

Evaluating a psychological profile of a serial killer (Updated)

*** Editors Note ***

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Murder has been illustrated as "the unlawful killing of a human being by another" (Oxford dictionary, 1997, p.742). The definition of Serial killings on the other hand, is not so simple to define, for it takes on many different forms, and is brought on by many different states of mind. Holmes and De Burger (1988) have attempted to define serial murder as consisting of repetitive killings which are one-on-one with rare exceptions, where the relationship between the victim and the offender is that of a stranger or slight acquaintance, and the motivation to kill and apparent motives are lacking (p.138). As we will see, this is not an extremely accurate description, because the motivation and motives are not lacking at all, but are just shrouded. Rarely do any of these killers act for money, instead they do it for the thrill, sexual satisfaction and/or dominance they achieve in their own world.

A more specific profile of a serial killer has been presented by Apsche (1993) stating that most are white males in their twenties or thirties, who target strangers near their homes or places of work. "According to criminologist Eric Hickey, who has assembled the most extensive database on demography of serial murder states that, 88% of serial killers are male, 85% are Caucasian, and the average age when they claim their first victim is usually around 28.5. In terms of victim selection, 62% of the killers target strangers exclusively, and another 22% kill at least one stranger. Finally, 71% of the killers operate in a specific location or area, rather than traveling wide distances to commit their crimes"(Apsche, 1993, p.16). Also, the F.B.I claims that to be classified as a serial killer, the person must first complete 3 separate murders, that are spaced by a duration they call "the cooling off period" which can vary from a few days to years. But one thing that very few definitions include is that for a killer to be known as a "serial Killer", they must have a particular method to their killings. For instance, Wayne Gacy, had the trade mark of gagging victims with their own underwear so that they would die in their own vomit.

To discover what makes a serial killer function, it is necessary to look back into their past, particularly their adolescent life. By looking at many and varied cases, it is evident that virtually all serial killers come from dysfunctional backgrounds involving sexual or physical abuse, drugs or alcoholism and their related problems. Many traits that seem to be universal in all these serial killers, though in varied amounts, include disorganised thinking, bipolar mode disorders, a feeling of resentment towards society brought on by their own failings, sexual frustrations, an inability to be social or socially accepted, over bearing parents and a wild imagination that tends to drag them into a fantasy world. In a chart of serial killer - childhood development characteristics - created by Ressler, Burgers and Douglas (1990), the three most frequently reported behaviors included day dreaming, compulsive masturbation, and isolation.

The daydreaming, which is brought on by an over productive imagination, tends to lead the way into the general fantasy world that the serial killer begins to live in to protect himself from any isolation he is faced with. At an early age, if a child is left alone, or forced to live in isolation whereby little attention is given to them for long periods of time, their minds become the object of their company, and thus begin the daydreams and the fantasy world (Ressler, Douglas and Burgess, 1990). This kind of isolation tends to breed feelings of inadequacy in some way or other in all serial killers. These feelings maybe masked by numerous artificial successes, but these feelings run deeper than the normal neurotic feelings of not being good enough. Essentially, these early life attachments which are known as 'bonding', set up a map by which the child will in later life react to others. In such cases, the children do not learn how to interact properly within their society, and at best, turn into mirror images of their isolators. A prime example of this can be seen in the case of Ed Kemper, whose mother condemned him to the

basement of their home at the tender age of ten in fear that he would molest his younger sister (though he had not given his mother any reason to think this). Confused and angry as to why he was suffering this punishment, he turned to his fantasies, which may have started out as 'normal', but with the continued isolation they quickly became his dominant world.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that the majority of all daydreamers will not find themselves turning into murderers in later years; and so too, not all fantasy life is pathological. In fact, ordinary, healthy human beings often dream about their hopes and pleasures, even those that are beyond their reach. "Some of these fantasies may include such deviant and bizarre sexual practices as fetishes, pedophilia, bondage, and rape... Because of their strong sense of conscience or concern over their public image, most will resist translating their desires into action" (Ressler, Douglas and Burgess, 1990). Detailed, ongoing research by the F.B.I shows that many convicted serial killers enact their crimes because of the incredibly rich, detailed and elaborate violent fantasies (including the act of murder) that have developed in their minds as early as the age of seven and eight. What distinguishes killers from 'normal' civilians is that the aggressive day dreams that have been developed as children, continue to develop and expand through their adolescence right into manhood, where they are finally released into the real world (Wilson & Seaman, 1992). Through the use of murder and mayhem, the serial killer literally chases his dream. With each successive victim, he attempts to fine tune the act, striving to make his real life experiences as perfect as his fantasy (Apsche, 1993).

David Berkowitz, known as "The son of Sam", is a typical example of an average serial killer, and quiet normal in comparison to his other counterparts who have been known to eat their victims. From the years of 1976 through to 1977, he set out his reign of terror in New York City, by shooting over ten lovers who were parked in secluded areas. Upon being interviewed by John Douglas (a member of the F.B.I) at Attica State Prison, it was discovered that Berkowitz came from an adopted home, and upon discovering his real mother, was told by her that he wasn't wanted. Originally being shy, insecure, and angry, he blossomed into a potential killer. He procured a large and powerful weapon, which in turn made him feel bigger and more powerful, and set about unknowingly to obtain revenge for what his mother had done to him.

In most cases, there is an event known as the "Pre-crime stresser", as discussed by Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas (1990). The pre-crime stresser can be looked at as the reason for why the person turns to killing as a form of release, even if the criminal does not realise the full extent of his motivations or fails to see the reasons behind the stress he feels. A clear example of this can be seen upon the questioning of Berkowitz who denied he had anything against women, nor did he have reason as to why he killed so many. In actuality fact, his mother's rejection was the stresser that ultimately turned him violent. He did not attack his mother directly (few serial killers ever attack the source of their resentment), but the majority of his killings were based on women who had a likeness to his mother.

Serial killers come in many different varieties. One which is driven by the desire to be acknowledged and feared is the "copy cat". As described by John Douglas (1996), they basically set out copying the actions of previously 'famous' serial killers who struck terror into people's hearts. For example, in Wichita Kansas, the BTK strangler (Bind, Torture, Kill), has been said to have attempted following in the footsteps of Berkowitz. This particular issue has been much debated, with some people arguing that the BTK incidences took place prior to any of Berkowitz's. As to the accuracy of this concept, it is debatable, particular when evidence suggests that the BTK activities continued up until 1979, though the murders were said to have ended during 1977. It is not so much the celebrity status that they so enjoy, but instead the ability to control the lives of thousands of area residents, who are held in their grip of terror. "Psychologically the thrill-motivated killer tends to be a sociopath, someone with a disorder of character rather than the mind. He lacks a conscience, feels no remorse, and cares exclusively

for his own pleasures in life...It has been estimated that 3% of all males in our society could be considered sociopathic" (Fox & Levin, 1994, p.18).

Society generally is quick to place tags on serial killers. Many believe that they are psychotics who hear voices or see visual hallucinations, but this is a misconception as explained by John Douglas (1996). Most are not at all psychotics who have lost touch with reality, but instead psychopaths who are suffering from chronic mental disorders with violent or abnormal social behaviors. Only a small hand full, like Richard Trenton who believed he needed to drink other people's blood to stay alive, are actually psychotics. And this group is so disorganised in its crimes that it is generally apprehended quite quickly.

One of the most hideous serial killers would undoubtedly have to be the sexual killer. Many specialists, including Douglas (1996) have agreed that the most crucial factor in the development of the serial rapist or killer is the role of fantasy. It has been suggested that the escalation from fantasy to reality in these instances, can be attributed to pornography. In response I would tend to agree, for pornography tends to build on the natural inner desires that exist within us all. The desire to have sexual intercourse is dominant in all males. The action of penetration brings on a sense of triumph and conquest. The only difference here is that these killers have not had the opportunity to learn intimacy due to childhood restraints, and they substitute intimacy with control (which they obtain by inflicting bodily harm to the other (the equivalent to the penetrating conquest) to counteract their inner desires for a mate. As Dr. Richard G. Rappart, a forensic psychiatrist, writes that the mode of death is one where factors indicate that the victim has meaning to the killer and that the intimacy of the murderous act is part of a close bond between himself and the victim formed in the killers fantasy and delusions. A study by Samuel Yochelson and Stanton Samenow (1988) pointed out that a high proportion of serial killers are 'highly sexed' in childhood, and have been known to look into bathrooms through keyholes on females undressing, or initiated sexual games - sometimes amounting to rape - with girls at school.

As Jack Apsche (1993) makes clear, serial murderers see themselves as dominant, controlling and powerful figures. They hold the power of life and death, and in their own eyes, they perceive themselves as God. In their fantasies and their enactment of the murder, they become God. This is actually probably the only power they have ever had, and for this reason they savor and continue to persist. As B.F Skinner proved in 'Science and Human Behavior', once a killer has tasted the success of a kill, and is not apprehended, it will ultimately mean he will strike again. He put it simply, that once something good has happened, something that made the killer feel good, and powerful, then they will not hesitate to try it again. The first attempt may leave them with a feeling of fear, revulsion and remorse, as stated by Ted Bundy to psychologists on the eve of his execution in 1989; but at the same time, it is like an addictive drug. Some killers revisit the crime scene or take trophies, such as jewelry or body parts, or video tape the scenario so as to be able to re-live the actual feeling of power at a latter date. Many have been reported as saying that they had fallen into the power of the devil after several kills, which is contradictory to their initial beliefs that they were God. It is almost as though initially they believed that they would be powerful in that they had the choice in taking or sparing life, but as time progresses, and the kills mount up, they find they are driven to kill as though they have no choice. Apsche (1993) has noted that many killers have attempted to get help when they discovered they had little control. They appear to want to stop their actions, but regain control to avoid their discovery. This is possibly an example of a bipolar personality clash.

Ultimately, it is virtually impossible to detect a serial killer. Many seem to be quiet normal in their everyday lives, only some actually tend to act differently to the general population. Many have stated that it is easy to fool society, especially psychiatrists, by simply stating what they want to hear. Nor is there any way of detecting for certain who might become a homicidal maniac. But by comparing many past cases it is possible to put together a list of general

personality traits that are common in serial killers, and that may prove useful in determining future killers. The F.B.I has its own list, but due to its unavailability I have prepared my own. Traits that should be looked at when trying to decide if a person is a potential killer include: Social withdrawal, abnormal dependence's on ones mother or ulcerated relations with ones parents, hypochondria or other attention seeking behavior including forms of clothing, delusional mind as to grandeur, severe depression, a general feeling of emptiness as to the future, inability to take criticisms, a general feeling of being mistreated, inability to assert ones self, parental taunts as to ones inability to be sufficient (or as I prefer to call it - the Hitchcock 'Psycho' syndrome), mood disorders, and a general failing in attempts to succeed. Of course these are very general points, and even if someone had the majority of these (as I do), it would not necessarily mean that they would become serial killers, it is only meant as a point of reference.

As Freud once commented, a child would destroy the world if it had the power. In a sense the serial killer's mind can be contrasted to that of a child's for it has not had the opportunity to develop to that of a 'normal' adult. Instead, fantasy takes the place of reality, and it is almost always solely based on acquiring power. A majority of serial killings might have been avoided if the killers had been better treated in their youth. But then again, there is no concrete evidence that suggests this to be true. In all actual fact, most of the conclusions that have been made on serial killers are only speculations based on observations and interrogations of the subjects. But to be realistic, can we really trust anything that may come from the equivalent of a child's mind filled with falsities created through fantasy?

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