

# Inside the Mind of a Serial Killer

Nicholas Zeigler  
Sociology 300: Criminology  
Dr. Kurtz  
Fall 2007

## What is Serial Murder?

The American public is fascinated by horror and cruelty. Fictional characters like Hannibal Lecter and Michael Myers amuse moviegoers; but while these interesting beings and their crimes sometimes seem far-fetched, they can be all too close to reality. What happens when the characters of a movie come to life, or cinema imitates reality? Just mentioning "Helter Skelter" or "Zodiac" can send chills down the spine of the biggest horror film fan. Anyone who has a common knowledge of Jeffery Dahmer or Ted Bundy knows they are far from fictional. Bonnie and Clyde, David Berkowitz, and Jack the Ripper are all real as well. They are all infamous serial killers.

According to Eric W. Hickey, author of *Serial Murderers and Their Victims*, serial murderers include "any offenders, male or female, who kill over time" (12). It is doubtful that anyone would disagree with Hickey's definition, but some experts may choose to be a bit more descriptive. Due to the qualifications of a serial homicide, there tends to be a general consensus among reactions to serial killings by the public but not necessarily among the proposed reasons for which one may commit such an atrocious act. The crime should not be confused with a spree killing, which involves the murder of many victims without a relationship or extended period of time existing between the killings.

## How Often are Serial Murders Committed?

While murdering multiple victims is a terrible form of homicide, these instances only account for 4.4% of all homicides as of 2005, according to Bureau of Justice statistics. Despite this small fraction, there has been an increase of 1.3% since 1975. Although these percentages seem very low, they should still be taken seriously due to

the cruelty of the crime. Again as of 2005, 4% of all homicides included two victims, .6% involved three victims, .1% involved four victims, and .05% involved five or more victims ("Homicide Trends"). While these numbers prove that killings with many victims are rare, they are still the stories that are embedded in our minds, and often times in history.

## Why Do Serial Homicides Occur?

It is difficult to prove why serial murders are committed but some educated guesses have been made as to the reasons for which some of these terrible acts of violence occur: "Various theses of the aetiology of serial murder exist, most of which chooses to align with a psychiatric, sociological or biological explanation" (Mitchell). In his article "What Twists a Man so far as Murder?" D. Jay Schaibly mentions three correlates to serial murder called the McDonald Triad. According to Schaibly,

The triad is the name given to the set of characteristic (sic) that serials (sic) killers are evident of in their youth. The "typical" serial killer is a sociopath or psychopath that during childhood was subject to three diagnoses: fire starting (pyromania), prolonged bedwetting, and animal torture. All of these things correlate to a phase in life in which the young person is curious of certain things new to them.

Shaibly's article begs the question: Do we have the power to thwart serial killings before they occur? His correlates definitely show a strong support for a biological explanation to the crime, but the three characteristics are also related to poor social treatment (Shaibly).

## Whom Does the Crime Effect?

Potential murderers often feel the crime will benefit them psychologically, perhaps fulfilling them internally. This depends upon the state of mind of the killers, which of course is the most troubling and confusing aspect of the murder to begin with. The offenders often discover that their fulfillment disappears and they soon get the urge to kill again. The murderer also suffers from the act due to incarceration and a possible death sentence if they are caught. Obviously victims suffer by losing their lives, and the families of victims go through a great deal of grieving. Finally, society suffers from fear. People may be afraid to leave their houses or allow their children to play in the streets. Daily life is interrupted when a serial murderer is on the prowl.

## Reactive Measures to Capture Murderers

Methods of catching serial killers that are designed to be reactive have been introduced throughout history. Of those, the most popular is criminal profiling. While the previous policies attempt to dissuade potential future serial killers, profiling deals with catching the murderer after he has committed the crime. It is a process used to narrow the suspects in a case to those who possess certain qualities or characteristics. These specific traits are based on research and have been known to exist in similar offenders in the past. Although a very useful tool, profiling does not seek to find a specific suspect, but gives investigators an idea of what to look for in a suspect. This policy has been developing over many years due largely in part to the Investigative Support Unit created in the 1950's by FBI employees Pat Mullany and Howard Teten. It is controversial, however, as to who exactly created criminal profiling (Meyer). Although profiling became popular in the 1950's due to its extensive

development, aspects of the process were used long before then. One of Jack the Ripper's victims, Mark Kelly, was examined by Thomas Bond. Bond suggested that due to the nature of the evidence, police should be looking for "a quiet, inoffensive looking man, probably middle aged and neatly dressed" (Petheric). Despite the current excitement of new developments in criminal profiling, the techniques have existed since the 1880's (Petheric). Profiling techniques have aided in the capture of many criminals, and as they become more advanced, the process becomes even more effective in identifying potential suspects. While it is important to improve the accuracy of profiling to apprehend murderers, it may prove more important to the future of our society to design proactive policies to intervene before a homicide takes place.

## Proactive Measures to Prevent Serial Homicide

Even in the 21st century, little is known about the mind of a serial killer; therefore, it is extremely difficult to formulate a policy designed to address the problem. Murder laws and harsh punishments are supposed to deter crime, but the number of serial murders is still on the rise. As we see in the McDonald Triad, the development of the potential serial killer begins with early warning signs. While not all kids who torture animals, set fires, and have prolonged bedwetting turn out to be serial killers, such problems should be addressed during childhood since a correlation exists. A psychological problem called Extreme Conduct Disorder refers directly to two of McDonald's characteristics.

Diagnosis signs for Conduct Disorder include aggression towards people as well as animals. In fact, Garret D. Evans, a professor of psychology, directly lists torturing animals as one sign of Conduct Disorder. Doctor Evans also states

under his category of property damage that fire setting with the intent "to destroy things" is another characteristic ("Conduct Disorder"). Unfortunately Conduct Disorder does not address the problem of bedwetting, according to Evans. It is not known how bedwetting develops, but theory suggests it is a psychological problem stemming from damaging parenting strategies or conflict within the child's home (Evans, "Bedwetting"). These factors may also contribute to the formation of a serial killer.

The first steps in creating policies dealing with serial killers should target early warning signs of criminal behavior. Legal policies dealing with animal torture include animal treatment laws. Animal rights activists fight for more "freedom" for animals, and many activists have advertisements which can be very informative. Many young children who possess such a problem can receive psychological treatment as well. There are also laws involving each animal species describing whether or not they may be killed by a licensed hunter in a specific manner. As for Pennsylvania State law, no child under the age of 12 is permitted to get a hunting license. Other states have similar laws setting age limits and requirements, and any child who does not fall under these requirements is contradicting policy whether they are aware of it or not.

There are also legal policies against setting fires. Arson is a very serious crime for which programs have been designed to address the behaviors of those who commit the act. In many cases, judges require guilty arsonists to attend classes on the topic. Kirkpatrick quotes an investigator from the National Fire Protection Association as saying, "Arson is a way of lashing out resentment for the environment in which people find themselves."

The third aspect of the McDonald Triad is

prolonged bedwetting. While there are policies to deal with animal torture and arson, prolonged bedwetting is viewed normally as a biological problem that is usually dealt with within the family. Parental literature exists on the subject to advise parents and inform them on prevention techniques.

## Gottfredson and Hirschi's Self-Control Theory

In order to refine preventative measures and establish new ones, it would be helpful for law enforcement officials to understand why the crime occurs. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to tell because most criminals have different variables in their lives that may or may not have influenced their behavior. Thus it is very difficult to derive a general theory of crime. On the other hand, many criminals do have similarities which provide criminologists with information that can help them to theorize. Two very important criminologists, Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson, attempted to explain why crime is committed in their Theory of Self-Control.

Self-Control Theory suggests that crimes are committed due to a lack of self-control, which is a result of poor parenting during childhood. Gottfredson and Hirschi even go as far as to say that self-control is fully formed by the fifth grade. Those who develop poor self-control will fail throughout life in adapting to social norms. They also state that people with low self-control are impulsive, insensitive, risk-taking, non-verbal, and short-sighted. Additionally, Gottfredson and Hirschi believe in versatility, which refers to the capability of the theory to predict any type of crime from street to suite, male to female and juvenile to senior (Lilly, Cullen, and Ball 108).

## Compatibilities between Self-Control Theory and Serial Homicide

In his book *To Kill Again*, Donald J. Sears states, "The serial killer's childhood is marked by a lack of nurturing and love. He usually grows up in a neglectful, abusive, and even violent atmosphere, where important needs are not met" (79). As a result, many kids who grow up in this type of environment have trouble controlling their emotions and establishing meaningful relationships as they grow older. The relationship with one's parents, the first connection a human builds in his or her life, provides structure and lessons, teaching one how to interact with others. Speaking metaphorically, if these so-called "lessons" are absent or not taught correctly, the individual will lack the knowledge to connect with others in physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual relationships (80). Here Sears refers to what Gottfredson and Hirschi would suggest is improper childhood socialization on the part of the parents (Lilly, Cullen, and Ball 108). This improper socialization should be interpreted as anything from abuse to neglect, or simply not correcting negative behaviors.

As explained previously, the McDonald Triad proposes early warning signs of future violent behavior. Fire setting, prolonged bed-wetting, and violence toward animals are not the only early behaviors that provide insight into a child's troubled mind, but these activities, among others, could easily be ignored by a neglectful parent. In allowing this sort of behavior to continue, parents are promoting the improper socialization of their child. Children displaying these behaviors need attention, prevention lessons, or even psychological help. In its idea of improper childhood socialization, Self-Control Theory clearly addresses this concept of neglect that Sears presents.

Gottfredson and Hirschi also claim that

self-control is developed around the fifth grade. This idea can also be paralleled to the development of a serial murderer because, as presented in the triad, early warning signs develop during childhood. These two criminologists attempt to accurately pinpoint the age during which such characteristics develop, which may not be possible, but they do strongly state their belief in a youthful onset of the traits which can be analogous to the development of a killer.

One major issue not directly explained of serial murders in Self-Control Theory is why some children who are raised improperly become criminals and others do not. Furthermore, an individual's degree of criminality becomes important here because it is yet another variable in the equation of self-control. While Gottfredson and Hirschi do not address this problem directly, their theory does provide an answer as to why this behavior may occur in some individuals and not in others who have similar backgrounds. People with low self-control are impulsive. The major aspect that separates killers from non-killers, both of whom have deprived childhoods, is intense frustration (Sears 85). The intense frustration described by Sears can lead to the lashing out or impulsiveness that Gottfredson and Hirschi claim plagues victims of low self-control. Secondly, people with low self-control are insensitive and risk-taking. Most killers are insensitive to the pain they cause and quite obviously take the risk of being put to death for their crimes.

Self-Control Theory and the crime of serial homicide are very compatible. Serial killers do appear to have low self-control, and much of their lack of ability to establish meaningful relationships, according to Sears, stems from deprivation during the childhood years. Also, many of the characteristics of individuals with low self-control can serve as possible explanations as to

why murderers kill. The theory's characteristic of impulsiveness also explains why some people with poor childhoods resort to murder and others do not. But does the theory work for those who commit the crime but never had a rough childhood? Ted Bundy and David Berkowitz grew up without violence or abuse. It may appear that these two men had quality childhoods, but a lack of violence and abuse does not necessarily mean "good quality." Any omission of love, care, nurturing, and expression of emotion can also result in improper childhood development of social skills. In other words, while Bundy and Berkowitz may not have been abused, they were most likely neglected. Thus Self-Control Theory does prove very compatible with serial murder, but there are some incongruous factors as well.

## Incompatibilities between Self-Control Theory and Serial Homicide

Gottfredson and Hirschi were largely ignorant of three major factors when they developed the Theory of Self-Control. The theory lacks the ability to differentiate between improper socialization by gender and the types of crimes committed. They also disregarded the correlation between improper socialization and its effects on social bonds in adulthood (one of Hirschi's own ideas). Finally, the researchers disregarded any evidence that shows possible biological factors that may contribute to criminal behavior. Although it seems that sociological issues carry more weight in creating a serial killer, it is important not to exclude other variables, since we are not attempting to derive a "general theory" of serial killing.

According to Bureau of Justice statistics, a vast majority of serial killers tend to be white males ("Homicide Trends"). Self-Control Theory is incapable of explaining this phenomenon

because Gottfredson and Hirschi do not distinguish between the types of crime and the sex of the offender. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2000, 50.9% of the white population was female and 49.1% of the white population was male. If sex is not relevant to the theory, the proportion of female-to-male serial killers should be closer to the ratio of female-to-male whites throughout the United States. Gottfredson and Hirschi may have been a bit ignorant to suggest that their theory is a "general theory of crime," or they have simply forgotten to address the differences that take place in the improper socialization of males in comparison with that of females. Along the same lines, one would expect to see, proportionally to the population, more minority serial killers as well.

Hirschi also wrote a theory suggesting that people commit crimes as a result of poor social bonds with society. This theory can also be paralleled to the behavior of the typical serial killer because killers can become frustrated by their inability to establish meaningful relationships with others. A correlation might exist between the weak social bonds of Bond Theory and the improper socialization of children in Self-Control Theory. Weak social bonds may be a result of a lack of nurturing as a child. As previously mentioned, a baby's first bond is formed with his mother and then his father. This primary relationship provides an example for future connections. If the parent-child relationship is weak, it is likely that future relationships will be feeble as well. Therefore, social bonds could be useful in accordance with Self-Control Theory to explain serial killing. Despite Hirschi's development of both the Bond and Self-Control theories, he failed to make this connection.

Many researchers state that biological justifications would be more efficient at explaining

the heinous acts of a serial murderer. Brain injuries, genetics, and chemical imbalances have been linked to murders, and this relationship is illustrated by Sears and Hickey in their books. Despite the popularity of biological reasoning in criminological literature, Self-Control Theory is incompatible with the logic. In no way did Gottfredson and Hirschi give any credit to the previously mentioned explanations in accounting for the commission of any type of offense.

Self-Control Theory is quite deficient in many ways. Its authors failed to address a variation in the improper socialization between sexes and between races. Hirschi also ignores the concepts of his Bond-Theory, which could possibly have a relation with some of the aspects of his Self-Control Theory, especially regarding crimes of impulsive violence. On the other hand, serial killers may be difficult to understand because many of their behaviors do not seem impulsive whatsoever. The term "impulsive" in this case is more or less used to describe the reaction to a breaking point in the individual's life which causes them to act out; it is a motivating force. Finally, there is an inconsistency between literature on serial killers and Self-Control in regard to the credit they give to biological causes of crime.

## Does the Theory Work?

Without ignoring the discrepancies of Self-Control Theory, it is more compatible with serial homicide than not. At the theory's core, it states that crime is a result of improper childhood rearing, which is very comparable to the sociological development of the serial killer. Literature on the crime and the theory are also harmonious in explaining the early age of emerging, potentially dangerous characteristics. Finally, Self-Control Theory makes clear why some children with insufficient childhood development on the part of

their parents commit murder and others do not. People with low self-control are impulsive and high frustration levels can cause them to act on impulses due to a lack of ability to express themselves and relate to others.

While Self-Control Theory is very accurate at depicting what preambles may lead to the formation of a killer, it is difficult to tell where such knowledge has a place in a reactive criminal justice system. It is also difficult to understand a mind so troubled. In fact, the public may have trouble understanding serial killers because many times they do not seem to be troubled at all. For the average person it is hard to understand how someone so normal can commit an act so evil.

## Works Cited

- Evans, Garret D. "Conduct Disorder." *EDIS*. University of Florida IFAS Extension. 2009. Web. 13 Sep. 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Bedwetting." *EDIS*. University of Florida IFAS Extension. 2009. Web. 13 Sep. 2007.
- Hickey, Eric W. "Serial Killers: Defining Serial Murder." *Mind of a Killer: An Investigation of Serial Homicide*. 2007. Web. 12 Sep. 2007.
- "Homicide Trends in the United States." *Bureau of Justice Statistics*. 11 July 2007. Web. 13 Sep. 2007.
- Kirkpatrick, Sarah. *International Encyclopedia of Justice Studies*. December 2002. Web. 8 Oct. 2007.
- Lilly, J. Robert, Francis T. Cullen, and Richard A. Ball. *Criminological Theory: Context and Consequences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007. Print.
- Meyer, C. B. "Criminal Profiling Research." January 2000. Web. 10 Oct. 2007.
- Mitchell, Edward W. "The Aetiology of Serial Murder: Towards an integrated model." 1997. Web. 21 Sep. 2007.

Petheric, Wayne. *Crime Library*. Web. 10 Oct. 2007.

Sears, Donald J. *To Kill Again: The Motivation and Development of Serial Murder*. Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1991. Print.

Shaibly, D. Jay. "What Twists a Man So Far as Murder?" *Serial Killers*. 16 Apr. 2003. Web. 24 Sep. 2007.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Female Population by Age, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Origin for the United States: 2000." 2001. Web. 29 Oct. 2007.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Male Population by Age, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Origin for the United States: 2000." 2001. Web. 29 Oct. 2007.

\*Title art by John Piazza