

How Family Background Shapes Serial Killers

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a research on the family backgrounds of 5 serial killers to establish a connection between the latter and the people they became when committing their crimes later in life. The specific cases chosen were regardless of the background but were random to make non-biased research, i.e., both family background related and non-related. This paper will combine results from different research conducted on the topic of abuse in serial killer childhood as well as conclusions drawn from case studies. It will provide statistics obtained from secondary sources which include direct research on individuals as well as statements and opinions from experts on the subject. The paper concludes that out of the 5 cases studied, 4 had suffered and acknowledged past abuse as a reason for their lack of sympathy for who they killed. Additionally, it was found that abuse was more prevalent in serial killers than in the general population. This project also helps to answer the question is it ‘Nature or nurture’ and aims to educate people and reduce the societal opinion that ‘Every serial killer is born a monster.’ The common ethical question when conducting the research was whether or not it was providing an excuse for the crimes of these serial killers or quite literally defining murder. This paper is in no way justifying the crimes committed by the mentioned killer but rather looks into understanding them as human beings and as children rather than the adults they were while committing the crimes.

Keywords: *Serial killer, abuse, family background, childhood.*

Subject: Social Sciences and Criminal Psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Jim Clemente, ex-FBI criminal profiler, stated, “*I like to say that genetics load the gun, personality, and psychology aim it, and your experiences pull the trigger.*” Some crimes can by no means be justified. Some of those crimes are committed by serial killers who will be known as animals, or even generalized as psychopaths. Sohil Makwana, the author of *The Probe*, begins: “*No killer is born a criminal, sometimes, society’s contempt, hatred, and rancor can rework a harmless sufferer right into a malevolent demon.*” Serial murderer documentaries have proliferated in recent years, but all of them seem to share an identical recurring flaw. Most documentaries which are available on famous streaming sites more often than not give attention to the crimes and the capture of the so-called monsters, and by no means to their upbringing and the factors that motivated them to become serial killers. This essay looks into the early years and domestic lives of several infamous serial killers to show that the way they grew up had a role in shaping them and discusses the childhood of these criminals to prove that no one is truly born evil.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The information used to conduct this research was acquired through reading the cases of Richard Ramirez (The Night Stalker), Yoo Young Chul (The Rain Coat Killer), Dennis Rader (The BTK Killer), Moses Sithole (The ABC killer), and Jeffrey Dhamer (The Milwaukee Cannibal). To get accurate statistics about those serial killers’ numerous resources were used including, the released documentaries and specific case studies on each of the serial killers. In the serial killers’ prison or death row interviews, books such as *The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, 2nd Edition by Michael Newton (2006) were used as sources. Google Scholar was used for providing numerous documents and research papers in addition to books that studied serial killer behaviors, and upbringing. YouTube and Murdepedia had been used to acquire exclusive interviews with the said serial killers, and the forensic psychologists that worked on their respective cases.

RESULTS

According to Mitchell and Aamodt (2005), in a study, conducted on 50 serial killers, 68% of them had experienced some type of abuse. Of those abused; 36% had experienced physical abuse, 26% of them had suffered sexual abuse, 50% of them had experienced psychological abuse and 18% of them had been neglected as children. Overall, 32% had no record of abuse.

Comparative research that has been done between the abuse of serial killers and the general population has shown that serial killers were far more likely to have been sexually abused as children. Compared with the societal proportion of 3%, 26% of the serial killers studied were sexually abused—a rate almost nine times that found in the general population (Mitchell & Aamodt, 2005).

Even though those are just a few cases, it's been confirmed through preceding studies that serial killers are in general shaped by their family history. Research suggests that their play as kids may be defined as aggressive and many come from dysfunctional households where there may be forgotten and abused (Hickey, 1997; Keppel & Birnes, 2003; Schlesinger, 2000 as cited in Knight & Zelda G., 2006); many fathers are absent (literally or symbolically) or are controlling and authoritative in the formative years. At the same time, the mothers can be rejecting, punitive, hated, or smothering, controlling and infantilizing (Hickey, 1997; Miller, 2000). Many serial killers were illegitimate or adopted kids, and numerous have been sons of prostitutes (Geberth, 1996; Hickey, 1997; Keppel & Birnes, 2003 as cited in Knight & Zelda G., 2006). Miller (2014) states that not all serial killers had difficult upbringings or grew up in abusive households, some simply want to kill.

Among the case studies consulted for this research, four out of five (Richard Ramirez, Yoo Young Chul, Moses Sithole, and Jeffrey Dahmer) showed that serial killers had experienced some type of abuse in their childhood – a missing parent, or parents would be present but would neglect them. Dennis Rader was found to have had no experience of abuse or bullying in his entire life and led a completely regular life before succumbing to his sadistic thoughts. Although it is believed that the triggering factor was that his instructor significantly embarrassed him during class according to Dr. Katherine Ramshad, a forensic psychology professor in an interview for *Out Life's* documentary series "Born to Kill" in 2013. This assertion additionally proved that at one point in his existence, Dennis Rader had a triggering occasion in his early life.

DISCUSSION

While conducting this research, the most appalling case was Richard Ramirez, a.k.a. The Night Stalker. Ramirez would often sleep in the cemetery to escape his father's rage. He started hanging out with his cousin Mike, who was a Vietnam war veteran, and he began showing Richard graphic photographs of women performing oral sex on their cousin at gunpoint. Another picture shows Mike holding the severed head of the same woman, and he was sexually aroused by these photographs (Dietrich et al., 2007). This would later lead him to target his victims and treat them in similar ways or any form of torture that would satisfy his sadistic needs. In his death-row interview in 1993, Ramirez said, *"A serial killer comes about by the circumstances like a recipe, poverty, drugs, child abuse, but these things, you know, contribute to a person's frustration and anger, and at some point, in life, he explodes."* This statement would seem to come from his psychiatrist, but it was him that stated so. Ramirez was confident in himself and always knew what to say, but despite that, he also mentions in the interview that *"I don't care about myself, I don't care what happens to me, really, I never did really."* These words are from an individual who had such self-hatred that it removed any human emotion from him. At such a young age of 13, he experienced murder firsthand, this child might have been mentally ill, but to grow up in conditions of abuse, and such graphism must have awakened the sadist in him.

An important question that often is raised is if some of these criminals are born serial killers? Some of them show no sign of abuse in their childhood. Some even deny that any of their wrongdoings occurred during their childhood. For example, the BTK killer, Dennis Rader, killed a total of 10 victims. He was a church official, a Boy Scout Captain, and a family man with a wife and daughter. He spent his childhood in a completely normal town with loving parents. Dr. Katherine Ramshad stated in an interview for *Out Life's* documentary series "Born to Kill" in 2013, *"It is believed that his triggering factor for his sexual fantasies was when his teacher humiliated him severely during class."* However, in the same documentary, Dr. Louis Schelesinger, a forensic psychologist, also mentions that deviant arousal patterns in individuals that show no occurrence of abuse is a normal occurrence, like how one discovers they are heterosexual. That's just the way he was born. Another case is Jeffrey Dahmer, an American serial killer who killed 17 people between 1978 and 1991. Dahmer was adored by both parents as an infant, but his mother was known to be difficult and

attention-hungry. She would often get into arguments with her husband as well as the neighbours (Rosewood, 2017). In an interview with journalist and TV host Nancy Glass in 1990 that was released on the internet in 2017, Jeffrey Dahmer states, "The person to blame is sitting right across from you. There is no one to blame for this person, not the parents, not society, not pornography, I mean those are just excuses." It begs the question: was what we believe to be the triggering factor for their actions true if they deny it?

CONCLUSIONS

After a thorough research including numerous documentaries and reading so much about the actions of these people, it is difficult to say that it was solely because they grew up in hostile environments. A large number of children worldwide have gone through abuse and neglect. Several people diagnosed with mental illnesses that instigate violence have been diagnosed, but not all of those people grow up being violent individuals; much fewer serial killers. According to Fazel S. et al. (2006), during follow-up, 314 individuals with bipolar disorder (8.4%) committed violent crimes compared with 1312 general population controls (3.5%). This research shows that society could create an environment that doesn't breed violence, as it is proven that it had a role in shaping these individuals. Of course, this does not excuse their behavior or take away the consequences of their actions.

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