

Reflections on The Sopranos

I just finished re-watching the entirety of *The Sopranos*, HBO's classic Mafia drama. I saw it season-by-season when it originally aired (1999-2007), and I still hew to the allegedly philistine view that the ending was not only bad, but insulting. Overall, though the show's reputation is well-deserved. Here are the top social science insights I take away. (minor spoilers)

1. *Human motivation is overdetermined.* For any important action, people usually have several plausible reasons, and pinpointing the marginal factor is nigh impossible. Thus, does Tony kill Ralph because he believes Ralph torched their racehorse? Because Ralph denied doing so? Because Tony had stolen Ralph's girlfriend, and didn't believe Ralph was OK with it? Or was it all because Tony never forgave Ralph for murdering his own pregnant girlfriend a season earlier?

2. *Humans are unbelievably petty.* By providing readers with an array of credible motives, the show leads us to think that small grievances at least occasionally cause massive reactions. When Paulie murders his mother's elderly frenemy, for example, it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that he wouldn't have done so if the frenemy hadn't tried to wrongfully appropriate his mother's dinner rolls. Similarly, Carmela doesn't try to divorce Tony because he's a serial adulterer or brutal criminal. She's known both for years. Instead, she tries to divorce him because Irina, Tony's ex-girlfriend, calls Carmela's home to tattle that Tony slept with Irina's one-legged cousin.

3. *Out of sight, out of mind.* In *The Sopranos*, criminals and non-criminals routinely interact. The non-criminals would have to be fools not to realize that the criminals aren't merely violent, but murderous. Still, as long as the non-criminals do not witness the violence with their own eyes, they barely care. Even when they discover details that would lead any reasonable person to conclude that the horrifying had happened, they look the other way. Thus, everyone except Adriana's mother gets over her disappearance (murder, actually) with minimal cognitive dissonance. Never mind that her boyfriend was a junkie who repeatedly beat her; Adriana must have just decided out of the blue to leave New Jersey and never talk to her family or friends again.

4. *A disciplined organized crime family can act with near-impunity.* It's easy to catch the typical murderer because the typical murderer murders someone he personally *wants* to murder. A crime family, however, can handily re-allocate its crimes so everyone lacks a personal motive for the crimes he personally commits. Criss cross! When Adriana tries to get Chrissy into witness protection, he doesn't murder her. Instead, he tells Tony, who delegates the job to Silvio.

5. *Organized crime families are not, in fact, disciplined.* Criminals are overwhelmingly impulsive, macro males. So even though they have a great social technology for manufacturing ironclad alibis, they routinely fail to use it. Early in the series, Chrissy shoots a random baker in the foot in broad daylight. A great way to get caught... but Chrissy felt slighted, so he shot anyway. Ralphie beats his pregnant girlfriend to death in the Bing parking lot because she insulted his manhood.

6. *Hedonic adaptation is mighty.* The leading criminals on the show aren't just filthy rich; they're very popular with the ladies. Yet these criminals almost never count their blessings or stop to smell the flowers. Instead, they're deeply bitter - and constantly on the edge of throwing temper tantrums. The wives of the leading criminals objectively have even less to complain about; they enjoy their husbands' riches without ever facing the danger and brutality of acquiring those riches. Even so, the mob wives spend their days complaining and feeling sorry for themselves. Carmela, Tony's wife, is the clearest case. Her main happy minutes come when she unwraps new jewels and furs. The rest of the time, she's crinkling her nose with crankiness.

7. *Rooting for the bad guy is easy... as long as he's got charisma.* If you neutrally described the typical *Sopranos* episode, almost anyone hypothetical juror would hand down centuries of jail time. As you watch, however, righteous verdicts are far from your mind. Why? Because the criminals have amusing personalities. My family's personal favorite is Paulie "Walnuts" Gaultieri; we can't stop quoting this scene:

*Paulie: As far as f***n' bears are concerned, I say, get rid of them all. They had their turn, and now we got ours. That's why dinosaurs don't exist no more.*

Dancer: Wasn't it a meteor?

Paulie: They're all meat eaters.

Chris: Meteor, me-te-or.

How can we feel such affection for a sadistic killer like Paulie? Because he's hilarious, and we're in no danger. Oh, and how he *loves* his mother!

8. *Psychiatric language is largely a set of excuses and power-plays.* *The Sopranos* addresses anxiety, depression, ADHD, addiction, sociopathy, Borderline Personality Disorder, and much more. Yet in virtually every case, it acknowledges that there is, to quote psychiatrists' psychiatrist Elliot Kupferberg, a reasonable "pre-therapeutic" take on

the same situation. Yes, you *can* say that addicts are helpless victims of a “disease.” But you can also say that addicts are people who willfully place their own self-destructive habits over family harmony. Indeed, *The Sopranos* standardly insinuates that psychiatric language mostly boils down to Social Desirability Bias. If a character has ADHD, he’s sick and needs help; only a monster would growl, “Man up and work harder.” But as the plot plays out, attentive viewers will notice that it’s the no-nonsense approach that fits the facts and improves behavior. Even psychiatrist Dr. Melfi reverts to old-fashioned theories of personal responsibility when she exits her office; if you cross her, she’ll lash out no matter what psychiatric labels you carry.

The only clear-cut exception to this psychiatric skepticism is Uncle Junior’s dementia. Even here, he starts out as a faker, feigning dementia to delay his trial. By the end of the show, however, Junior’s run out of money – and can’t remember where he stashed his emergency funds. Indeed, he barely knows who he is anymore. The lesson: Dementia, unlike the other mental problems characters face, is a hard constraint rather than an exotic preference.

9. *Despite ubiquitous ambiguity, right and wrong is fairly obvious if you calm down and detach yourself from your society.* In season 3, a lone righteous character, psychiatrist Dr. Krakower, sees through a web of wrong-doing and lame excuses in a matter of minutes. Carmela Soprano goes to Krakower for help, and he delivers The Moral Answers. Highlights from one of the greatest scenes of all time:

Carmela: [...] [Tony’s] a good man, a good father.

Krakower: You tell me he’s a depressed criminal. Prone to anger. Serially unfaithful. Is that your definition of a good man?

Carmela: I thought psychiatrists weren’t supposed to be judgmental.

Krakower: Many patients want to be excused for their current predicament. Because of events that occurred in their childhood. That’s what psychiatry has become in America. Visit any shopping mall or ethnic pride parade. Witness the results.

Carmela: What we say in here stays in here, right?

Krakower: By ethical code and by law.

Carmela: His crimes. They are, uh, organized crimes.

Krakower: The mafia.

Carmela: Oh so, so what? So what? He betrays me every week with these whores.

Krakower: Probably the least of his misdeeds. You can leave now, or you can you stay and hear what I have to say.

Carmela: Well, you're gonna charge the same anyway.

Krakower: I won't take your money.

Carmela: That's a new one.

Krakower: You must trust your initial impulse and consider leaving him. You'll never be able to feel good about yourself. You'll never be able to quell the feelings of guilt and shame that you talked about. As long as you're his accomplice.

[...]

Carmela: So . . . You think I need to define my boundaries more clearly. Keep a certain distance. Not internalize my-

Krakower: What did I just say?

Carmela: Leave him.

Krakower: Take only the children, or what's left of them, and go.

[...]

Carmela: I'd have to, uh, get a lawyer. Find an apartment. Arrange for child support.

Krakower: You're not listening. I am not charging you because I won't take blood money. And you can't either. One thing you can never say, that you haven't been told.

10. *Dylan Matthews and Tyler Cowen notwithstanding, the Columbus Day episode was hilarious and wise.* The veneration of this murderous slaver isn't just shameful; it exposes the shameful essence of identity politics of every description. And what better vessels for these truisms than a gang of self-righteously aggrieved mafiosi?