

# Diagnosis may be Evil

Predatory killers often do far more than commit murder. Some have lured their victims... for prolonged torture... Many perform their grisly rituals as much for pleasure as for any other reason. ...a few forensic scientists have taken to thinking of these people as not merely disturbed but evil. Evil in that their deliberate, habitual savagery defies any psychological explanation or attempt at treatment...

*For the Worst of Us, the Diagnosis May Be Evil*  
by Benedict Carey; NY Times 8 Feb 2005

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/08/health/psychology/08evil.html> (  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/08/health/psychology/08evil.html> )

Predatory killers often do far more than commit murder. Some have lured their victims into homemade chambers for prolonged torture. Others have exotic tastes - for vivisection, sexual humiliation, burning. Many perform their grisly rituals as much for pleasure as for any other reason.

Among themselves, a few forensic scientists have taken to thinking of these people as not merely disturbed but evil. Evil in that their deliberate, habitual savagery defies any psychological explanation or attempt at treatment.

Most psychiatrists assiduously avoid the word evil, contending that its use would precipitate a dangerous slide from clinical to moral judgment that could put people on death row unnecessarily and obscure the understanding of violent criminals.

Still, many career forensic examiners say their work forces them to reflect on the concept of evil, and some acknowledge they can find no other term for certain individuals they have evaluated.

In an effort to standardize what makes a crime particularly heinous, Dr. Michael Welner, an associate professor of psychiatry at New York University, has been developing what he calls a depravity scale, which rates the horror of an act by the sum of its grim details.

And a prominent personality expert at Columbia University has published a 22-level hierarchy of evil behavior, derived from detailed biographies of more than 500 violent criminals.

He is now working on a book urging the profession not to shrink from thinking in terms of evil when appraising certain offenders, even if the E-word cannot be used as part of an official examination or diagnosis.

"We are talking about people who commit breathtaking acts, who do so repeatedly, who know what they're doing, and are doing it in peacetime" under no threat to themselves, said Dr. Michael Stone, the Columbia psychiatrist, who has examined several hundred killers at Mid-Hudson Psychiatric Center in New Hampton, N.Y., and others at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in Queens, where he consults and teaches. "We know from experience who these people are, and how they behave," and it is time, he said, to give their behavior "the proper appellation." ...

"Evil is endemic, it's constant, it is a potential in all of us. Just about everyone has committed evil acts," said Dr. Robert I. Simon, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown Medical School and

the author of "Bad Men Do What Good Men Dream."

Dr. Simon considers the notion of evil to be of no use to forensic psychiatry, in part because evil is ultimately in the eye of the beholder, shaped by political and cultural as well as religious values... If the issue is history's most transcendent savages, on the other hand, most people agree that Hitler and Pol Pot would qualify.

"When you start talking about evil, psychiatrists don't know anything more about it than anyone else," Dr. Simon said. "Our opinions might carry more weight, under the patina or authority of the profession, but the point is, you can call someone evil and so can I. So what? What does it add?" ...

As part of an extensive, in-depth interview, a trained examiner rates the offender on a 20-item personality test. The items include glibness and superficial charm, grandiose self-worth, pathological lying, proneness to boredom and emotional vacuity. The subjects earn zero points if the description is not applicable, two points if it is highly applicable, and one if it is somewhat or sometimes true.

The psychologist who devised the checklist, Dr. Robert Hare, a professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, said that average total scores varied from below five in the general population to the low 20's in prison populations, to a range of 30 to 40 - highly psychopathic - in predatory killers. In a series of studies, criminologists have found that people who score in the high range are two to four times as likely as other prisoners to commit another crime when released. More than 90 percent of the men and a few women at the top of Dr. Stone's hierarchy qualify as psychopaths...

Checklists, scales, and other psychological exams are not blood tests, however, and their use in support of a concept as loaded as evil could backfire, many psychiatrists say. Not all violent predators are psychopaths, for one thing, nor are most psychopaths violent criminals. And to suggest that psychopathy or some other profile is a reliable measure of evil, they say, would be irresponsible and ultimately jeopardize the credibility of the profession.

In the 1980's and 1990's, a psychiatrist in Dallas earned the name Dr. Death by testifying in court, in a wide variety of cases, that he was certain that defendants would commit more crimes in the future - though often, he had not examined them. Many were sentenced to death...

"I think the main reason it's better to avoid the term evil, at least in the courtroom, is that for many it evokes a personalized Satan, the idea that there is supernatural causation for misconduct," said Dr. Park Dietz, a forensic psychiatrist in Newport Beach, Calif., who examined the convicted serial murderer Jeffrey Dahmer, as well as Lyle and Erik Menendez, who were convicted of murdering their parents in Beverly Hills.

"This could only conceal a subtle important truth about many of these people, such as the high rate of personality disorders," Dr. Dietz said. He added: "The fact is that there aren't many in whom I couldn't find some redeeming attributes and some humanity. As far as we can tell, the causes of their behavior are biological, psychological and social, and do not so far demonstrably include the work of Lucifer."

The doctors who argue that evil has a place in forensics are well aware of these risks, but say that in some cases they are worth taking. They say it is possible - necessary, in fact, to understand many predatory killers - to hold inside one's head many disparate dimensions: that the person in question may be narcissistic, perhaps abused by a parent, or even charming, affectionate and intelligent, but also in some sense evil. While the term may not be appropriate for use in a courtroom or a clinical diagnosis, they say, it is an element of human nature that should not be ignored... ([full article](#) (

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/08/health/psychology/08evil.html> ) )