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02 **PART I**
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05 **THE PSYCHOLOGY**
06 **OF SERIAL VIOLENT CRIMES**
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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

From: *Serial Murder and the Psychology of Violent Crimes*
Edited by: R. N. Kocsis © Humana Press Inc., Totowa, NJ

01 involving Satanic human sacrifice, the sexual torture of children, and acts of
02 cannibalism and necrophilia.

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

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

25

26 *SOCIOPATHY AND SERIAL MURDER*

27

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

35 In the literature, the term sociopath is often employed interchangeably with
36 psychopath and antisocial personality disorder. Initially, the word psychopath
37 was widely used by psychiatrists and psychologists to identify the syndrome
38 of character traits involving an impulsive, reckless, and selfish disregard of
39 others. During the 1950s, however, the psychiatric profession recommended the
40 use of the diagnostic term “sociopath,” in part to distinguish the psychopathic

01 personality from the much more serious psychotic disorders. Then, during the
02 late 1960s, psychiatrists once again proposed a change in terminology, replacing
03 both the sociopathic and psychopathic diagnoses with the antisocial person-
04 ality disorder (APD). Some experts in psychopathology maintain fine distinc-
05 tions among the three diagnostic categories, even offering various subtypes
06 for each (6). To understand sadistic serial murder, however, these differences
07 are not particularly important because the fundamental characteristics prevalent
08 among these offenders are, for the most part, common to all three terms.

09 ***Presentation of Self*** 10

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

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

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

39 Even in the most mundane areas of everyday life, normal people stage a
40 character. Goffman distinguished between the *frontstage* where the performance

01 is given from the *backstage* region where it is rehearsed. In a restaurant, for
02 example, the wait staff stages a scene in the dining area by their cordial and
03 hospitable demeanor with customers. In the kitchen, however, the same waiters
04 complain about their working conditions and swap unflattering stories about
05 their experiences with customers.

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

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

23 ***Compartmentalization***

24
25 Serial killers typically target absolute strangers (8). On a practical level,
26 this creates a more difficult challenge for law enforcement without the benefit
27 of knowing the motivation or the relationship between victim and killer. This
28 may be only half of the story, however.

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

37 For example, Hillside Strangler Kenneth Bianchi clearly divided the world
38 into two camps. The individuals toward whom he had no feelings including the
39 twelve women he brutally tortured and killed. Ken’s inner circle consisted of
40 his mother, his common-law wife, and his son, as well as his cousin Angelo

01 Buono, with whom he teamed up for the killings. Bianchi's wife Kelli Boyd
02 once told investigators: "The Ken I knew couldn't ever have hurt anybody or
03 killed anybody. He wasn't the kind of person who could have killed somebody."

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

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

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

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

36 Just as it was with the Nazi concentration camp doctors, the process of
37 compartmentalization operates to the advantage of a serial murderer who kills
38 for profit, that is, he robs and then executes to silence the eyewitnesses to his
39 crimes. Like a hitman for the mob, he kills for a living yet otherwise leads an
40 ordinary family life. In a similar way, a sexual sadist who may be unmercifully

01 brutal to a hitchhiker or a stranger he meets at a bar might not dream of hurting
02 family members, friends, or neighbors.

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

15 *Dehumanization*

16
17 Compartmentalization is aided by another universal process: the capacity
18 of human beings to *dehumanize* “the other” by regarding outsiders as animals
19 or demons who are therefore expendable. Serial killers have taken advantage of
20 this process in the selection of their victims: They often view prostitutes as mere
21 sex machines, gays as AIDS carriers, nursing home patients as vegetables, and
22 homeless alcoholics as nothing more than trash. By regarding their victims as
23 subhuman elements of society, the killers can delude themselves into believing
24 that they are doing something positive rather than negative. They are, in their
25 minds, ridding the world of filth and evil. This was apparently the collective
26 thinking of German citizenry during the 1930s and 1940s, when stereotyping
27 Jews as “vermin” helped to justify an “eliminationist anti-Semitism.”

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

33 A few sociopathic serial killers have confessed to their crimes, not because
34 they were remorseful but because they considered it in their best interest to
35 do so. For example, Clifford Olson, who raped and murdered eleven children
36 in Vancouver, British Columbia, decided that the police “had the goods on
37 him.” He decided, therefore, that he might as well turn his defeat into an
38 advantage. Olson confessed to murder and led the police to the bodies of his
39 victims in exchange for a \$100,000 “ransom.” Olson was later asked to reveal
40 information about other missing children, not for a fee but for the sake of the

01 worried parents. In true sociopathic fashion, he responded, “If I gave a shit
02 about the parents, I wouldn’t of killed the kid.”

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

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

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

32 ***Lack of Empathy***

34 During the 1930s, social philosopher George Herbert Mead (*11*) identified
35 “role taking” as a basic human quality, whereby an individual is able to adopt
36 the viewpoint of another person. Initially, the child takes one role at a time. He
37 may, for example, “put himself in the shoes” of his father or mother, his teacher,
38 his siblings, and his close friends. Later, according to Mead, the maturing child
39 comes to develop a consistent self-concept as he is able to define himself from
40 the viewpoint of the entire language community, or “the generalized other.”

01 Many serial killers apparently share the role-taking ability, even if they
02 use it to enhance the pleasure they derive from inflicting pain and suffering
03 on their victims. Indeed, role-taking ability has been shown to take the form
04 of a continuum rather than a dichotomous variable, along which any given
05 individual's degree of empathy can be located. Thus, there are some individuals
06 whose empathy is so profound and broad that they commiserate with the plight
07 of starving children on the other side of the world. Many individuals are closer
08 to the middle of the continuum, identifying with the grief of victims in proximity
09 to them but emotionally oblivious to the pain and suffering of most strangers.
10 At the other end of the continuum, however, there may also be millions who
11 are completely lacking in empathy. They may not be serial killers, but they
12 are insensitive to human tragedy. They may not kill, but they are more than
13 willing to cheat, swindle, lie, womanize, make unethical business decisions, or
14 sell someone a bad used car.

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

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

33 In the case of repeat killers for whom murder is instrumental, the lack
34 of empathy may truly be essential for avoiding apprehension. Profit-motivated
35 serial killers, for example, may not enjoy the suffering of their victims but
36 still take their victims' lives for the sake of expediency. During the 1970s,
37 for example, Gary and Thaddeus Lewington committed a series of ten armed
38 robberies around central Ohio during which they took their victims' wallets
39 and then cavalierly shot each one in the head. Twenty years later, Sacramento
40 landlady Dorothea Puente, with moral impunity, poisoned to death her nine

01 elderly tenants so she could steal their social security checks. In October 2002,
02 DC snipers John Allen Mohammad and Lee Boyd Malvo dispassionately shot
03 and killed ten innocent victims to further their demands for 10 million dollars
04 in ransom—pay up or perish. For them, the physical distance from the victims
05 they gunned down with a long-range rifle aided in inoculating them against
06 any tendency to empathize. The victims were merely and literally targets of
07 opportunity. In addition, they apparently saw Americans as “the enemy,” which
08 only aided them in dehumanizing their victims chosen at random.

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

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

30 In the literature of psychology as well as criminology, lack of empathy—
31 along with a manipulative and calculating style, an absence of remorse, and
32 impulsiveness—is frequently regarded as a defining characteristic of the socio-
33 pathic or antisocial personality disorder. Yet Heilbrun (12) came to quite a
34 different conclusion from his interviews of 168 male prisoners. He found two
35 kinds of sociopath—those who had poor impulse control, low IQ, and little
36 empathy (the Henry Lee Lucas type) and those who had better impulse control,
37 high IQ, sadistic objectives, and heightened empathy (the Theodore Bundy
38 type). In fact, the most empathic group of criminals in Heilbrun’s study was
39 comprised of intelligent sociopaths with a history of extreme violence, parti-
40 cularly rape, a crime occasionally involving a sadistic component.

01 According to Heilbrun, violent acts inflicting pain and suffering are more
02 intentional than impulsive. In addition, empathic skills promote the arousal and
03 satisfaction of sadistic objectives by enhancing the criminal's awareness of the
04 pain being experienced by his victim. Because the subjects in Heilbrun's study
05 were surveyed within months of their scheduled parole hearing dates, it is
06 certainly possible that at least some of the observed differences could represent
07 systematic response error. That is, perhaps the more intelligent subjects, anti-
08 cipating their upcoming parole review, were more apt to feign empathy through
09 their responses. Thus, IQ differences may have produced artificial differences
10 in empathy responses.

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

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

23

24 *CONCLUSION*

25

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

37

38 Sadism has even found a prominent position in popular culture. Many prime-
39 time television series now owe their staying power to the sadistic impulses they
40 exploit on the tube. Audience members find tremendous enjoyment in viewing
horrificed contestants who devour worms and insects on NBC's *Fear Factor*;

01 Donald Trump who exclaims without nuance, “You’re fired” on his wildly
 02 popular series; *The Apprentice*; *American Idol*’s Simon Cowell who brutally
 03 insults a contestant; Ann Robinson who refers to a losing player as “the weakest
 04 link”; contestants who backstab one another or eat rodents on an episode of
 05 *Survivor*; and aspiring singers lacking any talent who are deceived and humil-
 06 iated for the sake of a laugh on the WB’s contest, *Superstar USA*.

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

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

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