warmth and concern. Instead, they may be able to compartmentalize their moralistic predilections by constructing at least two categories of human beings— their circle of family and friends, whom they care about and treat with decency, and individuals with whom they have no relationship and therefore victimize with total disregard for their feelings.

For example, Hillside Strangler Kenneth Bianchi clearly divided the world into two camps. The individuals toward whom he had no feelings including the twelve women he brutally tortured and killed. Ken’s inner circle consisted of his mother, his common-law wife, and his son, as well as his cousin Angelo.
Buono, with whom he teamed up for the killings. Bianchi’s wife Kelli Boyd once told investigators: “The Ken I knew couldn’t ever have hurt anybody or killed anybody. He wasn’t the kind of person who could have killed somebody.”

It could be argued, of course, that Bianchi was simply manipulating his spouse in order to appear innocent. However, it is also a compelling interpretation that he compartmentalized human beings in a manner that was not very different from the way that normal people compartmentalize others in everyday life.

Indeed, the killer can take advantage of the normalcy of compartmentalization, when he interacts with those in his inner circle. For example, despite his conviction on 33 counts of murder, John Wayne Gacy was seen by those in his community as a rather decent and caring man. Lillian Grexa, who had lived next door to Gacy while he was burying victims in the crawl space underneath his house, remained supportive, even writing to him on death row. “I know they say he killed 33 young men,” explained Grexa, “but I only knew him as a good neighbor…the best I ever had.”

Thus, the compartmentalization that allows killing without guilt may really be an extension of this existential phenomenon. An executive might be a heartless “son of a bitch” to all his employees at work but a loving and devoted family man at home. A harsh disciplinarian at home can be highly regarded by his friends and acquaintances. Similarly, many serial killers have jobs and families, do volunteer work, and kill part-time with a great deal of selectivity. A sexual sadist who may be unmercifully cruel in his treatment of a stranger he meets in a bar might not dream of harming his family members, friends, or neighbors.

According to psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (10), the Nazi physicians who performed ghoulish experiments at Auschwitz and other concentration camps compartmentalized their activities, attitudes, and emotions. Through the extreme psychological process known as “doubling,” any possible feelings of guilt were minimized because the camp doctors developed two separate and distinct selves—one for doing the dirty work of experimenting with and exterminating inmates and the other for living the rest of their lives outside the camp. In this way, no matter how sadistic they were on the job, they were still able to see themselves as gentle husbands, caring fathers, and honorable physicians.

Just as it was with the Nazi concentration camp doctors, the process of compartmentalization operates to the advantage of a serial murderer who kills for profit, that is, he robs and then executes to silence the eyewitnesses to his crimes. Like a hitman for the mob, he kills for a living yet otherwise leads an ordinary family life. In a similar way, a sexual sadist who may be unmercifully...
brutal to a hitchhiker or a stranger he meets at a bar might not dream of hurting
family members, friends, or neighbors.

Lifton argues that physicians may be more susceptible to doubling than are
the members of many other professional groups. To practice medicine objec-
tively, they must become accustomed to dealing mundanely with the biological
basics of humanity—blood, internal organs, and corpses. As a result, doctors
learn to develop a “medical self.” They become desensitized to death and learn
to function under demands that would be abhorrent to most laypeople. A few
medical practitioners may even develop a fondness for the pain and suffering of
their patients. Beginning with his residency in Ohio State University’s medical
school in 1983, Michael Swango poisoned to death as many as 60 hospital
patients under his care. Writing in his diary, Swango explained the pleasure
that he received from killing: He loved the “sweet, husky, close smell of indoor
homicide.” It reminded him that he was “still alive.”

Dehumanization

Compartmentalization is aided by another universal process: the capacity
of human beings to dehumanize “the other” by regarding outsiders as animals
or demons who are therefore expendable. Serial killers have taken advantage of
this process in the selection of their victims: They often view prostitutes as mere
sex machines, gays as AIDS carriers, nursing home patients as vegetables, and
homeless alcoholics as nothing more than trash. By regarding their victims as
subhuman elements of society, the killers can delude themselves into believing
that they are doing something positive rather than negative. They are, in their
minds, ridding the world of filth and evil. This was apparently the collective
thinking of German citizenry during the 1930s and 1940s, when stereotyping
Jews as “vermin” helped to justify an “eliminationist anti-Semitism.”

The behavior of a serial killer after his capture provides some insight
into his level of conscience and his use of dehumanization. Genuine sociopaths
almost never confess after being apprehended. Instead, they continue to
maintain their innocence, always hoping beyond hope to get off on a techni-
cality, to be granted a new trial, or to appeal their case to a higher level.

A few sociopathic serial killers have confessed to their crimes, not because
they were remorseful but because they considered it in their best interest to
do so. For example, Clifford Olson, who raped and murdered eleven children
in Vancouver, British Colombia, decided that the police “had the goods on
him.” He decided, therefore, that he might as well turn his defeat into an
advantage. Olson confessed to murder and led the police to the bodies of his
victims in exchange for a $100,000 “ransom.” Olson was later asked to reveal
information about other missing children, not for a fee but for the sake of the
worried parents. In true sociopathic fashion, he responded, “If I gave a shit about the parents, I wouldn’t of killed the kid.”

By contrast, serial killers who possess a conscience may confess to their crimes, even if it is no longer self-serving to do so. So long as they are still on the loose and alone with their fantasies and private thoughts, they are able to maintain the myth that their victims deserved to die. After being caught, however, they are forced to confront the disturbing reality that they had killed human beings, not animals, demons, or objects. At this point, their victims are rehumanized in their eyes. As a result, these serial killers may be overcome with guilt for the sadistic crimes they committed and freely confess.

Not unlike sadistic serial killers, soldiers in combat learn psychologically to separate the allies from the enemy, treating the latter as less than human. As a result, countless normal and healthy individuals who would never dream of killing for fun have slaughtered the enemy in combat. They are not, in their minds, killing human beings—only “gooks,” “krauts,” or “kikes.” While in the midst of combat, they continue to hold dehumanized images. After returning home, however, they typically adopt prevailing attitudes toward the members of the same groups with whom they now live at peace. At the end of the Cold War, for example, we easily modified our thinking about the “red peril” and “the evil empire,” viewing Russians as our allies rather than our mortal enemy. After World War II, the negative image of our Japanese opponents—“the yellow peril”—quickly dissipated.

Similarly, it is easy to argue that brutal terrorists who target civilians and government officials are sociopaths whose lack of conscience makes possible doing the most despicable things to their innocent victims. Yet the dehumanization process may mean much more than an absence of conscience in facilitating a terrorist who kills civilians. Arab terrorists refer to Jews and Christians as “pigs” and “dogs.” Their terrorist acts may be more altruistic than selfish, designed to give them a place of honor in their religious community and to influence changes in policy they regard as detrimental to their national interests.

**Lack of Empathy**

During the 1930s, social philosopher George Herbert Mead ([11](#)) identified “role taking” as a basic human quality, whereby an individual is able to adopt the viewpoint of another person. Initially, the child takes one role at a time. He may, for example, “put himself in the shoes” of his father or mother, his teacher, his siblings, and his close friends. Later, according to Mead, the maturing child comes to develop a consistent self-concept as he is able to define himself from the viewpoint of the entire language community, or “the generalized other.”
Many serial killers apparently share the role-taking ability, even if they use it to enhance the pleasure they derive from inflicting pain and suffering on their victims. Indeed, role-taking ability has been shown to take the form of a continuum rather than a dichotomous variable, along which any given individual’s degree of empathy can be located. Thus, there are some individuals whose empathy is so profound and broad that they commiserate with the plight of starving children on the other side of the world. Many individuals are closer to the middle of the continuum, identifying with the grief of victims in proximity to them but emotionally oblivious to the pain and suffering of most strangers. At the other end of the continuum, however, there may also be millions who are completely lacking in empathy. They may not be serial killers, but they are insensitive to human tragedy. They may not kill, but they are more than willing to cheat, swindle, lie, womanize, make unethical business decisions, or sell someone a bad used car.

Hare (5) estimates that at least 1% of the population consists of what he refers to as “subclinical psychopaths.” They are not repeat killers but possess the characteristics usually associated with individuals who kill for pleasure. Subclinical psychopaths are, instead, charming men who use women for sex and money, only to then abandon them; con artists who engage in insider-trading and illegal market timing as stock brokers and money managers; individuals who are HIV-positive and still have unprotected sex; and salesmen who make vastly exaggerated claims about their products. Psychopaths are neighbors, coworkers, bosses, and dates. Some are sadistic serial killers.

We believe that lack of empathy is one characteristic of sadistic killers that has been accepted far too uncritically by psychologists and criminologists alike. Many investigators have indeed argued, based on superficial familiarity with serial murder cases, that sadistic serial killers are incapable of appreciating their victims’ pain and suffering. It has been reported that serial killer Henry Lee Lucas once compared his attitude toward killing humans to our concern for squashing a bug—no big deal. Similarly, Hillside Strangler Kenneth Bianchi boasted that “killing a broad” meant nothing to him. Yet as we shall argue below, “killing a broad” meant everything to him.

In the case of repeat killers for whom murder is instrumental, the lack of empathy may truly be essential for avoiding apprehension. Profit-motivated serial killers, for example, may not enjoy the suffering of their victims but still take their victims’ lives for the sake of expediency. During the 1970s, for example, Gary and Thaddeus Lewington committed a series of ten armed robberies around central Ohio during which they took their victims’ wallets and then cavalierly shot each one in the head. Twenty years later, Sacramento landlady Dorothea Puente, with moral impunity, poisoned to death her nine...
elderly tenants so she could steal their social security checks. In October 2002, DC snipers John Allen Mohammad and Lee Boyd Malvo dispassionately shot and killed ten innocent victims to further their demands for 10 million dollars in ransom—pay up or perish. For them, the physical distance from the victims they gunned down with a long-range rifle aided in inoculating them against any tendency to empathize. The victims were merely and literally targets of opportunity. In addition, they apparently saw Americans as “the enemy,” which only aided them in dehumanizing their victims chosen at random.

For sadistic serial killers, however, murder is an end in itself, making the presence of empathy—even intensely heightened empathy—important in two respects. First, their crimes require highly tuned powers of cognitive empathy to capture their victims. Killers who do not understand their victims’ feelings would be incapable of conning them effectively. For example, Theodore Bundy understood all too well the sensibilities of female college students who were taken in by his feigned helplessness. He trapped attractive young women by appearing to be disabled and asking them for help. In Calaveras County, California, serial killers Leonard Lake and Charles Ng gained entry into the homes of their victims by answering classified ads in the local newspaper, pretending that they wished only to purchase a camcorder or furniture. Milwaukee’s cannibal killer Jeffrey Dahmer met his victims in a bar and lured them to his apartment, where they expected to party, not to be murdered.

Second, a well-honed sense of emotional empathy is critical for a sadistic killer’s enjoyment of the suffering of his victims. For sadistic objectives to be realized, a killer who tortures, sodomizes, rapes, and humiliates must be able to both understand and experience his victim’s suffering. Otherwise, there would be no enjoyment or sexual arousal. Thus, he feels his victim’s pain, but he interprets it as his own pleasure. Indeed, the more empathic he is, the greater his enjoyment of his victim’s suffering.

In the literature of psychology as well as criminology, lack of empathy—along with a manipulative and calculating style, an absence of remorse, and impulsiveness—is frequently regarded as a defining characteristic of the sociopathic or antisocial personality disorder. Yet Heilbrun (12) came to quite a different conclusion from his interviews of 168 male prisoners. He found two kinds of sociopath—those who had poor impulse control, low IQ, and little empathy (the Henry Lee Lucas type) and those who had better impulse control, high IQ, sadistic objectives, and heightened empathy (the Theodore Bundy type). In fact, the most empathic group of criminals in Heilbrun’s study was comprised of intelligent sociopaths with a history of extreme violence, particularly rape, a crime occasionally involving a sadistic component.
According to Heilbrun, violent acts inflicting pain and suffering are more intentional than impulsive. In addition, empathic skills promote the arousal and satisfaction of sadistic objectives by enhancing the criminal’s awareness of the pain being experienced by his victim. Because the subjects in Heilbrun’s study were surveyed within months of their scheduled parole hearing dates, it is certainly possible that at least some of the observed differences could represent systematic response error. That is, perhaps the more intelligent subjects, anticipating their upcoming parole review, were more apt to feign empathy through their responses. Thus, IQ differences may have produced artificial differences in empathy responses.

Whether methodological concerns were partially responsible, Heilbrun’s finding of empathic sadistic sociopaths was all but ignored in the literature—that is, until recently, when psychiatrists began to question the commonly held view that antisocial types necessarily lack the ability to feel their victims’ pain. Instead, psychiatrists noted that in many cases they possess, as Glen Gabbard (13) wrote in *Psychiatric News*, “tremendous powers of empathic discernment—albeit for the purposes of self-aggrandizement.”

We suggest it is in the interaction between sexual sadism and sociopathy that empathy becomes both heightened and perverted. Sociopaths lack empathy; sadists require empathy. When both disorders are present together, sociopathic empathy is profoundly modified. One disorder enhances the other, making possible the sadistic thrills that many serial killers seek.

**CONCLUSION**

Many individuals who live conventional lives are able to satisfy their sadistic needs in a socially acceptable way. Business leaders have been known to wheel and deal, hire and fire; some teachers are unnecessarily tough on their students; and parents can be harsh and threatening in their child-rearing practices. For various reasons, serial killers lack whatever it takes to achieve a position of dominance in the legitimate system. Had serial killer Theodore Bundy ever completed his law degree, he might have been able to kill them—figuratively, of course—inside the courtroom, rather than on the streets. If Aileen Wuornos had been blessed with the opportunity for a decent childhood, she might have become an aggressive entrepreneur rather than a deadly highway prostitute.

Sadism has even found a prominent position in popular culture. Many prime-time television series now owe their staying power to the sadistic impulses they exploit on the tube. Audience members find tremendous enjoyment in viewing horrified contestants who devour worms and insects on NBC’s *Fear Factor*;
Donald Trump who exclaims without nuance, “You’re fired” on his wildly popular series; The Apprentice; American Idol’s Simon Cowell who brutally insults a contestant; Ann Robinson who refers to a losing player as “the weakest link”; contestants who backstab one another or eat rodents on an episode of Survivor; and aspiring singers lacking any talent who are deceived and humiliated for the sake of a laugh on the WB’s contest, Superstar USA.

In their capacity for committing extreme violence against innocent victims, serial killers obviously differ qualitatively from the average person. Few members of society would be able to torture and kill multiple victims (although the sadistic impulse is probably much more pervasive than we would like to think). In terms of their underlying psychology, however, serial murderers may not differ from normal people as much as we have been led to believe.

An alternative possibility is that the sociopathic designation has been incorrectly applied to sadistic serial killers. If they really do not differ from other people qualitatively in terms of their ability to project a public image of themselves, their ability to compartmentalize and dehumanize, and their empathy for the suffering of victims, they may not be the extreme sociopaths we have believed them to be. This does not mean that the psyche of the serial murderer is like that of normal people, only that we have been looking in the wrong place for the important differences.

REFERENCES