Exploring the Phenomenon of Serial Killing from a Psychological Standpoint
A Review of the Literature
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Abstract
This review observes the mind of serial murderers while trying to answer the question, "Are serial killers made or born?" It begins by examining the infamous serial killer Ted Bundy, a man responsible for over thirty-five deaths. From there a number of psychological perspectives are considered to gain a better comprehension of what motivates a serial killer. Different types of serial killers are also categorized such as a vision, mission, and comfort killer. The conclusion suggests that environmental and genetic factors are both responsible for serial murderers behavior and that further research is necessary.

What Defines a “Serial” Killer?
Psychologists and criminologists commonly identify three main types of multiple homicide: “mass,” “spree,” and “serial” (Canter and Alison; Knight). They categorize the killing of three or more victims at the same time as “mass” murder. To distinguish “spree” from "serial” murder, they categorize as “spree” murder the killing of three or more victims at different locations or times, but in a continuous succession unbroken by any “cooling-off period” (Canter and Alison). The “serial” killer, on the other hand, murders victims in a sequence broken by intervals of twenty-four hours or longer, indicating that each killing temporarily satisfies whatever motivates the killer’s actions, and each subsequent killing terminates a separate sequence of behaviors. Experts therefore generally classify as “serial” killers those who murder three or more victims, with significant cooling-off periods occurring between murders (Bartels and Ceri; Canter and Laurence; Cotter; Knight; Petherick; Rosen; Rule; Winter).

Ted Bundy
In The Stranger Beside Me, author Ann Rule explores the life of serial murderer Ted Bundy, responsible for an estimated thirty-five murders. Ironically enough, Rule describes her relationship with Bundy as deeply emotional and personal. She and Bundy were co-workers on the crisis line at Seattle’s Crisis Clinic on the Tuesday night late shift, and instantly became close friends. Rule volunteered on the phones, and Bundy earned two dollars an hour as a work-study student. Rule recalls her colleague’s aspirations of attending law school, his charm and promise, and her own ambivalence about now, years later, writing his story. And so Ted Bundy was my friend, through all the good times and the bad times, I stuck by him for many years, hoping that none of the innuendo was true. There are few who will understand my decision. I'm sure that it will anger many. And, with it all, Ted Bundy's story must be told, and it must be told in its entirety if any good can evolve from the terrible years: 1974-1980. I have labored for a long time with my ambivalence about Ted. As a professional writer, I have been handed the story of a lifetime, a story any author prays for. Probably there is no other writer so privy to every facet of Ted’s story. I did not seek it out, and there have been many, many, long nights when I wished devoutly that things might have been different-- that I was writing about a complete stranger whose hopes and dreams were no part of my own. I have wanted to go back to 1971, to erase all that has happened, to be able to think of Ted as the open, smiling young man I knew then. Ted has been described as the perfect son, the perfect student, the Boy
Scout grown to adulthood, a genius, as handsome as a movie idol, a bright light in the future of the Republican Party, a sensitive psychiatric social worker, a budding lawyer, a trusted friend, a young man whom the future could surely hold only success. He is all of these things, and none of them. (12-13)

Rule had an interesting relationship with Bundy. She knew very well that he was linked to the crimes, which he was being charged. He is a serial killer. What makes this account unique is that it narrates a question central to the remainder of the research. That is, “What drives someone to take the lives of total strangers?”

Psychological Research

Many psychologists have tried to understand the mind of serial killers. Zelda G. Knight feels that serial murder is perhaps the most baffling crime of all time. In her essay “Some Thoughts on The Psychological Roots of the Behavior of Serial Killers as Narcissists: An Object Relations Perspective,” Knight dives deep into the minds of serial killers. According to her research, some individuals are sadistic serial killers who enjoy the sexual murdering and who are both pathological and destructive narcissists. The study examines the psychological roots of the behavior of sexually motivated male serial killers, and why they do what they do. The context of serial murder is presented, with a definition of sexually motivated serial murder. The development of narcissism is described as this forms the basis for understanding such behavior.

Knight emphasizes early development. Serial killers exhibit a specific type of defensive personality, which shows a “defective self” that manifests during infant experiences. Often this is seen when infants or young children are abandoned. Drawing upon the theories of Self Psychology’s founder, Heinz Kohut, Knight also concludes that the parents or parent figures of serial killers were faulty, even destructive “self objects” for their sons:

[Mothers were] controlling, punitive and rejecting, or overprotective and seductive, while the fathers were (literally or symbolically) absent. These primary figures, in failing to give sufficient mirroring and idealization, and in lacking recognition of their infant’s emerging need for grandiosity and idealization would have disconfirmed the child’s emerging sense of self and reality. As a child the serial killer would not have discovered his or her “capacity to light up the mother’s face” and thus there would have been no sense of visibility and “recognition in the eyes of the other.” (1197)

Extreme failure of original self objects, Knight goes on to explain, produces extreme needs in children, which may transform into equally extreme, even monstrous, behaviors later on:

These children would have experienced a profound sense of rejection and low self-esteem. The impact of this kind of dysfunctional object relation would result in the needs for grandiosity being repressed only to unconsciously surface as mirror-hungry behavior. The need for mirroring and attention may explain why thrill serial killers require that their victims remain fully awake and aware during torture as this awareness ensures a response, and this response offers – in fantasy and in reality – a sense of visibility. (1197)

This need for mirroring also explains why there is not usually postmortem mutilation, necrophilia or cannibalism: Once the victim is dead there is no more recognition of themselves in the victim’s eyes and thus no more sense of existence and visibility.

Another psychologist, Philippe Cotter from Switzerland, presents the hypothesis that “the intensity of the mental health disturbances of any individual resorting to extreme
violence is merely indicative of the socialization of the violence used” (Cotter 2). He then attaches this behavior to a certain personality type: the authoritarian personality. This can be characterized by an ethnocentric view of the world. Cotter also claims that the minds of serial killers are similar to that of the Nazi political party in that both are unable to identify their actions are wrong. Cotter is different from Knight because he is categorizing serial killers by their actions whereas Knight focuses on childhood development.

Another intriguing psychological approach to understanding the minds of serial killers is presented by University of New Mexico neuroscientist Kent Kiehl and post-graduate student Joshua Buckholtz, who are studying how genetic risk factors predispose people to antisocial behavior and addiction problems. In an article the two published in Scientific American Mind, they explain how neuroscientists are discovering that some of the most cold-blooded killers are not “bad” in the strict sense. They suffer from a brain abnormality that leaves them wandering in an emotionless world. Kiehl believes that psychopaths are not merely selfish. Their brains process information differently from those of other people. It is as if they have a learning disability that impairs emotional development. Too often psychologist will write off serial killers because they feel that their minds are so distorted they will not be able to receive help:

But now that science is unraveling the mechanisms behind the disorder, it’s time for that attitude to change...If specific physiological deficits prevent psychopaths from empathizing with others, forming stable relationships and learning from their mistakes, then elucidating them could lead to new treatments: medications, perhaps, or targeted behavioral strategies. (22)

Kiehl has begun a multimillion-dollar project to gather genetic information such as brain images and case histories from 1,000 psychopaths. He plans to compile all of his research into a searchable database. In order to speed up the work Kiehl helped design a functional MRI machine that is housed inside of a trailer. In doing his research Kiehl noted that psychopaths appear tone-deaf because they lack access to their own feelings and those of others. Kiehl asks readers to imagine what it would feel like if you were never anxious or depressed, never had regrets or low self-esteem but also never cared deeply for anyone: this is how the mind of a serial killer operates.

Joseph P. Newmann at the University of Wisconsin Madison conducted one experiment that Kiehl focused on. It discovered yet another brain deficiency of psychopaths -- how they pay attention. In a gambling experiment, Newmann was able to show that psychopaths have trouble shifting gears, even when the strategy they are currently working on is failing. Newmann gave participants 100 cards. The cards were arranged so that 9 of the 10 were face cards, 8 of the next 10 were face cards, 7 of the next 10 were face cards and so on. Participants were then told that each time they turned over a card they would gain a point if it was a face card or lose a point if it was not; also they could quit them game whenever they should choose to do so. Players earned easy points at first, and then, as odds worsened, non-psychopaths would stop playing whereas psychopaths would continue to play until they had lost most or all of their earnings. Newmann feels that the apparent callousness of psychopaths is “actually the result of an attention quirk: they do not take in new information when their attention is otherwise engaged”(26).

Typology

Other researchers attempt to understand the minds of serial killers by proposing typologies to place them in. These typologies try to identify the motive of the killer. In the book Serial Crime by Wayne Petherick a few different typologies of serial killer are introduced. One proposed by psychologist Holmes in 1998. Holmes described six categories of serial killer. Three of them, vision, mission, and comfort, seek to accomplish nonsexual
goals. The main difference between the visionary and the mission killer is that the visionary is psychotic (voices tell him to rid the world of prostitutes), whereas the mission killer acts on egotistical belief (I want to make the world a better place and rid it of prostitutes) (Holmes 191). The remaining three types all involve sexual motives. They are the lust, thrill, and power/control killers all of which differ mainly in how fantasy is used and whether or not they need a live victim. Another distinction between serial killers, which is made by Petherick, is the idea of an organized versus a disorganized serial killer. The organized serial killer is intelligent and socially stable. His or her criminal behavior is more likely to be a result of stress, and this person is likely to show a large amount of planning prior to the crime, as shown by traveling to the crime scene, bringing a weapon or other instruments, careful victim selection, etc. In contrast the disorganized serial killer is, "of relatively low intelligence and poor adjustment. His crime seems to take himself as well as the victim by surprise. He frequently must kill the victim prior to his sexual release in order to maintain control over the victim" (Petherick 194).

Just as Petherick attempts to understand the motives of serial killers, one man by the name of John Douglas does all he can to catch them. In an article selected from the publication Biography, Douglas is celebrated. John Douglas, 52 is one of the most famous FBI agents; he successfully identified the serial killers of many famous crimes. Profiling was not always taken as seriously as it is today:

Today profiling, once considered psychological voodoo, has finally earned a place as a highly respected weapon in the investigator's anti-crime arsenal. As Douglas explains it, profiling is a system for understanding and classifying violent killers that has evolved since the 18th century. A well-trained profiler examines the crime scene and the manner in which the victim(s) died and then, from the killer's unique behavior towards the victim--his "signature"--deduces certain information about him. (Rosen)

Had it not been for Douglas, "The Trailside Killer" would not have been found and convicted. Around the woodland bay area of San Francisco joggers were being murdered. Local authorities believed the killer was most likely a good-looking Caucasian male. However, Douglas disagreed, based on the multiple stab wounds that each victim showed, Douglas concluded that the murder probably had a history of bed-wetting, fire starting, and cruelty towards animals (2). Douglas was correct and David Carpenter (The Trailside Killer) checked out on all the accounts Douglas speculated.

Conclusion

Research provides an immense amount of information about serial murderers. They are a selective type of individual who is capable of atrocious crimes because of conflict during early stages of cognitive development. However, if you examine the life of a murder such as Ted Bundy, it is difficult to understand how an individual such as he operates. Kiehl would conclude that Ted Bundy is a result of biological and environmental factors. Are serial killers made or born? The answer is probably both. If, as investigators believe, genes account for 50 percent of the variability among those who exhibit adult antisocial traits, then life circumstances are just as important as biological inheritance. Further research in psychology needs to be performed in order to fully understand the complex mind of a serial murderer.

Works Cited