register. If they did, it would “ruin” things for the molester.

This utter lack of empathy for their victims is one of the main focuses of new treatments being devised for child molesters and other such offenders. In one of the most promising treatment programs, the offenders read heart-wrenching accounts of crimes like their own, told from the victim’s perspective. They also watch videotapes of victims tearfully telling what it was like to be molested. The offenders then write about their own offense from the victim’s point of view, imagining what the victim felt. They read this account to a therapy group, and try to answer questions about the assault from the victim’s perspective. Finally, the offender goes through a simulated reenactment of the crime, this time playing the role of the victim.

William Pithers, the Vermont prison psychologist who developed this perspective-taking therapy, told me, “Empathy with the victim shifts perception so that the denial of pain, even in one’s fantasies, is difficult” and so strengthens the men’s motivation to fight their perverse sexual urges. Sex offenders who have been through the program in prison had only half the rate of subsequent offenses after release compared to those who had no such treatment. Without this initial empathy-inspired motivation, none of the rest of treatment will work.

While there may be some small hope for instilling a sense of empathy in offenders such as child molesters, there is much less for another criminal type, the psychopath (more recently called the *sociopath* as a psychiatric diagnosis). Psychopaths are notorious for being both charming and completely without remorse for even the most cruel and heartless acts. Psychopathy, the incapacity to feel empathy or compassion of any sort, or the least twinge of conscience, is one of the more perplexing of emotional defects. The heart of the psychopath’s coldness seems to lie in an inability to make anything more than the shallowest of emotional connections. The cruelest of criminals, such as sadistic serial killers who delight in the suffering of their victims before they die, are the epitome of psychopathy.[18]

Psychopaths are also glib liars, willing to say anything to get what they want, and they manipulate their victims’ emotions with the same cynicism. Consider the performance of Faro, a seventeen-year-old member of a Los Angeles gang who crippled a mother and her baby in a drive-by shooting, which he described with more pride than remorse. Driving in a car with Leon Bing, who was writing a book about the Los Angeles gangs the Crips and the Bloods, Faro wants to

show off. Faro tells Bing he's "gonna look crazy" at the "two dudes" in the next car. As Bing recounts the exchange:

> The driver, sensing that someone is looking at him, glances over at my car. His eyes connect with Faro's, widen for an instant. Then he breaks the contact, looks down, looks away. And there is no mistaking what I saw there in his eyes: It was fear.

Faro demonstrates the look he flashed at the next car for Bing:

> He looks straight at me and everything about his face shifts and changes, as if by some trick of time-lapse photography. It becomes a nightmare face, and it is a scary thing to see. It tells you that if you return his stare, if you challenge this kid, you'd better be able to stand your ground. His look tells you that he doesn't care about anything, not your life and not his.[19]

Of course, in behavior as complex as crime, there are many plausible explanations that do not evoke a biological basis. One might be that a perverse kind of emotional skill—intimidating other people—has survival value in violent neighborhoods, as might turning to crime; in these cases too much empathy might be counterproductive. Indeed, an opportunistic lack of empathy may be a "virtue" in many roles in life, from "bad cop" police interrogator to corporate raider. Men who have been torturers for terrorist states, for example, describe how they learned to dissociate from the feelings of their victims in order to do their "job." There are many routes to manipulativeness.

One of the more ominous ways this absence of empathy may display itself was discovered by accident in a study of the most vicious of wife batterers. The research revealed a physiological anomaly among many of the most violent husbands, who regularly beat up their wives or threaten them with knives or guns: the husbands do so in a cold, calculating state rather than while being carried away by the heat of fury.[20] As their anger mounts, the anomaly emerges: their heart rate *drops*, instead of climbing higher, as is ordinarily the case with mounting fury. This means they are growing physiologically calmer, even as they get more belligerent and abusive. Their violence appears to be a calculated act of terrorism, a method for controlling their wives by instilling fear.

These coolly brutal husbands are a breed apart from most other men who batter their wives. For one, they are far more likely to be violent outside the marriage as well, getting into bar fights and

battling with coworkers and other family members. And while most men who become violent with their wives do so impulsively, out of rage after feeling rejected or jealous, or out of fear of abandonment, these calculating batterers will strike out at their wives seemingly for no reason at all—and once they start, nothing she does, including trying to leave, seems to restrain their violence.

Some researchers who study criminal psychopaths suspect their cold manipulativeness, such absence of empathy or caring, can sometimes stem from a neural defect.* A possible physiological basis of heartless psychopathy has been shown in two ways, both of which suggest the involvement of neural pathways to the limbic brain. In one, people's brain waves are measured as they try to decipher words that have been scrambled. The words are flashed very quickly, for just a tenth of a second or so. Most people react differently to emotional words such as *kill* than to neutral words such as *chair:* they can decide more quickly if the emotional word was scrambled, and their brains show a distinctive wave pattern in response to the emotional words, but not the neutral ones. But psychopaths have neither of these responses: their brains do not show the distinctive pattern in response to the emotional words, and they do not respond more quickly to them, suggesting a disruption in circuits between the verbal cortex, which recognizes the word, and the limbic brain, which attaches feeling to it.

Robert Hare, the University of British Columbia psychologist who has done this research, interprets these results as meaning that psychopaths have a shallow understanding of emotional words, a reflection of their more general shallowness in the affective realm. The callousness of psychopaths, Hare believes, is based in part on another physiological pattern he discovered in earlier research, one that also suggests an irregularity in the workings of the amygdala and related circuits: psychopaths about to receive an electrical shock show no sign of the fear response that is normal in people about to experience pain.[21] Because the prospect of pain does not trigger a surge of anxiety, Hare contends that psychopaths lack concern about future punishment for what they do. And because they themselves do not feel fear, they have no empathy—or compassion—for the fear and pain of their victims.

* A note of caution: If there are biological patterns at play in some kinds of criminality—such as a neural defect in empathy—that does not argue that all criminals are biologically flawed, or that there is some biological marker for crime. A controversy has raged on this issue, and

the best consensus is that there is no such biological marker, and certainly no “criminal gene.” Even if there is a biological basis for a lack of empathy in some cases, that does not mean all who have it will drift to crime; most will not. A lack of empathy should be factored in with all the other psychological, economic, and social forces that contribute to a vector toward criminality.

8

The Social Arts

As so often happens to five-year-olds with younger siblings, Len has lost all patience with Jay, his two-and-a-half-year-old brother, who is making a mess of the Lego blocks they've been playing with. Carried away by a wave of rage, Len bites Jay, who breaks into tears. Their mother, hearing Jay's pained yelp, bustles over and scolds Len, ordering him to put away those objects of contention, the Lego blocks. At this—what surely must seem a gross miscarriage of justice—Len bursts out crying. Still peeved, his mother refuses to console him.

But Len is proffered comfort from an unlikely source: Jay, who, although the original injured party, is now so concerned by his older brother's tears that he undertakes a campaign to calm Len down. The exchange goes something like this:[1]

"Len, don't," Jay implores. "Stop crying, mate. Stop it crying."

But Len still cries. His direct plea a failure, Jay beseeches their mother on Len's behalf: "Len crying, Mummy! Len crying. Look. Me show you. Len crying."

And then, turning to Len, Jay adopts a mothering mode, patting his weeping brother as he reassures him in soothing tones, "Look, Len. No go on crying."

Len's sobs continue, despite the comforting. So Jay turns to another tactic, lending a helping hand in putting away the Lego blocks in their bag, with a friendly, "Ah, Len. I put it back for Lennie, hey?"

Even so, the tears continue. The ever-ingenious Jay tries yet another strategy, distraction. Showing his brother a toy car, Jay tries to draw his attention away from the minor tragedy that has just befallen him. "There's this man in here. What's this, Len? What's this, Len?"

Len takes no interest. He's inconsolable; his tears know no end. Losing her patience with him, his mother resorts to that classic parental threat, "Do you want me to smack you?" to which Len responds with a wavering, "No."

"Then just stop it, please," says his mother firmly, if a bit exasperatedly.

Through his sobs, Len manages a pathetic, gasping, “I’m trying to.”

Which prompts Jay’s final stratagem: borrowing his mother’s firmness and voice of authority, he threatens, “Stop crying, Len. Smack your bottom!”

This microdrama reveals the remarkable emotional sophistication that a toddler of just thirty months can bring to bear in trying to manage someone else’s emotions. In his urgent attempts to soothe his brother, Jay is able to draw on a large repertoire of tactics, ranging from a simple plea, to seeking an ally in his mother (no help, she), to physically comforting him, to lending a helping hand, to distraction, threats, and direct commands. No doubt Jay relies on an arsenal that has been tried with him in his own moments of distress. No matter. What counts is that he can readily put them to use in a pinch even at this very young age.

Of course, as every parent of young children knows, Jay’s display of empathy and soothing is by no means universal. It is perhaps as likely that a child his age will see a sibling’s upset as a chance for vengeance, and so do whatever it takes to make the upset even worse. The same skills can be used to tease or torment a sibling. But even that mean-spiritedness bespeaks the emergence of a crucial emotional aptitude: the ability to know another’s feelings and to act in a way that further shapes those feelings. Being able to manage emotions in someone else is the core of the art of handling relationships.

To manifest such interpersonal power, toddlers must first reach a benchmark of self-control, the beginnings of the capacity to damp down their own anger and distress, their impulses and excitement—even if that ability usually falters. Attunement to others demands a modicum of calm in oneself. Tentative signs of this ability to manage their own emotions emerge around this same period: toddlers begin to be able to wait without wailing, to argue or cajole to get their way rather than using brute force—even if they don’t always choose to use this ability Patience emerges as an alternative to tantrums, at least occasionally. And signs of empathy emerge by age two; it was Jay’s empathy, the root of compassion, that drove him to try so hard to cheer up his sobbing brother, Len. Thus handling emotions in someone else—the fine art of relationships—requires the ripeness of two other emotional skills, self-management and empathy.

With this base, the “people skills” ripen. These are the social competences that make for effectiveness in dealings with others; deficits here lead to ineptness in the social world or repeated

interpersonal disasters. Indeed, it is precisely the lack of these skills that can cause even the intellectually brightest to founder in their relationships, coming off as arrogant, obnoxious, or insensitive. These social abilities allow one to shape an encounter, to mobilize and inspire others, to thrive in intimate relationships, to persuade and influence, to put others at ease.

SHOW SOME EMOTION

One key social competence is how well or poorly people express their own feelings. Paul Ekman uses the term *display rules* for the social consensus about which feelings can be properly shown when. Cultures sometimes vary tremendously in this regard. For example, Ekman and colleagues in Japan studied the facial reactions of students to a horrific film about ritual circumcisions of teenage Aborigines. When the Japanese students watched the film with an authority figure present, their faces showed only the slightest hints of reaction. But when they thought they were alone (though they were being taped by a secret camera) their faces twisted into vivid mixes of anguished distress, dread, and disgust.

There are several basic kinds of display rules.[2] One is *minimizing* the show of emotion—this is the Japanese norm for feelings of distress in the presence of someone in authority, which the students were following when they masked their upset with a poker face. Another is *exaggerating* what one feels by magnifying the emotional expression; this is the ploy used by the six-year-old who dramatically twists her face into a pathetic frown, lips quivering, as she runs to complain to her mother about being teased by her older brother. A third is *substituting* one feeling for another; this comes into play in some Asian cultures where it is impolite to say no, and positive (but false) assurances are given instead. How well one employs these strategies, and knows when to do so, is one factor in emotional intelligence.

We learn these display rules very early, partly by explicit instruction. An education in display rules is imparted when we instruct a child not to seem disappointed, but to smile and say thank you instead, when Grandpa has given a dreadful but well-meant birthday present. This education in display rules, though, is more often through modeling: children learn to do what they see done. In educating the sentiments, emotions are both the medium and the

message. If a child is told to “smile and say thank you” by a parent who is, at that moment, harsh, demanding, and cold—who hisses the message instead of warmly whispering it—the child is more likely to learn a very different lesson, and in fact respond to Grandpa with a frown and a curt, flat “Thank you.” The effect on Grandpa is very different: in the first case he’s happy (though misled); in the second he’s hurt by the mixed message.

Emotional displays, of course, have immediate consequences in the impact they make on the person who receives them. The rule being learned by the child is something like, “Mask your real feelings when they will hurt someone you love; substitute a phony, but less hurtful feeling instead.” Such rules for expressing emotions are more than part of the lexicon of social propriety; they dictate how our own feelings impact on everyone else. To follow these rules well is to have optimal impact; to do so poorly is to foment emotional havoc.

Actors, of course, are artists of the emotional display; their expressiveness is what evokes response in their audience. And, no doubt, some of us come into life as natural actors. But partly because the lessons we learn about display rules vary according to the models we’ve had, people differ greatly in their adeptness.

EXPRESSIVENESS AND EMOTIONAL CONTAGION

It was early in the Vietnam War, and an American platoon was hunkered down in some rice paddies, in the heat of a firefight with the Vietcong. Suddenly a line of six monks started walking along the elevated berms that separated paddy from paddy. Perfectly calm and poised, the monks walked directly toward the line of fire.

“They didn’t look right, they didn’t look left. They walked straight through,” recalls David Busch, one of the American soldiers. “It was really strange, because nobody shot at ’em. And after they walked over the berm, suddenly all the fight was out of me. It just didn’t feel like I wanted to do this anymore, at least not that day. It must have been that way for everybody, because everybody quit. We just stopped fighting.”[3]

The power of the monks’ quietly courageous calm to pacify soldiers in the heat of battle illustrates a basic principle of social life: Emotions are contagious. To be sure, this tale marks an extreme. Most emotional contagion is far more subtle, part of a tacit exchange that

happens in every encounter. We transmit and catch moods from each other in what amounts to a subterranean economy of the psyche in which some encounters are toxic, some nourishing. This emotional exchange is typically at a subtle, almost imperceptible level; the way a salesperson says thank you can leave us feeling ignored, resented, or genuinely welcomed and appreciated. We catch feelings from one another as though they were some kind of social virus.

We send emotional signals in every encounter, and those signals affect those we are with. The more adroit we are socially, the better we control the signals we send; the reserve of polite society is, after all, simply a means to ensure that no disturbing emotional leakage will unsettle the encounter (a social rule that, when brought into the domain of intimate relationships, is stifling). Emotional intelligence includes managing this exchange; "popular" and "charming" are terms we use for people whom we like to be with because their emotional skills make us feel good. People who are able to help others soothe their feelings have an especially valued social commodity; they are the souls others turn to when in greatest emotional need. We are all part of each other's tool kit for emotional change, for better or for worse.

Consider a remarkable demonstration of the subtlety with which emotions pass from one person to another. In a simple experiment two volunteers filled out a checklist about their moods at the moment, then simply sat facing each other quietly while waiting for an experimenter to return to the room. Two minutes later she came back and asked them to fill out a mood checklist again. The pairs were purposely composed of one partner who was highly expressive of emotion and one who was deadpan. Invariably the mood of the one who was more expressive of emotions had been transferred to the more passive partner.[4]

How does this magical transmission occur? The most likely answer is that we unconsciously imitate the emotions we see displayed by someone else, through an out-of-awareness motor mimicry of their facial expression, gestures, tone of voice, and other nonverbal markers of emotion. Through this imitation people re-create in themselves the mood of the other person—a low-key version of the Stanislavsky method, in which actors recall gestures, movements, and other expressions of an emotion they have felt strongly in the past in order to evoke those feelings once again.

The day-to-day imitation of feeling is ordinarily quite subtle. Ulf

Dimberg, a Swedish researcher at the University of Uppsala, found that when people view a smiling or angry face, their own faces show evidence of that same mood through slight changes in the facial muscles. The changes are evident through electronic sensors but are typically not visible to the naked eye.

When two people interact, the direction of mood transfer is from the one who is more forceful in expressing feelings to the one who is more passive. But some people are particularly susceptible to emotional contagion; their innate sensitivity makes their autonomic nervous system (a marker of emotional activity) more easily triggered. This lability seems to make them more impressionable; sentimental commercials can move them to tears, while a quick chat with someone who is feeling cheerful can buoy them (it also may make them more empathic, since they are more readily moved by someone else's feelings).

John Cacioppo, the social psychophysiologist at Ohio State University who has studied this subtle emotional exchange, observes, "Just seeing someone express an emotion can evoke that mood, whether you realize you mimic the facial expression or not. This happens to us all the time—there's a dance, a synchrony, a transmission of emotions. This mood synchrony determines whether you feel an interaction went well or not."

The degree of emotional rapport people feel in an encounter is mirrored by how tightly orchestrated their physical movements are as they talk—an index of closeness that is typically out of awareness. One person nods just as the other makes a point, or both shift in their chairs at the same moment, or one leans forward as the other moves back. The orchestration can be as subtle as both people rocking in swivel chairs at the same rhythm. Just as Daniel Stern found in watching the synchrony between attuned mothers and their infants, the same reciprocity links the movements of people who feel emotional rapport.

This synchrony seems to facilitate the sending and receiving of moods, even if the moods are negative. For example, in one study of physical synchrony, women who were depressed came to a laboratory with their romantic partners, and discussed a problem in their relationship. The more synchrony between the partners at the nonverbal level, the worse the depressed women's partners felt after the discussion—they had caught their girlfriends' bad moods.[5] In short, whether people feel upbeat or down, the more physically