

# Chapter 6

## Your Pain, My Gain: The Interpersonal Context of Sadism

Christopher T. Burris and Rebecca Leitch

### Introduction

In order to situate ourselves in the context of the present volume, we must first address the question of how sadism should be conceptualized: Is it love, hate, a perverse alloy of the two, or none of the above? The answer, of course, depends on how love and hate themselves are conceptualized, and we explicitly adopt the motivational framework proposed by Rempel and Burris (2005): Thus, “love” is understood as a motive to preserve/promote the well-being of a target, and “hate” is understood as a motive to diminish/destroy the well-being of a target. Guided by this framework, Rempel and Burris suggested that sadism should be regarded as an *instrumental form of hate*: That is, sadistic motivation is congruent with physical and/or psychosocial harm befalling the target, with the anticipated outcome (i.e., the ultimate goal) of enhancing one’s own positive affect (i.e., increased pleasure, satisfaction, excitement, and/or arousal).

### What Sadism Isn’t

With this conceptual definition as a backdrop, we can specify a number of phenomena that should not be conflated with sadism (i.e., sadistic hate). For example, we suggest that sadistic hate is essentially irrelevant when acts that harm a target are performed under duress or otherwise coerced. Thus, although Baumeister (1997) cited reluctance to kill during combat and the relatively frequent occurrence of post-traumatic stress disorder among officers following police action shootings as evidence that most people do not want to hurt others, the strong situational press

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C.T. Burris (✉) · R. Leitch  
Department of Psychology, St. Jerome’s University, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G3, Canada  
e-mail: cburris@uwaterloo.ca

toward inflicting harm on a target in such circumstances makes pleasure-seeking—and therefore sadistic motivation—an improbable luxury.

Moreover, sadism should not always be inferred when increased positive affect follows the infliction of harm on a target. For example, consider the hate subtype that Rempel and Burris (2005) labeled redress, wherein the desire to harm a target is congruent with the ultimate goal(s) of justice and restoring order. Positive affect such as satisfaction may certainly result when doling out what are perceived to be just deserts, but this affective outcome is an unintended consequence rather than the ultimate goal—and so sadistic hate is once again functionally irrelevant.

Finally, behavior that is congruent with sadistic hate should be differentiated from superficially harmful behavior that is motivationally congruent with the target's well-being. For example, if a caregiver administers corrective discipline following a child's reckless behavior with the ultimate goal of discouraging similar behaviors that could put the child at physical or socioemotional risk, the temporary physical and/or emotional discomfort that the child may experience should not be taken as evidence of sadistic motivation in the caregiver. In contrast, consider a situation in which a 5-year-old boy carelessly spills soda on a stranger during a family outing at an amusement park. The boy's father responds by announcing that he will spank his son at the end of the day and, ignoring the child's repeated apologies and bargaining attempts, follows through. The father's intentional delay arguably decreases the corrective value of the discipline, and concurrent disregard of the child's persistent entreaties may function to enhance the father's sense of personal power. If this were indeed the case—that is, that the father deliberately sought to boost his own emotional well-being at the expense of his son's by "being the big man"—then the father's motivation should be considered sadistic.

Consensual BDSM play is another example of superficially harmful behavior that is congruent with the target's well-being and hence not an outcome of sadistic motivation as we conceptualize it. In their book *Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns*, BDSM practitioners Miller and Devon (1995, p. 3) frame the issue this way: "At the risk of ruining our well-tarnished image, we must tell you that the picture of the evil sadist abusing the cringing masochist is not quite the reality. In fact, no sadist we know would pull the wings off a fly unless the fly said that it would enhance its sexual pleasure." That is, although perhaps counterintuitive at first glance, the "sadistic" behavior practiced in consensual BDSM play contexts is ultimately pretense and in the service of the goal of increasing *the target's* positive affect: It should not, therefore, be regarded as evidence of genuine sadism. With this in mind, we question Baumeister's (1997) suggestion that a partner with submissive sexual interests' difficulty convincing an intimate partner to engage in "pseudo-sadistic" play behavior such as spanking should be taken as *prima facie* evidence of the rarity of sadistic motivation. The basis for a partner's refusal—fear of appearing deviant, for example (e.g., Burris and Schrage 2014)—could have nothing to do with reluctance to inflict harm. Indeed, our motivational conceptualization of sadism allows for the provocative possibility that refusal to engage in play behavior to gratify one's intimate partner could serve as a means of tormenting

the desirous partner. That is, as an old joke puts it: When a masochist says “Please hurt me!”, a *true* sadist says “No!”.

## Sadism: One Motive, Many Behaviors

Given these examples of *what sadism is not*, we are better situated to show how our motivational conceptualization can lead to an expanded understanding of *what sadism is*. As we proceed, remember that sadism should be inferred based on neither the extremity of a perpetrator’s behavior nor the magnitude of harm suffered by his/her target, but rather on whether the intended harm is in the service of boosting the perpetrator’s positive affect. With this in mind, first consider three “obvious” behavioral manifestations of sadistic motivation that have received clinical and/or forensic attention: All three—sexual sadism disorder, animal cruelty, and sadistic personality disorder—are typified by a high magnitude of harm linked to anticipated/actual affective payoff.

**Sexual sadism disorder.** As described in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association 2013), the core feature of sexual sadism disorder is “re-current and intense sexual arousal from the physical or psychological suffering of another person, as manifested by fantasies, urges, or behaviors” (p. 695). Given the severity of harm often inflicted on non-consenting others in pursuit of sexual gratification, it should not be surprising that much of the existing research related to sexual sadism focuses on criminal populations. For example, Dietz et al. (1990) detailed the crimes of thirty convicted men who had committed sexually sadistic acts. Nearly, all had planned the acts meticulously: They approached their target—a stranger—under pretense and captured, restrained, and beat that person. The victim subsequently would be subjected to such painful indignities as mutilation and forcible penetration, sometimes with objects. Many perpetrators murdered their victims and hid the bodies but kept personal objects or body parts as souvenirs. Some would also revisit the disposal sites to reminisce about the details of the crime.

One striking aspect of such depictions is the temporal expanse in which positive affective payoff is applicable: Pleasurable arousal is seemingly being experienced before, during, and after a specific offense. This apparent magnitude of affective payoff may help account for the often single-minded nature of sexually sadistic motivation, as evident in one offender’s reply when asked what could be done to avoid an attack from someone like himself: “[T]here’s a lot of steps you can take to help eliminate the average criminal [who is] just spontaneous and reckless and careless.... If somebody wants somebody bad enough... it’s nearly impossible [to prevent].... They could have the best security in the world. They could have guards and dogs and everything else. But if you have the time and the patience, the opportunity is going to arise when you can hit somebody” (Hazelwood and Michaud 2001, p. 107).

A key question, of course, is why the suffering of a non-consenting other functions as a source of erotic gratification among sexually sadistic individuals? A persistent challenge is identifying one or more appropriate comparison groups against which sexually sadistic individuals can be compared. Some studies have pointed to brain abnormalities (e.g., Briken et al. 2005), and the temporal–limbic pathway (which is linked to both sexual arousal and aggressive impulses) in particular has been implicated (e.g., Gratzner and Bradford 1995). The amygdala and anterior insula—brain areas linked to sexual arousal and pain, respectively—have also been shown to be more reactive to images of others in pain among sexual sadists versus controls (Harenski et al. 2012). Chromosomal abnormalities—in particular, the XYY configuration—may occur more frequently among perpetrators of sexual homicide versus controls, although the absolute rate of occurrence appears quite low (e.g., 1.8 % versus 0.01 % in Briken et al. 2006).

The early fusion of sex and aggression—often via victimization by a caregiver—has appeared frequently in the clinical literature concerning sexually sadistic offenders (e.g., Stoller 1975). Moreover, although sexual fantasies with sadistic content are by no means rare in non-forensic populations (e.g., Crepault and Couture 1980), they are, almost by definition, much less likely to yield sadistic behaviors (Revitch and Schlesinger 1981, 1989; Schlesinger and Revitch 1997). Among sadistic offenders, sexual gratification via fantasy depictions of violence appears nearly ubiquitous, whether manifest in literature/image collections (Dietz et al. 1990) or in the pre- and post-offense savoring noted above. It has been suggested that fantasies of sexualized violence may emerge as a compensatory response to intense, sustained experiences of anger and shame (Burgess et al. 1986) and are sustained via subsequent (often masturbatory) reinforcement (MacCulloch et al. 1983). The compensatory potential of sexually sadistic behavior was articulated by one serial rapist/torturer/murderer in Dietz et al. (1990, p. 165) as follows:

Sadism: The wish to inflict pain on others is not the essence of sadism. One essential impulse: to have complete mastery over another person, to make him/her a helpless object of our will, to become the absolute ruler over her, to become her God, to do with her as one pleases. To humiliate her, to enslave her, are means to this end, and the most important radical aim is to make her suffer since there is no greater power over another person than that of inflicting pain on her to force her to undergo suffering without her being able to defend herself. The pleasure in the complete domination over another person is the very essence of the Sadistic drive.

**Animal cruelty.** The key diagnostic criteria of conduct disorder—often considered the child/adolescent precursor to antisocial personality disorder—in the DSM-5 include aggression toward animals (and people) along with destruction of property, deceitfulness or theft, and serious violations of rules. Animal cruelty research has undergone considerable expansion and diversification over the past two decades (see Ascione 2008, for the most comprehensive overview of classic and recent contributions) but has been generally supportive of the suggestion that animal cruelty in childhood should be considered an indicator of risk for aggression directed toward humans. For example, Sanders and Henry (2015) demonstrated a link between a history of animal abuse and bullying behavior in a retrospective

study involving a large sample of young adult women. Merz-Perez et al. (2001) discovered that violent offenders were nearly three times more likely to report having perpetrated animal cruelty compared to nonviolent offenders in the same maximum-security setting. Walters (2014) in a large longitudinal study demonstrated that childhood animal cruelty predicted subsequent violent (and nonviolent) offending and that this relationship was mediated by interpersonal hostility and callousness. Animal cruelty has also figured prominently in numerous case histories of serial killers (e.g., Wright and Hensley 2003).

In one of the most methodologically sophisticated investigations of etiology—one that made use of a nationally representative, longitudinal, multigenerational US sample—Knight et al. (2014) showed that violence perpetrated between caregivers predicted children's increased likelihood of abusing animals over a decade later, although caregivers' own history of abusing animals did not. Moreover, Flynn (1999) found father-to-son corporal punishment to be a significant predictor of recalled acts of animal cruelty during childhood/adolescence among male undergraduates. Taken together, the latter two findings suggest that animal cruelty may be more a matter of displaced aggression than imitative behavior. Unfortunately, however, two issues constrain the confidence with which such findings can be invoked when attempting to understand the origins of sadistic motivation.

First, much of the extant animal cruelty research has relied on simple (often dichotomous) self-report indices of abusive behavior toward animals, and there have been few efforts to unpack the specific motives driving such behavior (see Dadds 2008). A notable exception is Kellert and Felthous (1985; cf. Hensley and Tallichet 2008), who offered a preliminary taxonomy of nine motives based on forty cases involving "excessive cruelty" (p. 1122): (1) controlling an animal's behavior (via putatively corrective, but often exceedingly severe, physical punishment); (2) retaliating for a perceived offense by the animal; (3) acting out prejudice against a particular species or breed; (4) attempting to elicit greater hostility in the animal; (5) developing one's skills and reputation as an aggressor; (6) shocking and/or amusing others; (7) using the animal as a tool to intimidate and/or terrorize someone; (8) consciously displacing aggression toward another person onto a putatively safer (i.e., non-human) target; and (9) "nonspecific sadism" that is pleasure-focused, "sometimes associated with the desire to exercise total power and control over an animal, and [that] may... compensate for a person's feelings of weakness or vulnerability" (p. 1124). This taxonomy suggests that sadism is but one of a number of possible motivational contributors to any specific incident of animal abuse. Pinpointing the role of sadistic motivation in animal cruelty is further complicated by the fact that perpetrators' actual motivation may not always be consciously accessible (cf. Felthous 1981), so some reasons offered for their behavior may be post hoc rationalizations.

Second, the extant literature not uncommonly normalizes and/or trivializes acts of animal cruelty that appear less extreme and/or are directed toward non-mammals (versus, especially, mammalian pets). For example, Felthous (1981, p. 48) wrote that "[p]lucking wings off of grasshoppers and sticking pins in toads might be considered as cruelties, but these are rather common childhood behaviors of limited

clinical significance. Repetitive purposeless killing or injuring cats or dogs should be considered a more serious behavioral symptom.” In a similar fashion, Ascione (2001, p. 7) suggested that animal abuse that is “exploratory/curious” should be regarded as distinct from that which is “pathological” or “delinquent.” Targeting insects or amphibians for harm with the intent of satisfying one’s curiosity is still arguably congruent with our conceptual definition of sadistic motivation, however: Thus, if sadism is to be understood, these comparatively mundane instances may be just as illuminating as extreme ones.

**Sadistic personality disorder.** One attempt to make mundane sadistic behaviors the focus of clinical attention resulted in the inclusion of sadistic personality disorder—described as “a pervasive pattern of cruel, demeaning, and aggressive behavior directed toward other people, beginning by early adulthood”—within Appendix A of the DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association 1987, p. 369). Individuals with sadistic personality disorder were believed to target individuals whom they regard as subordinates (e.g., family members, coworkers) and to take pleasure in their use of physical and psychological tactics to diminish further their targets’ perceived autonomy. For example, “a father may severely punish his child for a minor infraction of table manners... a husband may not let his wife leave the house without him, or permit his teenage daughter to attend any social functions” (p. 369).

Sadistic personality disorder has been estimated to occur in approximately 2–5 % of the population (Feister and Gay 1991). One survey of forensic psychiatrists (Spitzer et al. 1991) revealed that half had been in contact with individuals who, in their opinion, met the diagnostic criteria for the disorder: These individuals were overwhelmingly male (98 %), and most had a history of abuse (90 % emotional, 76 % physical, 41 % sexual) and/or multiple losses (52 %). Comorbidity with both narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders (Spitzer et al. 1991), and with mood disorders and alcoholism (Reich 1993), has been demonstrated.

Although sadistic personality disorder was not included in subsequent editions of the DSM, the high level of agreement among clinicians when applying the diagnostic criteria (Freiman and Widiger 1989) suggests that sadistic motivation is a salient aspect of day-to-day interpersonal functioning for some people. Indeed, there is a small but growing empirical literature that supports an individual difference approach to understanding sadism.

A notable recent example is Buckels et al. (2013), who reported two studies offering behavioral evidence of “everyday sadism.” In the first, higher scores on O’Meara et al.’s (2011) Short Sadistic Impulse Scale predicted an increased likelihood of choosing to (ostensibly) kill bugs over a number of other presumably unpleasant tasks (e.g., cleaning a toilet). Moreover, this pattern was observed even when controlling for the so-called Dark Triad (i.e., individual differences in narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy; see Paulhus and Williams 2002), and higher dispositional sadism predicted greater self-reported pleasure associated with having made this choice. In their second study, higher self-reported sadism scores predicted delivering unprovoked, intense blasts of white noise to an ostensible rival in a reaction-time competition. Higher sadism scorers were also more willing to

work on a monotonous task to earn the privilege of delivering such blasts, and both of these observed relationships remained more or less intact when controlling for Dark Triad tendencies.

Although no creature was actually harmed or killed in either study reported by Buckels et al. (2013), participants presumably thought otherwise—and high sadism scorers' harm-congruent choices appeared gratuitous and linked to enhancing their own positive affect. Consequently, although some might perhaps dismiss these face-valid outcomes as “just some bugs” or “just a bit of loud noise—no real harm done,” we would suggest that both are rather compelling examples of behavioral consequences of sadistic motivation. As such, they set the context for assembling other comparatively mundane (versus a sexual serial killer, at least) manifestations of sadism. We focus on three: internet trolling, organizational hazing, and pranking.

**Internet trolling.** Based on a textual analysis of over 2000 postings on a Usenet newsgroup, Hardaker (2010, p. 237, emphasis added) defined a “troll” as an online “user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are *to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement.*” Defined thus, internet trolling appears to be a clear example of a comparatively mundane behavioral outcome of sadistic motivation. Research by Buckels et al. (2014) supports this assertion: In two online studies, Buckels et al. showed that dispositional sadism was the best (i.e., better than Dark Triad variables) predictor of trolling behavior and enjoyment and that sadism's predictive utility did not extend to other online behaviors such as chatting or debating. Indeed, Buckels et al. asserted that the observed relationships were so “strong that it might be said that online trolls are prototypical everyday sadists” (p. 101).

**Organizational hazing.** In contrast to the cloak of anonymity under which internet trolls operate is the often face-to-face practice of hazing, defined by Allan and Madden (2008, p. 2) as “any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers them regardless of a person's willingness to participate.” In their survey of over 11,000 US post-secondary students, Allan and Madden found that over half of those belonging to voluntary groups—including, but not limited to, varsity sports and Greek-letter organizations—reported having experienced at least one incident of hazing. Recurrent elements included “alcohol consumption, humiliation, isolation, sleep-deprivation, and sex acts” (p. 16). The severity of hazing incidents varies dramatically: At the extreme, deaths due to severe beatings or alcohol poisoning have been reported (Parks et al. 2014). Nevertheless, over 9 out of 10 of Allan and Madden's respondents who admitted having experienced at least one hazing episode (based on a list of behaviors that they were subject to or induced to perform) refused to label the experience as hazing. Moreover, the vast majority of those who identified the experience as hazing did not report the episode to officials, citing fear of consequences for group or self, trivialization of harm experienced, and putative positive consequences of the episode such as bonding with the group or a sense of accomplishment.

It is, of course, quite reasonable to assume that not all targets of organizational hazing will suffer equally. At the same time, the potential for organizational hazing to yield aversive—and potentially severe—physical and/or psychological consequences arguably undercuts the credibility of efforts to normalize it and/or tout its benefits. Indeed, hazing appears to be a behavioral outcome of sadistic motivation, at least some of the time. For example, consider Waldron et al.’s (2011, p. 119) composite narrative told in the voice of a male former high school athlete who subjected others to hazing: “It was more just to have a good time, all in good fun; but, it’s also humiliation. You want to laugh at somebody else’s misfortune. Like, a guy naked out in the hallway, that’s funny. You want him to be embarrassed. I don’t know why, but, it’s just human nature. I guess you want to laugh at somebody else’s misfortune. As far as people that initiate it, I think they just do it because they have the power to. They find it fun and they can do it without anybody stopping them.” The sadistic theme—subjecting another person to physical or psychological harm in order to boost one’s own positive affect—is indisputable here. At the same time, the narrator seems to lack insight as to why sadistic motivation exists in the first place. We will revisit this issue shortly.

**Pranking.** Unlike hazing, which typically allows the target an opportunity for at least token consent based on foreknowledge of the activity, pranking requires an unsuspecting target who cannot provide meaningful consent for what s/he will ultimately experience: If the would-be target decodes the prank beforehand, there is no gotcha, and the prank “fails.” Consider these five examples of pranking from the Web site *fmylife.com*, which provides an online forum for users to post brief accounts of unfortunate events that befall them:

Today, my boyfriend and I went to the beach. I though[t] he was being really sweet by putting sunscreen on my back as I layed on my stomach. I got home later, and felt that my back was sore. Then I saw the giant penis on my back that been burnt in. FML (17 Dec 2009)

Today, I woke up to my Playstation 3 and my laptop missing and window open. My dad faked a robbery to see me freak out. FML (6 Jun 2011)

Today, I woke up to my girlfriend grinning at me, her hand on my junk. I grinned back, then looked down and saw blood smeared all over her hand and my junk. After I started screaming and crying, she laughed and said it was fake blood. She recorded everything. FML (4 Aug 2013)

Today, while I was pulling weeds, my dad thought it would be absolutely hilarious to yell “Hey, son!” then unload his gun at me when I turned around. After I’d screamed like a bitch and pissed myself, he broke down into hysterical laughter and said he’d loaded the gun with blanks. Fuck you, dad. FML (30 Aug 2015)

Today, I found my husband in the bathtub, which was filled with blood-red water, motionless and staring blankly at the ceiling. I started screaming and crying, and he burst into laughter at his “hilarious” prank. He only seemed regretful that his video camera hadn’t been recording properly. FML (19 Sep 2014)

In each of these instances, the target appeared to enter the situation unsuspectingly and his/her physical and/or psychological well-being was subsequently compromised: Painful sunburn, screaming, crying, and “freaking out” are mentioned, and humiliation is also implied (e.g., “giant penis on my back,” “screamed



like a bitch and pissed myself”). Four of the five incidents involve simulations of what many would regard as severely traumatic events: burglary, shooting, genital mutilation, and suicide. Three explicitly note the perpetrator’s laughter in the aftermath of a “successful” prank. Although we cannot know for sure, none of the accounts implies that the victim provoked the perpetrator in any way beforehand. Taken together, these observations suggest that pranking may be motivated, at least some of the time, by sadism: This strikes us as a particularly unsettling possibility, given that all five pranks described above occurred in close relationship contexts, i.e., parent–child, intimate partners.

With this in mind, we were astonished when an October 2015 PsycINFO search using the search terms “prank” and “practical joke” revealed *no* relevant empirical literature. We consequently saw fit to undertake such research ourselves: Given its apparently novelty, our first investigative attempt (Leitch and Burris 2016) was primarily descriptive and made use of mostly open-ended responses of 91 undergraduates (57 % women) who had performed, watched, and/or been subjected to pranks. Most relevantly, we found that the best predictors of pranksters’ positive overall evaluation of a memorable past prank were anticipatory and post-event joy/excitement, as well as post-event pride/satisfaction. Peri- and post-event joy/excitement also predicted the desire to prank again. In contrast, although peri- and post-event regret was the best predictor of negative overall evaluations of a specific past pranking episode, regret did not inhibit the desire to prank again. Taken together, pranksters’ willingness to subject another person to physical and/or psychological harm appears to be positively reinforced by the accompanying sense of enjoyment and efficacy: Thus, pranking would appear to be one possible behavioral outcome of sadistic motivation.

**Vicarious sadism.** Before attempting to assemble a case for a mechanism that drives sadistic motivation, we should also note that sadistic gratification is sometimes vicarious, such that first-person participation in the harming of a live target is optional. Three examples will suffice. First, consider the popularity of programs such as MTV’s/BET’s *Punk’d*, wherein the negative reactions of pranked individuals are filmed for entertainment purposes. As in several of the *fmylife.com* accounts above, the pranksters willingly subject their targets to simulated traumas: For example, in a pilot filming for what became the *Punk’d* series, a couple on holiday in Las Vegas walked into their hotel room to find what appeared to be a bloodied homicide victim; the couple subsequently sued MTV and celebrity host/producer Ashton Kutcher (“Couple sue over TV corpse prank” 2002). Second, Greitemeyer (2015) demonstrated that dispositional sadism predicted preference for violent video games over and above the Big Five personality dimensions, the Dark Triad, and a measure of trait aggression. Third, fusing elements of sexual sadism and animal cruelty, there exists a clandestine niche market for “crush” videos that feature the fetishistic mutilation of small animals, typically by the stamping of unshod or stilettoed female feet (see Ricaurte 2009–2010).

## Why Sadistic Motivation?

Throughout this chapter, we have embraced the conceptualization of sadistic hate as motivation that is congruent with physical and/or psychosocial harm befalling a target in the service of the ultimate goal of enhancing one's own positive affect. This conceptualization allows for discernment of sadism based on family resemblance across a wide range of behavioral outcomes. That is, be it private torture inflicted by a serial rapist or public scrotal pain orchestrated by a prankster, intending another's harm as a means to one's own pleasurable end is the signifier of sadistic motivation.

Having made the case for a common motive across the putative behavioral manifestations of sadism described earlier, a key question is why unprovoked harm directed toward a living target is experienced as a source of positive affect. That is, does sadism have a common mechanism? Note that the question of why sadistic motivation develops is different from why people act on it: We will deal with the latter after exploring the former. Let us consider some clues.

Animal cruelty is often part of a larger constellation of violence within a family system: An adult abuser may target a partner or a child as well as a pet, for example. As noted earlier, however, Knight et al. (2014) showed that while violence between caregivers subsequently predicted an increased likelihood that their children would abuse animals, caregivers' own history of animal cruelty did not. Moreover, Flynn (1999) found that corporal punishment by fathers predicted greater cruelty to animals among boys. Sims et al. (2001) showed that individuals who perceive a child as having more control over a negative outcome than they themselves do as caregivers experienced negative affect during brief interactions with a puppy and a cat: Thus, the same "low perceived control" (LPC) attributional style that has been linked to child abuse may also generalize to include animals as possible targets. Indeed, Chin et al. (2008) found LPC individuals to be more likely than non-LPC individuals to endorse the use of harsh punishment (specifically, electric shocks) when training animals.

Taken together, these findings are congruent with the suggestion that animal cruelty can be a behavioral manifestation of compensatory control and/or displaced aggression, a theme that has emerged in previous qualitative research (Kellert and Felthous 1985). Wright and Hensley (2003) took these ideas a step further in their review of cases wherein serial murderers were subject to "episodes of prolonged humiliation" (p. 82) as children: They postulated animal cruelty—and the subsequent, often eroticized torture and/or murder of human victims (cf. sexual sadism disorder)—to be a "means of [killers] venting their frustration to regain their dignity and sense of self" (p. 83). Recall also that a high proportion of individuals identified by forensic psychiatrists as meeting the criteria for sadistic personality disorder report having been victimized (i.e., a combination of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; Spitzer et al. 1991).

Some organizational hazing findings also point to the possible role of displaced aggression in sadistic behavioral outcomes. Specifically, in addition to an

unsurprising positive correlation between positive attitudes toward hazing and the number of hazing-related acts committed in a survey of members of student organizations, Owen et al. (2008) found a similar positive correlation between positive attitudes toward hazing and *the number of hazing-related acts endured*. These results are best understood against a backdrop of generally neutral to negative attitudes toward hazing across Owen et al.'s entire sample, as well as other results suggesting "that there may be a small number of active perpetrators who are responsible for hazing a larger number of potential victims" (p. 48). If displaced aggression is a pertinent mechanism, hazing victims may have a vested interest in maintaining the practice despite widespread disapproval because new recruits can serve as targets for their own hazing machinations. Waldron et al. (2011, p. 120) similarly suggested that "leaders felt they had the right to haze the younger members of the team because they had 'paid their dues to the team' by accepting the hazing perpetrated against them."

Similar to the Owen et al. (2008) findings and also suggestive of the contributory role of displaced aggression, we (Leitch and Burris 2016) found that victims of pranks rated pranking others more positively than did non-victims. Moreover, consistent with our earlier suggestion that sadistic motivation can be gratified vicariously, pranking victims also rated the experience of watching pranks more positively than did non-victims. More speculatively, we earlier noted a couple's 2002 lawsuit against celebrity Ashton Kutcher for his role in staging a simulated homicide scene in their hotel room. In 2001, Kutcher visited the home of a woman he had been dating, concerned about her silence following a dispute they had been having. He looked inside and saw what he eventually learned was a pool of blood that had seeped from her brutally stabbed, deceased body: She was a victim of a suspected serial killer ("I thought it was red wine" 2010). The disconcerting similarity of Kutcher's prank to his own previous tragic discovery raises the question of whether the former emerged as a means of discharging feelings of powerlessness and anger evoked by the latter.

We propose that sadism can be understood as a *compensatory/restorative motivational response to insults to the self*. Thus, sadistically motivated behavior functions to displace and discharge aggressive impulses provoked by such insults, which both reduces tension and boosts positive affect and self-efficacy (for a partially complementary neurobiological perspective, see Nell 2006). Marcus-Newhall et al. (2000) found strong meta-analytic support for the existence of displaced aggression—that is, "that those who are provoked and unable to retaliate reliably respond more aggressively toward an innocent other than those not previously provoked" (p. 682). Moreover, Miller et al. (2003) have made a strong case that the tendency to ruminate over past provocations facilitates the displacement of aggression across even considerable time spans. Invoking displaced aggression, at least as commonly understood, as an explanatory mechanism for sadistic motivation fails to account neatly for the presumed payoff of harming the target—that is, positive affect in the form of pleasure, satisfaction, arousal, and/or excitement. Speculatively, we suggest that elevation of the self via sadistically motivated behavior following insult may function as the guarantor of positive affective payoffs.

We (Burris and Leitch 2016) recently conducted a preliminary test of our model: In a study involving 133 undergraduates, we included multiple measures relating to respect (i.e., the importance of being respected, hypervigilance for signs of disrespect, feeling disrespected across a variety of interpersonal situations) and a measure of the tendency to ruminate about anger-evoking episodes with the understanding that these would tap vulnerability to insults to the self and an increased likelihood of (displaced) hostile responses, respectively. Congruent with our model, O'Meara et al.'s (2011) dispositional measure of sadistic tendencies was significantly positively correlated with anger rumination and all respect measures, and the relationship between sadism and anger rumination remained even when controlling for the substantial overlap between the former and the Dark Triad.

We also asked our participants whether they had ever pranked someone and, if so, to answer questions about their most memorable prank. Although the 65 % who admitted having pranked someone did not score higher compared to self-identified non-pranksters on any of the individual difference measures (including dispositional sadism), noteworthy relationships emerged between the predictor variables and both motivation and affect among the pranksters. Specifically, at the zero-order level, two of the three respect measures and anger rumination (along with dispositional sadism) predicted participants' willingness to identify their pranking motivation as sadistic (i.e., "I thought it would be fun" and "I had the opportunity," averaged). In a stepwise regression, dispositional sadism and the importance of respect were both significant predictors, and anger rumination was marginally significant; the Dark Triad did not predict.

Moreover, underscoring the importance of fantasy and anticipation in less extreme sadistic acts that has elsewhere been well-documented among sexual serial killers (e.g., Simon 2008), some pranksters reported a cluster of positive emotions (e.g., excitement, amusement, satisfaction, pride) associated with the planning phase of the prank (in addition to inhibitory emotions such as anxiety, regret, doubt, and concern for the target). Consistent with our model, the only significant predictors of this *sadistic affect* in a stepwise regression were anger rumination and the importance of respect; dispositional sadism and the Dark Triad did not explain significant additional amounts of variance. This is a striking finding: Taken out of context, descriptors such as "determination," "happiness," and "playfulness" sound adaptive and life-affirming, and it might be tempting therefore to dismiss the resulting pranks as "all in good fun." But the pranksters most likely to report these positive emotions were those who agreed with statements such as "It is more important to be respected than liked" and "I have daydreams and fantasies of a violent nature." Thus, the apparent displacement of aggression via pranking appears to make oneself feel good, but the costs for victims can be considerable. For example, one participant in Leitch and Burris (2016) wrote about being naked and locked out of a cabin in winter by his peers: He suffered frostbite as well as a cut foot and a repair bill that resulted from his kicking in a window to gain reentry.

We think that our model can also account for vicarious sadism. Specifically, we suspect that third-party exposure to others' physical/psychological harm can restore a sense of self that has been squashed by repeated perceived insults via two

complementary routes. First, the observer can simply identify with and/or take the perspective of the perpetrator: A narrative centered upon an empowered self is thus externally accessed (e.g., in a virtual gaming context, as in Greitemeyer 2015) rather than internally generated, but otherwise seems to differ little from sadistic fantasy. Second, the observer can elevate the self by derogating the victim: For example, an observer might marvel at the imputed stupidity or embarrassing loss of composure of a pranking victim while assuring him/herself that s/he would not be so easily duped or rattled in the same situation. We plan to test these ideas in the near future.

## Making the Choice: Sadistically Motivated Behavior

Throughout this chapter, we have been careful to distinguish sadistic motivation from its behavioral outcomes. The distinction is important, for it seems quite reasonable to assume that some combination of personal and social censure often suppresses infliction of ostensibly gratuitous harm on a living target. The greater the harm, the higher the behavioral threshold is: An intense but brief scare can perhaps be brushed off, for example, but death, disfigurement, and severe psychological trauma cannot. Likewise, the more consensually valued the target, the higher the behavioral threshold is: Rightly or wrongly, the stakes are different when the victim is a bug, a pet, a stranger, or an intimate. Thus, choosing to act on sadistic motivation can perhaps be understood as one outcome of hedonic calculus, however coarsely executed, wherein the salient anticipated rewards for harming a target outweigh the perceived costs.

Techniques for overcoming one's personal censure against acting out sadistic motivation (cf. Bandura et al. 1996) can include: (1) *ignoring or minimizing harm* to the target (potential or actual; sometimes facilitated by a narrowed focus of attention, as in Baumeister 1997); (2) *invoking a justification* in terms of stable target qualities (e.g., "cats are evil") or putative target behaviors, however dubious (e.g., "this is revenge"); (3) *emphasizing the anticipated rewards*, both intrapersonal (e.g., "this is *only* thing that arouses me") and interpersonal (e.g., "this will strengthen the group's bonds"). Two additional techniques can be marshaled to deal with social censure: (4) *collectivizing the sadistic act* (i.e., making it public), so targets can be chided in order to discourage retaliation and/or claims of having been "excessively" harmed, for example; or (5) *concealing the sadistic act* (i.e., minimizing the likelihood of it being or becoming public, possibly via target selection).

Consistent with (1), Buckels et al. (2013) found dispositional sadism to be inversely correlated with perspective-taking and empathic concern. The examples of (2) are illustrative of justifications for animal cruelty documented by Kellert and Felthous (1985). Pertinent to (3) is our (Leitch and Burris 2016) finding that pranksters' retrospective reports of peri- and post-event joy/excitement associated with a specific pranking experience amplified their desire to prank again, whereas incident-specific regret did not inhibit this desire.

Regarding (4), McCreary (2012) found that student fraternity members scored lower on measures of moral judgment and higher on measures of moral disengagement compared to student non-members. Presented with adolescent bullying and fraternity hazing vignettes and asked at what point they would intervene in a pro-victim manner as each situation escalated, fraternity members were slower to intervene in both compared to non-members. Fraternity members were also more likely to recommend dismissal of hazing charges in the fraternity vignette, suggesting a more hazing-supportive attitude than non-members.

Finally, in reference to (5), isolating the victim has long been regarded as a control technique employed by domestic abusers (e.g., Follingstad and Dehart 2000). Having said that, sadistic motivation per se (i.e., pleasure, satisfaction as a desired end) was nowhere mentioned in an up-to-the minute, comprehensive review of research concerning abusers' stated motives for intimate partner violence (IPV; Neal and Edwards 2015). To conclude that sadistic motivation is irrelevant to behavioral outcomes in close relationship contexts would be recklessly premature, however—a point to which we now turn.

## Close Others as “Ideal” Targets of Sadism?

At first glance, the willingness to harm a “loved one” for the pleasure and satisfaction it brings seems so antithetical to trust and safety that we might expect it to manifest only within the most dysfunctional of close relationships. Clinical observation and informal survey responses led Schnarch (1997, 2009) to assert that this experience—which often takes the form of withholding sexual and/or emotional intimacy—is common enough in close relationship contexts to warrant the label “normal marital sadism,” however. At the same time, Schnarch was unclear concerning the extent to which such behavioral outcomes are purely gratuitous (i.e., genuinely sadistic) versus retributive—that is, consciously enacted in response to a perceived insult by the intimate target. Earlier we presented anecdotal evidence that impactful pranking can occur between both intimate partners and parents and children, and we also have initial evidence that pranks can be sadistically motivated and a behavioral manifestation of displaced aggression (Burris and Leitch 2016). This raises the question of whether some aspects of close relationships might increase their likelihood of becoming contexts for recurrent, sadistically motivated behaviors. At least two seem particularly important.

First, family/relational units—like exclusive groups centered on voluntary membership (e.g., Greek-letter organizations)—are closed systems, in the sense that there is consensual agreement that at least some aspects of their functioning are private rather than public: This could certainly make it easier for a potential perpetrator to conceal sadistic behavioral outcomes and thereby sidestep social

censure. Pursuant to this point, Schnarch (1997, p. 309, brackets inserted, italics in original) wryly speculated that “psychiatrists favoring this diagnostic category [i.e., the now-defunct sadistic personality disorder] considered marital sadism to be normal: *the diagnosis wasn’t applicable if sadistic behavior was directed toward one person, such as your spouse.*” Second, to the extent that the target is relationally invested for any combination of emotional and practical reasons, s/he may be less likely to protest or retaliate when on the receiving end of sadistically motivated behaviors—just as organizational loyalty discourages the reporting of hazing (Park et al. 2014).

Under such circumstances, sadistic motivation may be more easily obfuscated, particularly when the resulting behaviors are less extreme. For example, we suspect that burning one’s partner with a cigarette would be much less likely to evoke benign attributions than would staging a mock suicide attempt for the partner to discover. Indeed, the import of the latter is much easier to dismiss with statements such as “it was just a joke” and “you’re so sensitive.” Moreover, unless the harm experienced by the target is sufficiently extreme, we suspect that overt displays of positive rather than negative affect by the perpetrator will constrain the likelihood that his/her intent would be construed as sadistic: It seems easy to imagine attributions of sadism when a perpetrator is laughing hysterically or verbally denigrating a partner while burning him/her; laughing at the target partner’s reaction to one’s “awesome” prank seems much more ambiguous—perhaps even to perpetrators themselves. Thus, compared to more brazenly abusive acts, subtler behaviors such as pranks may be “ideal” expressions of sadistic motivation because they are easier to mete out, do not require a supporting phalanx of target-directed control behaviors, and are easier to justify to the target, to oneself, and to any third-party observers.

If our assessment is correct, this may help make sense out of the curious absence of sadism (i.e., pleasure, satisfaction as a desired end) as a stated motive for IPV among abusers *or* their victims (Neal and Edwards 2015)—in contrast to sexual sadists (Dietz et al. 1990), animal abusers (Kellert and Felthous 1985), organizational hazers (Waldron et al. 2011), and pranksters (Burriss and Leitch 2016). Given that sadistic motivation appears relevant at least some of the time across all of the latter contexts, it seems extremely unlikely to us that it is never relevant to IPV. Instead, we think that the key issue is that the costs of linking extreme behaviors such as IPV to sadistic motivation in a close relationship context are exceptionally high: Attributions such as “control, anger, retaliation, self-defense, to get attention, and an inability to express oneself verbally” (Neal and Edwards 2015, p. 1) are likely to be regarded as more comprehensible and palatable to both perpetrators and victims in (intact) close relationships than the attribution “s/he (or I) thought it was fun.” Although this suspected obfuscation dynamic deserves investigation in its own right, it also underscores the value of studying more mundane manifestations of sadistic motivation such as bug-killing and pranking because admissions of sadistic motivation seem much more obtainable in those contexts.

## Sadism: Consequences and Moral Considerations

Two more points seem worth making in closing. First, the negative consequences of sadistically motivated behaviors seem difficult to contain: Gratification of the sadistic motive often seems to involve multiple victims and/or escalation from non-human to human targets (e.g., Buckels et al. 2013; Walters 2014; Wright and Hensley 2003). This is aggravated considerably by sadism's hypothesized mechanism: displaced aggressive impulses, provoked by insults to the self, that often reap powerful affective rewards when expressed. Importantly, if our displacement hypothesis is correct, acting on sadistic motivation leaves the source of that motivation intact, however. Moreover, the salience of positive affect—particularly when anticipating and planning a sadistic act (e.g., Burris and Leitch 2016)—may obfuscate the causal dynamics. Being the target of victimization (sadistic or otherwise) may therefore unleash a wellspring of motivation to perpetrate against an ever-expanding pool of innocents (e.g., Leitch and Burris 2016; Owen et al. 2008). Intimates can be targets and may even be prioritized as such, which can easily set in motion a cycle of revenge (e.g., Schnarch 1997, 2009). Thus, although behaviors that appear to be motivated, at least in part, by sadism are often normalized and rationalized by victims as well as perpetrators (e.g. Allan and Madden 2008), they seem exceedingly difficult to justify from a third-person perspective.

Second, in light of the above, it is perhaps not surprising that the “*wish to inflict harm merely for the pleasure of doing so*” is regarded as one the key features of lay conceptions of “pure evil” (Baumeister 1997, p. 73, italics in original; see also Burris and Rempel 2011). To be clear, none of the hypothesized ends of sadistic motivation (pleasure, satisfaction, arousal, and excitement) is inherently problematic. Rather, moral judgment is an issue of means—that is, when these inherently positive ends are framed as being *contingent upon a living target experiencing harm* and salient alternative means are shunned. Some examples are notorious, as when the Hillside Stranglers tortured a victim to the point of her losing consciousness, resuming only after she had revived (Holmes and Holmes 2010). Other examples, such as this posting from *fmylife.com*, seem insignificantly pedestrian at first glance:

Today, my parents sat me down and told me that I'm adopted. I took it in stride, and reassured them that as far as I'm concerned, they're my true parents. That annoyed them. Apparently the whole thing was a prank for a YouTube video, which I ruined by not crying or freaking out. FML (29 Aug 2014)

As scandalous as it might sound, we would nevertheless suggest that these two examples are in fact quite motivationally similar. It is therefore probably not an accident that one (now obsolete) meaning of the word *prank* was “an evil deed” (The Chambers Dictionary 1998, p. 1289). Stripped down to its essentials, when “my gain” comes at the price of “your pain”—whether you are a stranger, a partner, a dependent, or a non-human animal—we would heartily agree.

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