

What factors shape a serial murderer?

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Abstract. Serial murderers have long been a subject of fascination and concern in the fields of criminology and psychology. This article explores the multifaceted factors that contribute to the emergence of serial killers, including childhood trauma, mental illnesses, and sociocultural influences. Research indicates that childhood trauma, including abuse, neglect, and adoption-related issues, can significantly shape an individual's propensity for violence in adulthood. Mental illnesses, such as antisocial personality disorder, psychopathy, and sadistic traits, are also key factors that increase the risk of serial killing behaviors. Sociocultural factors, including cultural values, social support networks, and media portrayal, play a pivotal role in molding individuals' values, mental well-being, and opportunities for criminal activities. Understanding these interconnected factors is crucial for identifying and preventing serial killings, ultimately contributing to a safer society.

Keywords: Serial murderers, childhood trauma, mental illnesses, sociocultural factor.

1. Introduction

Serial murderers are an intricate and unsettling topic that has garnered significant attention within the realms of criminology and psychology. These individuals have gained notoriety for their relentless, brutal, and repetitive acts of violence, often involving multiple victims, thereby sparking widespread public apprehension. Their actions have not only shocked but also perplexed society, prompting profound questions about the underlying motivations that drive certain individuals to become serial killers. Over the past few decades, experts in criminology, psychology, and the social sciences have dedicated extensive efforts to unravel the enigma surrounding serial killers. Their research endeavors have sought to unearth the psychological and social factors that contribute to the emergence of these heinous criminals with the ultimate goal of understanding and, hopefully, preventing such atrocities.

Criminologists assert that the behavior of serial murderers is influenced by a myriad of interconnected factors, encompassing their early life experiences, mental health conditions, familial backgrounds, and the socio-cultural environment in which they are raised. A deeper examination into these elements is essential to fathom the complex web of influences that propel individuals toward serial killing.

Psychologists, on the other hand, are deeply concerned with the potential psychological disorders that may afflict these criminals. Conditions like antisocial personality disorder and schizophrenia have been linked to impulses and violent tendencies, raising concerns about the role of mental illness in the genesis of serial killers. Understanding these psychological dimensions is crucial for developing effective strategies for identification, intervention, and treatment. In sum, the phenomenon of serial murderers has become a focal point of extensive academic inquiry and societal discourse. This study seeks to delve into the multifaceted perspectives of psychology, criminology, and sociology in order to shed light on the underlying factors that contribute to the emergence of serial killers. By plumbing the depths of this unsettling subject, our hope is to equip society with the knowledge necessary to create a safer future, one where the threat posed by serial killers can be better understood and mitigated.

2. Influencing Factors

2.1. Childhood trauma

Childhood trauma plays a pivotal role in shaping the psychological development of individuals, potentially leading to extreme behaviors in adulthood. Numerous studies and case reports highlight the correlation between early-life abuse, neglect, or domestic violence and the propensity for serial killers to exhibit violent tendencies as adults.

Abuse is separated into different categories: physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Physical abuse refers to someone causing no accidental physical harm to another person. In this case, for example, the serial killer Lorenzo Fayne's mother was accused of physically injuring his son's head as a punishment. Sexual abuse, however, refers to inappropriate sexual activity considering the child's developmental status. For example, serial killer Bobby Joe Long was sexually offended by his mother by forcing him to have sex with other men. Finally, psychological abuse refers to verbal humiliation that causes emotional distress and damages the child. The serial killer Carroll Edward Cole, for example, his mother dressed him as a girl and forced him to identify himself as a girl [1].

One noteworthy study by Cleary and Luxenburg in 1993, involving over 60 serial killers, identified psychological or physical abuse as a predominant feature in their childhoods [2]. Additionally, research conducted by Hickey in 1997 revealed that 48 percent of a group of 62 male serial murderers had experienced rejection by a parent or another significant figure during their formative years. Studies investigating the link between childhood abuse and neglect and adult violence have shown that individuals who endured physical, sexual, or emotional abuse during their youth were three times more likely to exhibit violent behavior in adulthood [2]. Prominent serial killers like John Wayne Gacy and Ed Gein had both suffered from parental abuse and likely experienced some form of trauma [3].

Another facet of childhood trauma involves adoption and abandonment, which can also serve as indicators of violent tendencies in adulthood. Adoption studies suggest that if both biological and adoptive parents exhibit violent behavior, there is a 40 percent chance that the child may engage in criminal activities later in life, compared to a 12.1 percent chance when only genetic factors are involved. Furthermore, individuals raised in non-violent environments, with neither biological nor adoptive violent parents, have only a 6.7 percent chance of becoming criminals, decreasing to 2.1 percent when none of these risk factors are present. In conclusion, both genetic predisposition and environmental factors contribute significantly to an individual's development of violent tendencies and criminal behavior. Serial killers like Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Gary Ridgeway, Ed Gein, Ed Kemper, and others likely experienced unstable emotional attachments to their parents and experienced abandonment physically or emotionally during their childhoods [3]. In fact, most serial killers are often from divorced families where the father has left the mother [4].

It's crucial to note that a substantial number of serial killers were raised by adoptive parents, and the sense of abandonment from their birth parents could have fueled feelings of rejection and intense anger, influencing their development. Additionally, some adopted children struggle to establish strong bonds with their new parents initially due to a lack of warmth and intimacy during the adoption process, potentially hindering their ability to develop love and empathy throughout their lives. For instance, the "Son of Sam" killer in New York, Berkowitz, who targeted strangers in parked cars, might have acted violently due to his feelings of rejection. After returning from military service in the Korean War, he sought out his biological family, only to discover that they did not consider him a part of their family and refused to accept him, leading him down a path of serial killing [5]. The abnormal or unusual relationships which their mothers are another recurring trend among serial murderers. Extensive research has identified this as a common factor in many serial killers' backgrounds, often characterized by elements of sex and abuse. Notable examples include Bobby Joe Long, Henry Lee Lucas, Gary Ridgeway, Ed Gein, Charles Manson, and Ed Kemper, who all had inappropriate relationships with their mothers. Some of them sexually offended their mothers during their youth, while others were subjected to sexual sadism by their mothers. These shared experiences

suggest that the relationships with their mothers played a significant role in their serial killing behavior [3]. In Fact, some of the serial killers were taken into reformatory institution or orphanage, and thus they lacked parental care [6].

2.2. Mental illnesses

Certain mental illnesses may increase the risk of offending, especially without appropriate treatment and support. For example, antisocial personality disorder (APSD) is a significant contributing factor to the development of serial killing behaviors. APSD is characterized by a range of personality traits and behaviors that can profoundly influence an individual's propensity to engage in serial murder. These traits include arrogance, a lack of compunction, apathy towards others, an absence of conscience, a tendency to blame others, manipulative and conning behavior, emotional coldness, a distorted acknowledgement of socially appropriate manners, disregard for social duties, nonconformity to social regulations, and irresponsibility [7]. It's important to note that not everyone with APSD becomes a psychopath, and not all psychopaths become killers. Many psychopaths may succeed in the field of economics by controlling and persuading the individuals around them for financial gain, but they are not necessarily driven to commit murder. However, research has shown that individuals with psychopathy, which often co-occurs with APSD, are more likely to engage in violent reoffending after being discharged from prison compared to offenders without psychopathic traits. Some well-known serial offenders, such as Gary Ridgeway, Ed Gein, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, BTK (Dennis Rader), John Wayne Gacy, and Ed Kemper, can be classified as psychopaths.

It was found in a study conducted by Stone that a significant percentage (86.5%) of serial killers can be assessed as psychopaths based on the Hare criteria, while an additional 9% shown not enough traits to be diagnosed as psychopaths but exhibits some psychopathic characteristics. Furthermore, up to 50% of the serial murderers in the study exhibited schizoid personality traits as defined in the DSM-IV, and 4% showed some schizoid traits. Additionally, Sadistic Personality Disorder (PD) was present in 87.5% of the men, with discrete traits found in 1.5% of them. The study revealed a strong overlap between psychopathic traits and sadistic PD, with 93% of the psychopathic serial killers also exhibiting sadistic traits. Furthermore, half of the psychopaths in the study displayed schizoid traits. Astonishingly, around half of the serial killers met the criteria for all three different categories of personality disorders: schizoid, sadistic and psychopathic [8].

Hazelwood and Michaud conducted a study that found that most serial killers exhibit sadistic behavior. Pleasure derived from the pain of others is a prevail and significant factor in sexual sadism. Many sexual sadists also possess a strong desire to dominate others and are willing to subject their victims completely to their control. This desire for dominance was evident in the case of one of the most notorious serial killers, Mike DeBardeleben, who previously depict the impulsion of having complete mastery over the victim, making them helpless and subject to the perpetrator's desires, including causing suffering for pleasure.

APSD, especially when co-occurring with psychopathy and sadistic traits, can significantly influence an individual's likelihood of engaging in serial killing behaviors. Understanding these personality disorders and their associations can be crucial for identifying and preventing such violent criminal acts in society.

Secondly, fascination with violence, death and dying is another factor contributing to the formation of serial killing behaviors. Dating back to the childhood of serial killers, it is not surprising that psychologists found out that they were long fascinated with violence, death and dying [7]. Some of the serial killers gain joy by torturing animals and manipulate the faith of weak and vulnerable creatures. This foregrounds the experiment on human beings later in their lives. These aggressive fantasies developed as a response to different threats including childhood mistreatment and negligence. The theory suggests that the fantasies act as a rehearsal for aggressive behavior and killing. As the time progresses, individual will try and seek opportunities to behave violently and may begin their killing spree. The studies of male sexual murderers and sadistic offenders supports this view. They have shown a positive correlation between intrusive fantasy life and rate of paraphilias and

violent fantasies. Edmund Kemper, the killer who was convicted in 1973 of murdering 6 female college students before killing his own mother, who also cruelly dismembered his cat when he was 13. This suggested that the fantasy of torturing weak animals developed and lead to the later serial killing. Other individuals appear to have a fascination about dead beings. For example, Milwaukee's Jeffrey Dahmer collected animals that was dead on the roads by car accidents when he was a child. Later, he began experimenting on these creatures: dissecting them, using acids to dispose them. These actions are the early form of his later violent murders. At the early age, having intrusive fantasy life makes them see violence a normal and acceptable way to get what they want. There are lots of rejections of fantasy within murders. Even though some serial killers have little or none preparation for the murder, evidence show that there is still unconscious fantasy going on in his/her mind. The crime scene often matches the elements of fantasy in their minds and the killers only rely more and more on their fantasy. As the time passes, the fantasy continuously substitutes their true feelings and make the individual develop a range of negative personality traits. For example, aggression, rebelliousness, low self-esteem etc. After developing a variety of negative personality traits, they will develop a preference for autoerotic activity, aggression, chronic lying, rebelliousness and a preference for fetish behavior. Then, they begin having difficulty distinguishing between the reality and his fantasies. More and more isolated and violent behaviors begin to grow. These fantasies stimulate themselves, further alienate themselves with the society and increase his/her antisocial behavior. The increased cycle of isolation and fantasy only catalyzes the individual's negative traits. Finally, it is likely to form serial killing behaviors [7].

2.3. Sociocultural factors

Sociocultural factors play a pivotal role in understanding the influences on serial murderers. The concept of social culture encompasses a complex tapestry of elements, including societal values, cultural traditions, moral principles, social structures, and the interplay between individuals and society. Undoubtedly, social culture exerts a profound impact on the formation of individual behaviors and values, a fact that applies equally to serial murderers.

Primarily, social culture significantly shapes individual values and moral compasses [9]. Diverse cultures and societies adhere to varying moral codes and principles that profoundly mold individual conduct. In certain societies, acts of violence may be perceived as acts of honor or legitimate methods for resolving conflicts, potentially predisposing individuals towards extremely violent actions like serial killings. Conversely, cultures emphasizing peaceful dispute resolution and reverence for life may mitigate the occurrence of such behaviors. Consequently, the influence of social culture on the values and moral perspectives of serial murderers is unmistakable.

Moreover, social culture can also impact an individual's mental well-being and social behaviors [9], thereby heightening the propensity for serial murder. Social culture can influence an individual's psychological stress levels and adaptability. Some cultures may foster feelings of isolation, exclusion, or helplessness more readily, serving as catalysts for violent tendencies. Additionally, social culture can affect an individual's social support network and environment. A lack of social support or exposure to an unhealthy social milieu can render someone more susceptible to criminal activities, including serial killings. Furthermore, social culture can shape the social structure and opportunities for criminal activities. Certain societies may present greater opportunities and incentives for engaging in criminal behavior, including serial murder. For instance, societies marked by high poverty rates, widespread unemployment, and severe social inequality may drive individuals to desperate measures in their quest to meet their needs. Additionally, some societies may experience lax law enforcement or rampant corruption, which can embolden criminals by reducing the risk of punishment, thereby fostering a breeding ground for serial killers.

Additionally, the media and entertainment industry wield significant influence in perpetuating the impact of social culture on serial killers [10]. These industries play a pivotal role in shaping public consciousness and values, often choosing to sensationalize violent incidents and crimes. Such media coverage can inadvertently glorify or propagate the actions of serial killers, potentially inspiring

individuals to emulate these behaviors or view them as an appealing means of garnering attention or fulfilling psychological needs. Lastly, social culture can influence attitudes and responses to serial killers. Different societies may adopt varying approaches to the trial and punishment of criminals, which can, in turn, influence individuals' perceptions of the risks associated with criminal activities and their willingness to engage in violent behaviors. Some societies may lean towards punitive measures, while others prioritize rehabilitation and social reintegration, thus affecting the overall dynamics surrounding crime and its consequences.

In sum, social culture represents a multifaceted factor that exerts a profound impact on serial murderers. It significantly influences the emergence and evolution of serial killers by shaping individual values and moral perspectives, affecting mental health and social behaviors, altering social structures and opportunities, and disseminating and influencing attitudes towards crime through media channels. Therefore, when addressing the issue of serial murderers, a comprehensive approach is essential, one that takes into account not only individual factors but also the intricate web of sociocultural influences.

3. Conclusion

The phenomenon of serial killers is a complex and disturbing subject that has been explored extensively through the lenses of criminology, psychology, and sociology. This interdisciplinary study reveals a series of interrelated factors that account for the emergence of serial killers. Childhood trauma, including abuse, neglect, and abandonment, has been shown to play a key role in shaping an individual's psychological development and can lead to violent tendencies in adulthood. Mental illness, particularly antisocial personality disorder, psychopathy, and sadistic traits, can significantly impact a person's likelihood of engaging in serial killing behavior. Additionally, a fascination with violence, death, and death is thought to be a factor in driving individuals to commit serial murder. Sociocultural factors, including social values, cultural traditions, moral principles, social structure and media influence, also have a profound impact on serial murderers. These factors shape personal values, mental health, social behavior and opportunities for criminal activity. Furthermore, they influence different societies' attitudes and responses to serial killers. Understanding the intricate interactions among these factors is critical to developing effective strategies for identifying, intervening, and preventing serial killings. By delving into this disturbing topic, we hope to provide society with the knowledge necessary to create a safer future where the threats posed by serial killers can be better understood and mitigated. We must continue to explore and solve the complex root causes of serial murder to protect our communities and ensure a safer and more compassionate society for all.

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