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A field guide to everyday psychos

By ANN ROSEN SPECTOR

JUST WHEN you thought Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich couldn't act any nuttier after he was accused of federal corruption charges related to President-elect Barack Obama's vacated Senate seat, he went ahead and named a replacement for Obama.

Psychopathology, it seems, is not just for serial killers and pedophiles anymore. It's gone mainstream.

I think of it as the Psychopathology of Everyday Life.

It's only surprising that we're surprised every time we pick up the paper and find out about another scam. Enron. WorldCom. Tyco. Countrywide Mortgage. AIG. Madoff. We thought they were telling the truth. We trusted them. They seemed so sincere. They pocketed millions or billions and left us penniless.

And don't forget the national, state and local pols who promise us the moon, but steal the stars, or sell them to the highest bidder (front door or back door, doesn't seem to matter) while we're busy going to work, raising families, paying taxes.

The pious, principled and devout do-gooders, laity and clergy, who rail against immorality, yet don't practice what they preach. Are they filled with remorse and just don't show it? Or are their public tears just for show and they're smirking beneath that holier-than-thou façade?

Blagojevich seemed merely an amateur, annoying, but not that good at the con. How anyone believed in a man reputed to demand a hairbrush at his side at all times is beyond me. At least Donald Trump was able to keep his "do" in place with a mere gallon of hairspray.

But psychopaths exist to prey on the gullible. As P.T. Barnum allegedly said, "There's a sucker born every minute." That person is us. We're all capable of becoming a victim of a scam. And even the most respectable among us can't always be counted on.

As psychologists Paul Babiak and Robert D. Hare illustrated in their 2006 book, "Snakes in

Suits," some of the very factors that are successful in business, the professions and politics also meet the psychiatric criteria for the disorder:

* Glibness, superficial charm.

("That candidate won me over in the interview!")

* Failure to accept responsibility.

("It was the guys in R&D!" "The intelligence was bad.")

* Grandiose sense of

self-worth ("The whole project was my idea." "I'm the only person who can keep our country safe.")

The diagnostic criteria also include lack of remorse and impulse control, as well as a pattern of "inner experience." ("But enough of my telling you how great I am . . . why don't you tell me how great you think I am?")

Of course, not everyone who demonstrates these characteristics is a psychopath. Some are just evildoers or rats. Or, if we love them, they're merely flawed members of the flock.

The Hare checklist is used to assess psychopaths. The information should be good, since it's gathered in large part from interviews with, well, psychopaths.

Knowing what we now know about the Blagos and Madoffs, let's look again at some of the items. Perhaps they can help us recognize these folks in the future. (Maybe, they sound a lot like your last romantic interest. Or boss?)

1. Glibness/superficial charm. (Isn't that page one of the sales training manual?)
2. Grandiose sense of self-worth. (I believe I dated that guy. More than once.)
3. Lack of realistic, long-term goals. (I know for sure I dated THAT guy. Also more than once.)
4. Failure to accept responsibility for your actions. (I voted for him, too. Does he really feel our pain?)

But here's something you may not know and maybe won't want to: Psychopathology is almost impossible to treat successfully. No matter whether you go to a psychiatrist, psychologist or shaman.

The key features of the disorder are, according to the DSM-IV Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, the bible of the mental-health professionals, "a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others."


Add deceitfulness, impulsivity and a lack of remorse. Why would such a person seek out therapy? People go to therapy because they are in pain - the psychopath is fine, thank you very much. It's the victims who bear the brunt of the con.

And how truthful would this person be to his therapist? Do you think therapists can't be conned? They make the purse-snatcher who knocks the old lady off her walker and the pickpocket look almost benign, don't they? By maybe if we can't cure them, we can at least start to recognize them. *

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