

The Empathic Capture of True Crime when the Offender becomes Psychologically Richer than the Victim

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ABSTRACT

This article examined how true crime narratives could distribute psychological depth unevenly between offenders and victims. It used a focused integrative review of secondary scholarly evidence from true crime psychology, narrative engagement, empathy, and victim and offender representation. The literature was selected purposively for conceptual relevance and was compared through close reading and integrative synthesis. The review showed that offender centered narratives could provide denser access to motive, biography, internal states, and behavioral development than to victim interiority. This asymmetry was interpreted as a condition that could concentrate opportunities for cognitive perspective taking around the offender without reducing moral condemnation. The synthesis developed the concepts of psychological richness, Victim Psychological Thinning, and Empathic Capture, together with a distinction between moral condemnation and empathic centrality. The article concluded that moral centrality and psychological centrality did not necessarily coincide in true crime representation. The framework remained conceptual and did not claim that true crime generally caused greater empathy for offenders.



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INTRODUCTION

True crime now occupies a large space in podcasts, television, documentary film, books, and long form journalism, while psychological research on the genre is still comparatively young. Recent work links consumption to morbid curiosity, defensive vigilance, excitement, fear of crime, and forms of affect regulation. Perchtold Stefan et al. (2026b) show that these motives do not collapse into a single appetite for violence. Hopp (2026) likewise found that crime concern predicted later true crime use, while use did not predict later crime concern. A daily diary study by Perchtold Stefan et al. (2026a) also failed to support a simple model in which true crime reliably increases negative affect. The genre therefore deserves analysis as a form of directed information seeking, not merely as repeated exposure to violent content.

Audience motives explain only part of what happens during consumption. A true crime narrative also decides who receives motive, biography, voice, and access to internal states. Long form productions may spend substantial time reconstructing how an offender thought and how behavior developed. The victim can remain the clearest source of moral loss while receiving less material for imagining an ordinary inner life. This is a narrative configuration, not a genre wide assumption. The psychological question concerns access to represented minds rather than simple visibility.

Narrative research gives that question a firm psychological basis. Transportation directs attention into a story world and can shape emotional and cognitive responses to characters (Green & Brock, 2000). Identification also depends on access to goals, perspective, and experience rather than exposure alone (Cohen, 2001). Hoeken et al. (2016) found that story perspective can alter identification even when characters occupy different positions in a conflict. de Graaf et al. (2012) also show that

identification can support narrative persuasion. These studies do not establish a true crime effect. They show that narrative structure changes whose experience becomes available for sustained mental work.

Empathy cannot be reduced to liking, forgiveness, or moral approval. Decety and Jackson (2006) distinguish affect sharing from processes involved in understanding another person's state. Zaki (2014) treats empathy as motivated and selective. Batson et al. (1997) elicited empathic concern toward a convicted murderer. Hernández Peña et al. (2024) later showed distinguishable affective and cognitive processes when participants adopted victim and offender perspectives during violent scenes. A morally disfavored person can remain available for perspective taking. Condemnation does not decide who receives the most psychological attention.

True crime research already shows that representation can shape ethical judgment. Slakoff (2023) found perpetrator justification and victim blaming in podcasts about intimate partner violence. Holmes and Hines (2025) show that women who watch true crime television actively negotiate questions of victim respect. Graham and Stevenson (2022) report similar concerns among podcast listeners. Wright et al. (2026) demonstrate that victim blaming comments change with media framing and the gender configuration of intimate partner homicide. These studies do not measure psychological richness. They do show that narrative positioning is not neutral. Ethical concern alone also does not reveal which actor receives the richest psychological construction or the greatest amount of inferential attention during the story.

The missing link sits between representation and empathic attention. Media studies show how voices, frames, and archives are selected. Narrative psychology explains how point of view and character information support perspective taking. The two literatures rarely ask what follows when one actor receives much more material for mental state inference than another. Gray et al. (2007) showed that mind perception is structured around attributed capacities for experience and agency. At the representational level, motive, memory, intention, and emotion give an audience more material for constructing a mind. Moral importance alone does not provide the same access.

This article develops a conceptual account of that imbalance through a focused integrative review of secondary scholarly evidence. It asks how asymmetrical psychological elaboration can structure empathic attention in offender centered true crime narratives and how strong condemnation can coexist with sustained cognitive engagement with the offender. The argument is conditional. It does not claim that most true crime narratives thin victims, that offender explanation causes sympathy, or that audiences respond in one uniform way. The proposed concepts describe a narrative affordance that becomes plausible when psychological depth is unevenly distributed. Empathic Capture names the concentration of perspective taking opportunities around the more elaborated actor. Victim Psychological Thinning names the relative lack of represented interiority around the victim. Moral condemnation may remain high while this allocation of attention persists.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study used a focused integrative review of secondary scholarly evidence. The design was chosen because the aim was conceptual development rather than measurement of prevalence, causal effects, or audience level associations. No participants, episodes, podcasts, films, court files, or social media posts were sampled for original analysis. Published empirical findings and theoretical arguments were treated as secondary evidence across the reviewed bodies of work. The unit of analysis was the relationship proposed in prior scholarship between narrative representation, access to mental states, perspective taking, empathic response, moral judgment, and victim or offender positioning.

Sources were selected purposively from three connected bodies of literature. The first covered true crime consumption and audience motives. The second covered narrative transportation, identification, perspective taking, empathy, and engagement with morally problematic characters. The third covered victim and offender representation in crime media and true crime journalism. Scopus oriented searching was supplemented with Google Scholar and citation tracing for foundational studies. Search terms combined true crime with empathy, perspective taking, narrative transportation, victim representation, offender representation, morbid curiosity, victim blaming, podcasting, and crime narratives. Selection followed conceptual relevance rather than exhaustive coverage, so the review makes no PRISMA, prevalence, or completeness claim.

Analysis consisted of close comparative reading and integrative synthesis. Direct true crime studies were used for claims about the genre, while general narrative and empathy studies were used

only to support the proposed psychological mechanisms. Findings were compared around four questions that recur across the literature. These concerned how much interior information a narrative provides, whose perspective is repeatedly available, whether moral judgment can remain separate from cognitive engagement, and how victims and offenders are positioned through media framing. The proposed constructs were retained only where those literatures could be connected without turning an association from prior work into a causal claim.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Psychological Richness and Victim Psychological Thinning

Psychological richness is not the same as screen time, mention frequency, or factual detail. A person becomes psychologically rich when a narrative supplies enough material to infer motives, emotions, goals, conflicts, relationships, and changes across time. Narrative engagement research has long shown that access to character goals and perspective affects how audiences follow a story (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Green and Appel (2024) likewise describe transportation as a process in which attention and imagery are organized around a represented world. The present synthesis uses those findings cautiously. It treats psychological richness as a narrative condition that can increase opportunities for mental state inference. It does not assume that every piece of biographical information produces empathy.

Offender centered true crime can create this condition because crime generates questions that invite explanation. Motive, planning, grievance, concealment, and later behavior may become recurring narrative problems. Criminology itself has long treated hidden motive as an explanatory problem, although individual psychodynamic accounts remain limited when detached from social context (Kadir, 2024). Homicide research raises a related caution because broad dangerousness does not explain why only some violent trajectories become lethal (Kadir, 2026d). McDonald et al. (2021) identify defensive vigilance as one motive for consumption. Scrivner (2021) and Perchtold Stefan et al. (2026b) likewise describe curiosity and threat oriented motives. These findings explain why information about a dangerous actor can remain attractive without showing that offenders are always the richest characters.

Victims can remain highly visible without receiving equivalent interior access. Photographs, timelines, forensic findings, family statements, and descriptions of the final day may keep a victim present throughout a production. Homicide research also shows that victim offender relationships and immediate situations carry social information that final legal categories or aggregate counts can lose (Kadir, 2026c). None of these elements automatically tells an audience how the person interpreted relationships, understood risk, imagined the future, or experienced ordinary life. Gray et al. (2007) show that attributing mind involves judgments about capacities for experience and agency. A representation can therefore contain abundant facts while offering a narrow basis for reconstructing the person as an experiencing and acting subject.

Victim Psychological Thinning describes a relative condition. It does not mean erasure, disrespect, or factual inaccuracy. It applies when a victim carries substantial moral weight but receives less interior elaboration than the actor around whom explanation is organized. Slakoff's (2023) study is relevant because perpetrator explanation can coexist with victim blaming. Work on victim offender relations also shows that the meaning of violence changes with relational context rather than resting only on the final event (Kadir, 2025). Holmes and Hines (2025) show that audiences can notice and negotiate ethical problems in representation. A production can state that it honors a victim and still provide fewer cues for imagining that victim as a complex mind.

Media victimology strengthens this distinction between being seen and being psychologically developed. Conlin and Davie (2015) show that framing associated with Missing White Woman Syndrome changes viewers' emotions. Liebler (2010) documents how the news media also critique and reproduce selective victim attention. O'Farrell (2025) analyzes the discursive legitimation and delegitimation of the same bias. DiBennardo (2018) shows that sexual crime reporting can construct ideal victims and monstrous offenders through recognizable cultural scripts. These studies concern visibility and framing rather than true crime psychological depth. Their relevance lies in showing that victim representation is already filtered through selection. Psychological thinning adds a different question about which represented person is given an interior life.

Psychological thinning should not be confused with a demand for sentimental victim biography. Adding only positive traits can reproduce an ideal victim hierarchy in which sympathy depends on

respectability or social status. A psychologically thicker representation may include conflict, ordinary preferences, imperfect choices, and relationships that are not organized solely around victimization. Wright et al. (2026) show that framing can alter victim blaming in homicide reporting. The point here is different. Thicker representation concerns access to personhood, not a guarantee that blame disappears.

Archive availability can produce imbalance without any deliberate attempt to glorify an offender. Clifford and Waller (2026) show that true crime podcasts actively rework police records, court materials, witness accounts, and other archival fragments. Maares and Perreault (2025) describe podcasting as a space where journalistic norms mix with subjective storytelling. Criminal investigation can create a durable record around the offender through interviews, legal argument, and documented behavior. Victim subjectivity may be less directly preserved, particularly after death. This is a production condition rather than evidence of audience effect. It helps explain why offender centered richness can emerge even when producers reject admiration or sensationalism.

Table 1 Conceptual Claims and Evidentiary Boundaries

Construct	Secondary evidence	Claim supported	Claim not established
Psychological richness	Narrative transportation, identification, perspective, and mind perception research	More interior and biographical material can provide more opportunities for mental state inference	That greater detail necessarily produces empathy or liking
Victim Psychological Thinning	Victim framing, victim blaming, true crime ethics, and selective representation research	Moral visibility and psychological interiority can be analytically separated	That victims are generally psychologically thin across true crime
Empathic Capture	Perspective taking, cognitive empathy, transportation, and offender empathy research	A morally disfavored actor can remain a target of sustained cognitive empathic attention	That true crime generally makes audiences empathize more with offenders
Moral condemnation and empathic centrality	Empathy research and work on engagement with morally problematic characters	Blame and sustained psychological engagement can coexist	That cognitive engagement reduces blame, punishment preferences, or perceived responsibility

Empathic Capture without Moral Approval

Perspective taking does not require moral agreement. Chung and Slater (2013) found that narrative perspective taking can reduce stigma and out group distinctions. Batson et al. (1997) demonstrated empathic concern toward a convicted murderer under experimental conditions. Hernández Peña et al. (2024) provide a more direct violence related finding by showing separable patterns when participants adopt offender and victim perspectives. These studies differ in stimulus, outcome, and context, so they should not be treated as direct evidence about true crime audiences. Together they support one modest inference. A narrative can make the internal state of a morally condemned person cognitively available, and audiences are capable of engaging with that state without first approving the person.

Narrative transportation adds another part of the mechanism. Green and Brock (2000) showed that transportation can influence responses to narrative information. Johnson (2012) found increased empathy after transportation into a story. Walkington et al. (2020) are more directly relevant because transportation facilitated empathic responding toward an offender. Their study was not a true crime experiment and did not manipulate relative victim depth. Its value is therefore limited but important. Offender status does not close the door to empathic processing once attention is recruited into a character centered narrative.

Empathic Capture names a concentration of cognitive empathic attention around the actor who receives richer material for perspective taking. Capture does not imply involuntary control. Repeated access to motive, memory, fear, grievance, or self explanation gives the audience more occasions to model one person's internal state. The result may be curiosity or an effort to understand how violence developed. Decety and Jackson (2006) separate this cognitive work from affective resonance. Zaki (2014) also cautions against treating empathy as automatic. The construct is an affordance of representation, not a claim that every audience member feels compassion for the offender.

Moral condemnation can remain stable while empathic attention is concentrated elsewhere. Antihero research provides a useful adjacent comparison because identification and enjoyment can persist around morally problematic characters without simple approval of their conduct. Janicke and Raney (2015) link antihero enjoyment to identification and moral disengagement, while Janicke and

Raney (2018) model the process in greater detail. Fictional antiheroes are not equivalent to real offenders, and the ethical stakes are different. The relevant point is limited to psychological separability. Attention, identification, understanding, blame, and approval are not interchangeable outcomes. A true crime audience may reject the offender's behavior and still spend most of the narrative trying to understand that offender.

Moral Condemnation and Empathic Centrality Dissociation describes this separation without treating it as a contradiction. Moral condemnation concerns blameworthiness, while empathic centrality concerns whose internal state receives sustained perspective taking. A production may reinforce blame through evidence and testimony while repeatedly returning to offender motive and development. The offender can remain morally unacceptable but psychologically central as a problem to be explained. Intense interest in an offender does not by itself demonstrate admiration, exculpation, or sympathy. The form of attention has to be specified before its moral meaning is inferred.

True crime motives make this dissociation plausible because information seeking can be directed toward threat without making threat attractive. McDonald et al. (2021) interpret part of women's true crime interest through defensive vigilance. Scrivner (2021) shows that morbid curiosity includes interest in dangerous people and events. Kadir (2026b) similarly argues that fear of homicide can be shaped by perceived vulnerability and highly visible stranger danger even when lethal risk also develops within familiar relationships. Perchtold Stefan et al. (2026b) report distinct motives involving curiosity, vigilance, and excitement, while Hopp (2026) finds that prior crime concern predicts later true crime consumption. These studies concern why people approach the genre, not which character they mentally enter. The framework connects that approach motivation to a possible narrative destination when offender information is much richer than victim interiority.

Empathic Capture also differs from identification. Cohen (2001) links identification to temporary adoption of a character's perspective and goals. Empathic Capture requires less. An audience can infer what an offender believed, feared, planned, or misunderstood without adopting the offender's goals or self definition. That threshold matters for real crime because it permits analysis of cognitive engagement without suggesting alignment with the offender. The concept is strongest when it describes where interpretive work is concentrated, not how positively an audience evaluates the person who receives it.

Boundary Conditions and the Conceptual Model

Available evidence does not support a genre wide prevalence claim. Some true crime productions center victims, families, institutional failure, wrongful conviction, or investigative process. Psychological richness can also shift across episodes as new archives and voices appear. Holmes and Hines (2025) show that audiences themselves evaluate whether a production treats victims responsibly, which makes uniform audience assumptions especially weak. Empathic Capture is better examined as a possible property of narrative organization. The relevant condition is repeated access to one actor's motives and internal states. Only then does the model propose greater opportunity for cognitive empathic attention.

Podcasting depends heavily on voice, sequencing, and archival audio, while documentary film can provide facial expression, place, family footage, and visual reconstruction. Long form journalism can sustain biography through prose. Green and Appel (2024) emphasize that transportation depends on features of both narrative and recipient. Thomas and Grigsby (2024) also show substantial variation across transportation research. Psychological richness should therefore remain open to differences in format, duration, editing, and the kind of evidence available to producers.

Audience characteristics also constrain the model. Prior attitudes toward crime, similarity to a victim or offender, personal victimization, gender, fear of crime, and motives for consumption can alter what material becomes salient. Hoeken et al. (2016) show that similarity and perspective affect identification. Zaki (2014) argues that empathy is shaped by motivation. Perchtold Stefan et al. (2026b) report differences in true crime motives and correlates across consumers. These findings make deterministic language inappropriate. Richer offender representation may provide more opportunities for perspective taking while a particular viewer refuses, resists, or redirects that attention. The theory concerns differential availability of psychological material before it concerns any uniform audience response.

Comparative designs offer the cleanest test of the proposed relations. Researchers can ask whether offender and victim receive similar opportunities for first person voice, motive inference,

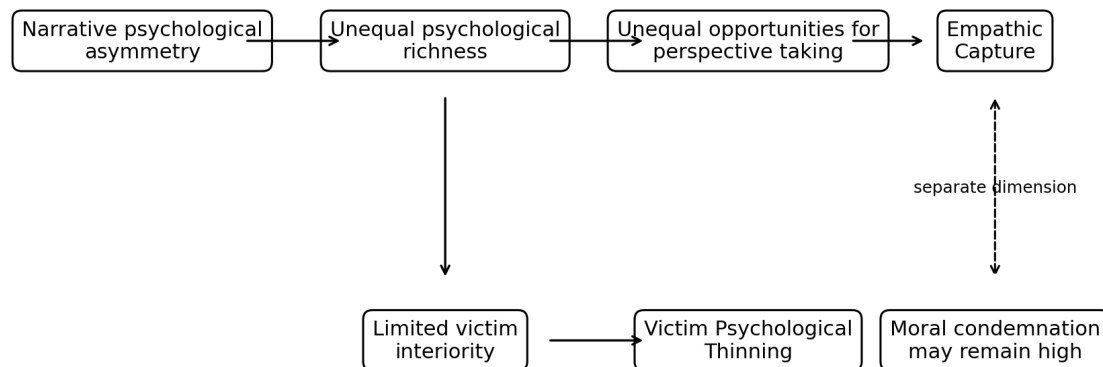
relational context, emotional complexity, and temporal development. Screen time can be recorded, but it should not stand in for psychological richness. Content analysis could code internal state attribution and whose goals organize narrative sequence. Experiments could vary relative offender and victim elaboration while holding crime facts constant. No such test is reported here. These designs would examine whether unequal psychological richness reallocates perspective taking without assuming that liking or moral approval must change.

The evidence does not establish how common this configuration is in true crime. Psychological richness is supported indirectly by narrative work on perspective, identification, transportation, and mind perception. Victim Psychological Thinning draws on selective victim framing and true crime research on victim blaming and ethical representation. Empathic Capture draws on evidence that perspective taking and transportation can engage morally disfavored targets. The dissociation claim rests on empathy research and work on morally complex characters. Table 1 summarizes these boundaries so that the conceptual model is not mistaken for an empirical prevalence finding.

Narrative psychological asymmetry is treated here as a descriptive condition rather than an estimated causal path. Unequal psychological richness appears when one actor receives substantially more material for mental state inference. That difference may create unequal opportunities for perspective taking during sustained engagement. Empathic Capture is proposed when those opportunities become concentrated around the more elaborated actor. Limited victim interiority can simultaneously produce Victim Psychological Thinning. Picture 1 keeps moral condemnation separate because it may remain high throughout the process. The central claim is not that understanding weakens blame. Blame and psychological centrality can occupy different dimensions.

Victim centeredness should not become an ethical formula. A production can give a victim more interior detail and still reproduce classed, racialized, gendered, or ideal victim assumptions. DiBennardo (2018) and O'Farrell (2025) show why recognition can remain socially selective. A better question is whether the victim is represented beyond the function of being harmed. The same restraint applies to offenders. Explaining motive or developmental history can have legitimate criminological and preventive value. Retrospective explanation also carries a hindsight risk because earlier digital warning signs can appear more coherent after lethal violence than they did prospectively (Kadir, 2026a). The concern begins when explanation creates a large psychological asymmetry that remains analytically invisible.

Consumption research can study why audiences seek frightening material, while media studies can examine archives, framing, voice, and journalistic authority. Psychology can test whether unequal access to represented minds directs perspective taking. Victimology can ask whether moral centrality is accompanied by subjectivity rather than mere presence. Empathic Capture provides a shared term for the point where those literatures meet. Its value depends on testing, including studies that fail to find the predicted pattern. Without that possibility, the concept would only rename a concern already discussed informally rather than sharpen an explanation of narrative attention.



Picture 1 Proposed Conceptual Relations of Empathic Capture

CONCLUSION

Offender centered true crime can create an unusual distribution of psychological attention. The victim may anchor the harm and remain the clearest object of moral concern, while the offender receives the richer account of motive, biography, relationships, and internal conflict. Secondary evidence from narrative psychology, empathy research, media victimology, and emerging true crime studies makes this configuration theoretically plausible. It does not establish that the pattern is common or that audiences respond in the same way. The review therefore treats unequal psychological richness as a narrative condition that may alter opportunities for perspective taking rather than as a demonstrated media effect.

Empathic Capture describes the proposed concentration of cognitive empathic attention around the more elaborated actor. Victim Psychological Thinning describes reduced interior depth when the victim remains morally important but is represented through a narrower psychological frame. Moral condemnation can remain high at the same time, so offender understanding should not be read automatically as sympathy or approval. The framework stays modest about evidence. Its main contribution is to shift analysis from who appears most often to whose mind becomes most available for reconstruction.

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