The Psychology Behind the Serial Killer
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Dr. Denise Ben-Porath asked students enrolled in Introduction to Clinical Psychology (PSYC40383) to construct a profile of a specific personality type. In “The Psychology Behind the Serial Killer,” Laura Lawler offers a profile of human predators in order to examine the psychological disorders that create serial killers. She concludes that psychology can offer only a partial explanation for such abnormal behavior.

Creeping around the shadowy house, the predator found its prey waking to strange sounds. The victim lay facedown, with a sweating forehead pressed fearfully into the pillow, silently praying the noises would just go away. Suddenly the victim found himself straddled and pinned to the bed. He was unable to scream for help due to the pressure of the handle of a pick-axe against his throat, preventing any breath from escaping, much less any sound. The victim struggled beneath the weight of the assailant. The scant light from the sodium-arc street light outside cast a peculiar silhouette on the walls of the darkened room, projecting an image that looked oddly like that of a cowboy saddled upon a bucking bull at a rodeo. Struggling to dismount the attacker, the victim felt the piercing blows of the sharp point of the pickaxe, succumbing to death only after receiving eleven stab wounds to the chest and throat. The thrill of the kill was stimulating enough that, when interviewed later, the murderer reported “popping a nut,” that is, becoming so sexually aroused by the event, to the point of having an orgasm (Pearson, 1998).

Does this sound like the heinous acts of Jeffrey Dahmer, Jack The Ripper, or Ted Bundy? How about the petite, pretty, fawnlike, Texas teen named Karla Faye Tucker? A woman? A killer? A sexual predator? Never before had such a thing been heard of, until Miss Tucker.

Typically, when one thinks of serial killers, such images as Son of Sam, John Wayne Gacy, or the Boston Strangler, come to mind. Though these men do indeed fit the description, there are many myths and misconceptions surrounding the definition of serial killer, first and foremost that serial killers are always men. To try to clear up a few of the misconceptions and myths about the serial killer, this paper will attempt to clarify what, how, who and, perhaps, why a serial killer is a serial killer.

Definition: What

What is a serial killer? Retired Special Agent Robert Ressler, a twenty-two year veteran of the FBI’s Behavioral Sciences Unit in Quantico, Virginia, is responsible for creating the term “serial killer.” He defines this person as “one who commits a series of murders, usually three or more, the victims most often being strangers, and usually with a cooling-off period in between each kill” (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998; Pearson, 1998; Ressler and Shactman, 1997). This precise definition is necessary to distinguish this type of predator from the mass murderer (who kills many simultaneously), mercenaries, war criminals, or mafia hit men.

Profiling: Who and How

Though serial killer may have a fairly specific definition, there is no single precise profile for the serial killer. Each has a unique identity, set of motives and methods, and a unique psychopathology that would attempt to explain the mens rea, that is, the purpose or intent of the murder. “Psychological profiling is an investigative tool used strictly to answer the how of the crime, not the why” (Severence et al, 1992; Lanier and Henry,
1998). By examining the psychological make-up of the serial killer, it is often possible to explain the behavior, which might make it a useful tool in solving crimes.

**Theories of Criminal Behavior**

Many theories have been proposed to explain criminal behavior. English psychiatrist Henry Maudsley (1835-1918) believed that “criminal activity was a type of release valve for pathological minds, to prevent them from going insane.” Isaac Ray (1807-1881) believed that some criminals were driven to deviance by their psychological urges.” These, of course, are assumptions of a biological nature that criminals are “born” as such.

Recently, it has been demonstrated that there are certain psychological factors that might produce criminal behavior (Monahan and Steadman, 1984; Lanier and Henry, 1998). Rather than being biologically predisposed to criminal activity, some psychologists postulate that deviant or criminal behavior arises as a result of poor socialization or faulty development in one or more of the fundamental early stages of life. Criminal behavior could be the result of experiencing traumatic events early in life, such as abuse and/or neglect. Perhaps criminal behavior is caused by some underlying psychological disturbance residing quietly in the mind, waiting for some social, environmental, or emotional trigger to summon it to the surface.

Of course, Sigmund Freud had his own opinions regarding criminal propensity. Though Freud wrote very little on the subject of criminality, students of Freud’s psychoanalytical approach to human behavior fundamentally relied upon the assumptions and necessities of proper development and the influence of the human mind to explain human behavior (criminal or otherwise). Freud’s psychoanalytic theory placed great emphasis on the role of the unconscious mind’s influence on behavior, and the events that shape the unconscious mind. Students of Freud’s psychoanalytic school of thought concluded that, “crime is an expression of subconscious internal conflicts, resulting from trauma or deprivations experienced in childhood” (Aichorn, 1935; Healy and Bronson, 1926, 1936; Alexander and Healy, 1935; Bowlby, 1946; Abrahamson, 1944, 1966; Friedlander, 1947; Redl and Wineman, 1951, 1952, Redl and Toch, 1979, Lanier and Henry, 1998).

**Males and Females: Differences and Similarities**

Are these psychological explanations the same for male serial killers as for female serial killers? Finding information on the female serial killer requires some extensive research, as she tends to be very elusive. One has to wonder why we do not hear of female serial killers nearly as often as their male counterparts. When the media portrays a serial killer it is almost always a man with some deep psychological disturbance. He is usually a sexual predator like Ted Bundy, or a signature killer such as Buffalo Bill in The Silence of The Lambs, who leaves a trail of trademark calling cards for the young, pretty, pout-lipped female detective to follow. So why then is it that we do not hear of female serial killers? Perhaps it is because their male counterparts so frequently cause terror in their respective communities, while female serial killers tend to be more elusive. Female serial killers often conceal their activities in their homes or places of employment and commit their crimes more covertly. Most often their victims are related to them or under their charge. They also tend to disguise their crimes, making them look like accidents or naturally occurring events. They are quiet killers, every bit as lethal as male serial murderers, and we are seldom aware one is among us because of their virtual invisibility. Unfortunately, the media portrayals are all most of us know of these predators. This is one aspect that makes them so dangerous.

**Why: The Mind Behind the Mask**

Though they are equally capable of serial murder, males and females are often very gender-specific in their approach, motive, and modus operandi (MO); that is, “their way of perpetrating the crime or abducting their victim” (Douglas, 1997). Furthermore, it appears that behind the evil facade of every killer there seems to be a sort of underlying psychological disorder, which assists in explaining their propensity towards murder (why they do it).

With respect to motive, male serial killers
typically fall into certain categories. Those that
the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental
Disorders, Fourth Edition, might classify as
“schizotypal personalities” are the “visionaries,”
the killers who act in response to instructions from
inner “voices” or alter egos. They may claim to
be demon possessed, or to be receiving instruction
from God, and use this to justify or rationalize
their acts of murder. David Berkowitz (The Son
of Sam) is a classic example of a delusional
personality type. When police searched his
apartment in Yonkers, they found scribbled all
over the walls the message “Kill for My Master,”
a command he allegedly received from “the
voices” (Lane and Gregg, 1992). Also under the
heading of schizotypal personalities is the
“missionary” type who feels it is his job to rid
the world of its so-called “undesirables.” Jack
the Ripper terrorized the East end of London for three
months in the year of 1888, with his savage and
brutal “cleansing” of the streets of Whitechapel,
where he mutilated and dissected the bodies of
five prostitutes.

Then there is the “hedonistic” type, who
actually gains pleasure from killing. Under this
category are three subtypes: 1) lust killers, 2) thrill
killers, and 3) gain killers, under which female
serial killers may fall, as will be demonstrated
later.

The lust-killer is probably the most common
type of male serial killer. For him, gratification
comes as the result of sexual sadism, “intense,
sexually arousing behaviors that involve the
psychological and/or physical suffering of the
victim” (DSM-IV, 1994). There is usually a
typical pattern of behavior, or steps, that lead up to
the hedonistic-lust kill. First, the fantasy stage.
The desire to kill is usually cultivated by the use
of pornographic materials that allow the killer to
imagine himself or role-play in his mind. These
events eventually lead up to the second stage,
referred to as the “hunt” stage. In this stage, the
killer searches for a specific type of victim, as did
Ted Bundy. Bundy specifically selected his
female victims—all having straight hair parted
down the middle. The killer may also tend to be
“place specific,” tending to stay in an area familiar
to him. However, as in the case of Bundy and
some others, the hunting range may extend for
hundreds of miles. The third stage is the “kill”

stage. Here, the fantasy becomes real, and he is
able to do with his victim what he wishes. Very
often, there are paraphilic (specifically fetishistic)
elements involved where the killer may derive
sexual gratification from a photograph of the
victim, or a severed body part, which he may store
in a freezer for future sexual gratification. Finally,
there is the “post-kill” phase. The act is
completed and the victim is dead, leaving the
killer feeling alone and empty (this is not referring
to the cannibalistic killer who becomes hungry a
few hours after digesting his prey!). This feeling
of desertion is most likely believed to be a result
of a defective psyche, possibly stemming from
early experiences of abandonment, rejection, or
neglect. If he is so inclined, it is during this stage
that he will write letters of confession to police or
media, or he will begin the killing cycle all over
again. Jeffrey Dahmer is a prime example of this
sort of killer, who could clearly be observed going
through all of these stages with his victims.

“Thrill killers” kill just for the sheer
excitement of it. Although they may be quite
sadistic in their rituals, sexual gratification is
mostly an incidental byproduct of their act. Their
main goal simply is to kill. The more they torture
and mutilate their victim, the more exciting it
becomes for them. Karla Homolka and Paul
Bernardo, a husband and wife killing team, found
sadomasochistic torture and rape of young virgin
girls (including Karla Homolka’s own sister) to
add an element of excitement to their marriage.
Homolka and Bernardo could be described as
having a number of psychological disorders.
Together they were partners in what is referred to
as “Shared Psychotic Disorder, or Folie a
Deux” (DSM-IV, 1994, Pearson, 1998). This is a
delusional disorder that develops in an individual
closely related to someone who already has a
predominantly delusional psychotic disorder. The
two people involved seem to share their disorders,
both becoming equally delusional, feeding and
fostering the other’s psychoses. Paul Bernardo
was obviously a masochistic, misogynistic
individual, whose need to make young girls suffer
was encouraged by his equally sadistic and
masochistic wife. Not only would Karla Homolka
participate willingly as his sex slave, but she
would also play the role of master to her
husband’s enslaved young victims, all of whom
she helped him “catch” or lure.

The level of excitement Homolka experienced served her histrionic personality well. “Histrionic personalities are emotionally shallow, inappropriately sexually provocative, and overly concerned with being the center of attention” (DSM-IV, 1994). It was only during these crazed moments of perversion that she would receive any praise or attention from her husband. In fact, she would often make sure she was front-and-center of the video camera Bernardo would use to record their perverse criminal activities.

Two other categories of serial killer that males and females seem to share are the “power seeker” and the “gain killer.” The “power seeker” usually has a very low self-esteem, and uses murder as a means to obtain a sense of control, or power, or to gain attention and sympathy from others” (Lane and Gregg, 1995).

Mary Beth Tinning found that she could easily become the center of attention at the funerals of all 9 of her children. After her first child died naturally of meningitis, Tinning found herself to be not only comforted, but also cheered up, by the sympathy and adulation she received from the mourners at the funeral of her newborn infant. Once she realized the amount of attention she could receive, she found that by harming, injuring and eventually killing eight more of her own children, she could gain even more attention and sympathy (Pearson, 1998).

Tinning is one of many women who “use their children to express their will to power” (Pearson, 1998). Very often these women are babysitters, caretakers, nurses, or doctors’ wives. They frequently have extensive medical knowledge and access to a variety of medications that they use to make their children ill or even to cause their deaths. These women are described as having a psychological disorder known as “Munchausen syndrome by proxy,” a term introduced by Richard Asher to describe “a person (usually a woman) who inflicts injuries on another, frequently a child or elderly person, to manipulate others to gain their attention or sympathy” (Pearson, 1998; Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998). Though some of these women kill their children, most of them carefully monitor the medications they give their children, administering just enough to keep them alive, thereby prolonging the amount of attention they receive. Those children that do die appear to do so from natural causes, such as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), pneumonia, or Reye’s syndrome. Often the cause of death is such a mystery that coroners are unable to determine any specific cause of death and label it as “unknown.” All of the drastic attention-seeking behavior is most likely a result of abuse or neglect the mothers themselves received as children, or from the emotional abuse and neglect they receive as adults. One could only predict that children who manage to survive might grow up to become parents who will do the same thing to their children.

The serial killer who murders to gain profit is also frequently a woman—one who kills for insurance settlements, property inheritance, or some other financial benefit. She is often given the nickname “The Black Widow.” Due to the victim-specific nature of her crimes, she must adhere to a very precise definition in order to be worthy of her malevolent moniker. To be considered a Black Widow, “she must systematically kill multiple spouses, other family members, or others outside of her family with whom she has developed a close, personal relationship” (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998). Childhood abuse and neglect might serve to explain the multiple murders committed by Nanny Hazel Doss. “Over a period of nearly thirty years, Doss killed four husbands, two of her own children, one of her grandchildren, two of her sisters and her own mother, all for profit from life insurance policies and family savings” (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998; Lane and Gregg, 1998). Three of her husbands died from “stomach troubles,” as the coroner’s report read, her two daughters died from “accidental poisoning,” her grandchild from “natural causes,” and her mother also from “accidental poisoning” (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998; Lane and Gregg, 1998). It was not until the death of her fourth and last husband that anyone became suspicious. An autopsy, requested by medical personnel, revealed that her husband had died from ingesting a large dose of arsenic. When apprehended by police, she confessed to a total of ten murders. She denied greed as her motive, insisting that she was simply looking for the right man to give her the love and affection she
never had as a child; yet another case of criminal behavior probably caused by faulty childhood development. Incidentally, she was given the nickname "the Giggling Grandma" because of her tendency to giggle nervously when she spoke of her crimes (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998; Lane and Gregg, 1998).

Conclusion
Psychology can attempt to explain only some of the causes of criminal behavior. Serial murder is an especially perplexing phenomenon. No one, not even the actual perpetrator, really knows why they are the way they are. Many psychologists and criminologists believe there is usually a psychological disorder that might attempt to explain the evolution of any human being into a serial killer. The evidence certainly does suggest this is true. What thoughts go through the psychopath's mind when he or she is killing? "Psychiatrist J. Reid Meloy compares the mind of a psychopath to that of a reptile, a cold-blooded animal working solely on instincts that tell it to feed, mate, hunt, or kill" (Pearson, 1998). We may never know what forces create the serial killer, but it should serve us well to recognize the importance of psychological development and its influence on human behavior. While female and male serial killers are very different in their motives, methods, and the victims they choose, the results are the same: innocent people end up suffering violent deaths at the heinous hands of psychopathic serial killers.

References