

THE PERPETRATOR SYNDROME

We can now summarize the perpetrator syndrome: the constellation of attributes found in most people who persistently coerce others. Perpetrators tend to:

1. *Deny or minimize the damage they are doing to others*, for example, by failing to recognize their own coercive actions, by under-estimating the sensitivity of those they are abusing, and by imagining that the victims like what is being done to them.
2. *Rationalize the harm they are doing*, for example, by alleging that the perpetrations are ultimately in the best interest of victims, better than other alternatives, a necessary last resort, or otherwise inevitable and unavoidable.
3. *Blame the victim*. This is a derivative of denial and rationalization, but is worth mentioning in its own right. Typically, perpetrators accuse the victim of being the malicious or dangerous one, or the provocateur. By blaming others, they reject responsibility for their own actions.
4. *Suppress their own feelings of empathy*, thereby blunting their emotional responsiveness to their victims. Often they blunt their empathic responsiveness toward themselves and all other people as well, and become unable to love. They become withdrawn from themselves and others.
5. *Deny or rationalize their own prior victimization at the hands of others*, including the abuse they were subjected to as children and adults. They do not tend to excuse their perpetrations on the grounds that they themselves have been previously victimized.
6. *Persistently react with anger and blame toward others based on much earlier feelings of shame and humiliation*. Sometimes the anger is very covert and indirect in its expression. Often the feelings of shame are denied. While guilt and anxiety can also drive people to abuse others, shame seems by far the most common emotional basis for perpetration, especially in its most severe forms. Rapists and murders, for

example, are almost always driven by childhood shame. Shame will be discussed in greater depth in chapter 5.

7. *Dehumanize their victims.* The victim is defined as inferior due to his or her status or condition as a man, woman, child, criminal, mental patient, foreigner, racial minority, etc. Perpetrators try to overcome their own feelings of inferiority and to elevate themselves to a superior status by dominating others.
8. *Feel empowered through their perpetrations.* They do not feel guilt or shame about the harm that they do to others. When they do feel guilt or shame, it is in response to their own earlier victimization by others. Their perpetrations are motivated by their earlier victimization.
9. *Seek to resolve conflicts through authority, power, and domination,* sometimes directly through physical violence, sometimes indirectly through socially sanctioned authority. When they feel threatened with possible exposure or censure, they often tend to escalate their perpetrations, and may not be stopped unless confronted with overwhelming power.
10. *Become grandiose and self-centered.* They imagine that they have the power and the right to obtain their ends through force, and feel a certain degree of invulnerability, at least when they are in the act of perpetration. This can lead to the self-destructive escalation of their perpetrations to the point that they are confronted or exposed.
11. *Become alienated from their genuine basic needs,* especially those related to love.