

Serial Killers, Mass Murderers, and Spree Killers: Three Factors Decide the Murder Type on the Same Continuum

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Abstract: Multiple murder is a popular topic for many movies, TV series, novels, and other art forms due to its seemingly mysterious nature. However, against the depictions of the perpetrators as being rather charismatic and charming personas, the reality is that they are individuals with serious personality disorders of different types. To correct these misleading public images, this paper introduces a simple classification chart of serial, spree, and mass killers to promote easy understandings of who they are and where they come from. It proposes that three factors decide which symptom the subject falls into on the same continuum.

Keywords: serial killer, mass murder, spree killer, classification, background, cause, motive, difference.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although our understanding of multiple murder has progressed substantially due to vigorous research in the field, these crimes remain the objects of unusually high levels of public curiosity, in part because of their seemingly mysterious natures [1], [2]. Indeed, serial, spree, and mass murders are the topics of many movies, TV series, novels, and true crime books. This is especially true of serial murder [3], [4]. In these productions, it is not rare for murderous characters to be depicted as being highly charismatic and rather charming people with the ability to do what ordinary people cannot, or to have understanding of an unknown truth of deep human nature that ordinary people can never achieve [5–7]. However, the fact is that those who commit these crimes are simply individuals who have been deeply psychologically scarred in their childhoods and grown up to develop pathological obsessions that allow them to commit these acts [8], [9]. That is, they have serious personality disorders and, as such, do not deserve the public attention they so often receive [10], [11].

II. DISCUSSION

A. A Necessary Correction

We must change the public's incorrect perceptions of murderers. It is wrong for a society to hold in awe people who pursue their own agendas and pleasures by victimizing others. To stop such social trends, we need to demystify murderers for the public by promoting an understanding of who they are and where they come from [12], [13]. To dispel these myths, we need a simple system by which the public can get a clear image of who murderers really are and why they do what they do. To avoid sensationalism, we must also strive to describe serial, spree, and mass murderers concisely, without going into a level of detail that only those who specialize in the field need to know.

B. A Simple Classification Chart of Mass, Spree, and Serial Killers

Below is a simple classification chart of serial, spree, and mass murderers aimed at providing a clear image for comparing the three types of murderers, the conditions that produce them, their motives, and the availability of human interactions in their childhoods. For the sake of simplicity, family annihilators are not included in the mass murder category, as they are rather exceptional by killing exclusively within their own families [14].

TABLE 1: CLASSIFICATION CHART OF MASS, SPREE, AND SERIAL KILLERS: DIFFERENT TYPES OF REVENGE VIOLENCE

Type of Murder	Mass Murder-----Spree Murder-----Serial Murder
1) Background	ϕ (ng/mc/rg/op) -----continuum----- \downarrow (ab/ex/man)
2) Interaction	Low-----High-----Low
3) Motive	Mission----- Outburst/Cannot Stop -----Pleasant sensation
Onset	Adolescence \rightarrow Years Later

Note. ϕ =neglectful; \downarrow =abusive; ng=neglect; mc=mind-control; rg=rigid child-rearing; op=overprotection; ab=abuse; ex=denial of existence; man=denial of manhood

C. Serial Killers and Mass Murderers at Contrastive Positions, Spree Killers at the Center on the Same Continuum

As you see in the above classification map, these three types of murder are not categorical but rather on a continuum. That is, mass murderers and serial killer are at opposite ends of the spectrum, with spree killers at the center; and these placements are based on the contrastive natures of their childhood conditions. Mass murderers are produced by neglectful child-rearing practices such as neglect, mind control, rigid child-rearing, and overprotection [15], which cause children to fail to develop the self-identity necessary to establish healthy relationships with others (here, “mind control” indicates manipulating a child so that s/he does not satisfy their own needs, but instead focuses on satisfying the parent[s]’ interests [16]). By contrast, serial killers are produced by abusive child-rearing practices such as physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse [17], including the denial of manhood (e.g., “All women are dirty”), and denial of existence (e.g., “I didn’t want to give birth to you”), which warps the child’s self-identity into a desire to hurt, destroy, or annihilate others [18], [19]. In other words, children who grow up to be serial killers faced unnatural external forces during their childhoods. These forces may be continual, incidental, or both [20]. However, in case of children who grow up to be mass murderers, human forces (i.e., the contacts, communications, and exchanges) necessary to grow up and live socially are missing in their childhoods [21], [22].

D. Different Motives: Pleasurable Sensations and a Sense of Mission

Based on the contrastive natures of these killers’ backgrounds, we can also observe differing driving forces (motives) among them. Serial killers commit murder because of the pleasurable sensations they feel when hurting, destroying, and murdering people; this may include elements of sexual pleasure or the pleasure of psychological control [23]. Mass murderers, who target the public or a specific group of people, act as if killing is their life’s mission (duty/social justice). Thus, they do not feel an ecstatic sensation resulting from the act itself [24].

E. Mass, Spree, Serial Killing as Continuum Symptoms

Mass, spree, and serial murders are not categorical; instead, they are, as previously noted, symptoms on a continuum [25] and can be classified depending on the degrees of neglectful and abusive factors in their backgrounds and the availability of human interactions both inside and outside home (i.e., sibling[s] and/or outside friend[s]) with whom they have normal human interactions. Because of this spectrum, there was a case in which one mass murderer confessed that he was afraid of becoming a serial killer [26]. Mission-Oriented serial killers and mass murderers both carry out their murders as their mission. Only differences are that the former repeat the act with a slight inner pleasant sensation as its engine while the latter stops in one-time incident in more business-like execution.

F. Availability of Human Interactions in the Childhood Backgrounds of Spree Killers

Spree killers, who had access to human interactions in their childhood, develop virtually the same emotions as the ordinary people, yet they go on to kill multiple people in a relatively short period time without a cooling-off period [27]. They are classified into two basic types. One comes from highly neglectful family backgrounds with human interactions available, while the other comes from highly abusive family backgrounds with human interactions available. The former want to stop their murderous rampages but simply cannot, because of their pathological obsession with money, materials, and/or abnormal acts (i.e., murder/rape), desires that developed to fill the emotional void left by their early maternal neglect [29]. In the latter group, once they commit one murder, they become hooked on the excitement and a chain of murderous rampages ensues until some outside force stops them. In the case of spree killers, the perversion of the personality has not progressed so deeply as genuine mass and serial killers, who were raised in neglectful or abusive homes without human interactions. Because of this, spree killers often show strong feelings of guilt or regret over their

destructive acts, which sometimes leads to suicide while genuine serial and mass killers typically justify their actions fully. Also, because of this availability of human interactions, which works against the building up of stresses and frustrations, the McDonald Triad (i.e., a history of bedwetting, arson, and animal abuse) may not always be seen in the spree killer's childhood. All the three, or at least two, are often seen in serial killers' childhoods [29]. Because these three types of murder are on a continuum, there are spree killers who show strong mass murderer-like characteristics and those who show strong serial killer-like characteristics.

G. All Distorted Indirect Forms of Revenge Violence

Although these three types of murder appear to be entirely different phenomena, they are common in that they are all distorted, indirect forms of revenge violence not committed against the original perpetrators of the abuse or neglect (e.g., caregivers, bullies, teachers, etc.). Thus, the murderers' pent-up anger is usually released years after the original incident(s), and aimed at secondary targets, who are often unsuspecting total strangers, either all at once, with only very short breaks, or serially after certain intervals [25], [30]. In the case of serial murder, the unreleased anger is fermented in killer's fantasies over long years, and as such it reaches an incredibly abnormal level. Serial killers fantasize about the absolute domination of others, controlling others' lives and deaths, the complete destruction of their bodies, sadistic acts, and so on. They often envision themselves totally covered with blood, enveloped in the putrid odor of the dead bodies [31]. In cases of mass murder, the killer's anger is either an envious rage at not being accepted by a group or society, or the desire to destroy the meaningless society that does not reflect his/her own values. In the mind of a mass murderer, glorified revenge-suicide (Thanatos) is romanticized to a level that excels their sexual desires (Libido) [24], [32], [33]. Again, in the case of spree killers, their murderous acts are either due to a pathological obsession with certain things or acts that of their distorted interests, or to a chain of destructive outbursts beyond their control once they have begun.

H. The Degree of the Normal Emotions Decides the Levels of Their Guilt

All three types of killers begin to show their symptomatic acts around adolescence [2], [13–18]; this is typically accompanied by a strong surge of sexual hormones and psychological maturation [34], [35]. Most of these killers will justify their murderous acts either by laying the blame on the victims such as social minorities, by establishing their own self-centered quibbles, or by adopting existing fundamental/satanic religions or radical/extreme philosophies such as white supremacy, except for some spree killers and exceptional serial/mass murderers, who happen to have developed high levels of normal emotions as the ordinary have [24], [25], [32], [36–38].

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