

# Serial murderers and their early childhood environments

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(2015年3月20日 受理)

## 1. Introduction

In his *trauma-control model*, Hickey (1997) hypothesizes how the mind of the serial murderer develops. He posits that the subject experiences certain destabilizing event(s) “during the formative years” (p. 86). Such an unresolved trauma causes feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt in the subject, which is suppressed to such an extent that it cannot be recalled consciously. This suppressed experience in time will be split off within the subject. However, the pain of a traumatic event will eventually surface. “For the offender, this cycle of trauma and quest for regaining control can be generated at a very early age” (p. 88).

Holmes, Tewksbury, and Holmes (1999) try to further specify this developmental process in their *fractured identity syndrome*. They postulate that one traumatic incident, which “often happens in the adolescent years” (p. 267), causes a small fissure in his personality, and the following incidents cause this fissure to explode into a fracturing of the personality. Before this happens, “[s]erial killers are much like everyone

else during the primary years of personality development....and there was nothing in their early years that would have prepared them for the sequential predation that would occur later in their lives” (p. 267). The subject can also recall the painful social event that made him feel that the sequential homicide would be acceptable.

Fox and Levin (1998) point out “the inability to predict (and selectively prevent) [multiple murder] from an understanding of early childhood events” (p. 449) based on the fact that few of those who share some common trait actually become such killers. However, Lykken (1995) reiterates that nature works only through nurture. He claims that the genome exerts its influence upon the brain indirectly by helping to determine the effective environment that resonates with the child’s innate proclivities. Krueger, Hicks, Patrick, Carlson, Iacono, and McGue (2002) propose that genetic factors may influence the overall likelihood of the externalizing disorders, but what determines the way this likelihood is expressed are events unique to a specific person at specific points in time. Heritabil-

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ity estimates for aggression range from 44% to 72% (Miles & Carey, 1997; Rhee & Waldman, 2002), and only 50% is estimated to be information hardwired in DNA that accounts for adult antisocial traits (Kiehl & Buckholtz, 2010). All these seem to indicate that in the case of violent crimes, such as serial murder, a substantial part depends on heredity, whereas the rest is still left to be determined by environmental factors.

As for the traumatic environmental factors of the serial killer, Hickey (1997) mentions “unstable home life, death of parents, divorce, corporal punishments, sexual abuse, and other negative events” (p. 86), emphasizing rejection as being the most common. Here, he seems to include both abusive and neglectful factors. On the other hand, Holmes et al. (1999) mention such examples as punishment for what the subject did not do, and discovery of the subject’s illegitimacy or adoption (p. 268–269), insinuating psychological abuse/shock. However, neglect, physical abuse, and psychological abuse each has a distinct psychological effect on child’s development. Although physical abuse produces aggression toward others, psychological attacks and criticism by the parents appear to be specifically associated with low self-evaluation (Briere & Runtz, 1990). Neglect, on the other hand, is associated with more severe cognitive and academic deficits, social withdrawal and limited peer acceptance, and internalizing problems than physical abuse (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). We seem to have some ambiguity on the childhood environments of serial murderers.

Another issue is the environmental factors of which time has the most impact. There are serial killers who start showing their abnormality at a very young age. For example, Ted Bundy surrounded his aunt by knives at the age of three, when she was taking a nap (Rule, 1980). William Heirens would playfully shut a dog up in an unlit oven, and lock his mother in the pan-

try at age two (Moyer, Powell, Powell, & Pinn, n.d.). There is a possibility that something already happened to these subjects before these incidents. However, both Hickey (1997) and Holmes et al. (1999) place more importance on traumatic event(s) that happen during formative and adolescent years, mentioning cases that actually happened at age eight, nine, and 13. Although Holmes et al. emphasize that the fractured dark side is not simply dissociation but rather “a damaged element that will arise because of damages that have existed for some time, usually in the childhood of the adult killer” (p. 268), they do not elaborate on this any further. In another section, they mention that the serial murderer will learn that he has “an inborn stigma” (p. 267), from which the small breakage also could be taken as something the subject inherits. Here we see another ambiguity. Therefore, it seems necessary for us to look into what exactly happened especially during early childhood to cause the act of serial murder.

## 2. Methodology

In this study early childhood environments of 41 serial killers were looked into. Those 41 cases were: Charles Albright (Matthews & Wicker, 1996), Edmund Kemper (Cheney, 1976), William Heirens (Freeman, 1955), Andrei Chikatilo (Ol’Gin & Krivitch, 1993), Michael Swango (Stewart, 1999), Angelo Buono (Crisp, 2002), Ed Gein (Schechter, 1989), Henry Lee Lucas (Cox, 1991), Ottis Toole (Norris, 1991), Donald Harvey (Martin, 2005), Gary Ridgway (Rule, 2004), Harold Shipman (Whittle & Ritchie, 2000), Ted Bundy (Rule, 1980), Paul Bernardo (Castleden, 2011), Albert De Salvo (Kelly, 1995), Charles Ng (Henton & Owens, 2002), Danny Rolling (London, 1996), John Wayne Gacy (Sullivan, 2011), Richard Ramirez (Carlo, 2010), Robert Hansen (Gilm-

ore & Hale, 1991), Gerard Schaefer (Schaefer & London, 1989), Hadden Clark (Havill, 2001), Richard Chase (Biondi, 1992), Donald Gaskins (Gaskins, 1994), David Parker Ray (Sparks, 2006), Patrick Kearney (Stewart, 2010), Albert Fish (Schechter, 2010), Anatoly Onoprienko (Leslie, 2010), David Berkowitz (Brodi, 2012) Joel Rifkin (Mladinich, 1981), Kenneth Bianchi (Crisp, 2002; O'Brian, 1985), Robert Black (Church, 1996), Gerald Stano (Flowers, 1993), Cary Stayner (McDougal, 2000), Jeffrey Dahmer (Dahmer, 1994), Dennis Nilsen (Malekos, 2012), Dean Corll (Olsen, 2000), Coral Eugene Watts (Mitchell, 2006), Tommy Lynn Sells (Fanning, 2007), William Bonin (Bonin, 1991), and Ivan Milat (Whittaker, 1998).

Levin and Madfis (2009) make a point that family problems are not directly perceptible by traditional measures. Thus, we also referred to information on Murderpedia, Crime Library on truTV, Wikipedia, radford.edu, and YouTube, whenever necessary, to better understand the limited literary information in order to pass our final judgment.

### 3. Results

Based on the most outstanding characteristic, there were seven distinct patterns that emerged out of these random 41 cases.

#### Type 1: Domination and Aggression by Mother

There were three smaller groups in this type. The first group was “anger-prone mothers.” They had some kind of dissatisfaction already before their son was born. Their anger came from their own psychology or problem. They seem not to have been the type of individuals who were ready to take care of their child in the first place. They constantly complained about subtle details of what their son did, and humiliated him. Thus the subjects spent all their

childhood on a bed of thorns. Andrei Chikatilo, Angelo Buono, Gary Ridgeway, and Edmond Kemper belonged to this group.

The second group was mothers with a certain fixed idea. They denied accepting their son’s natural identity. Some mothers wanted a girl, and could not accept the fact that their child was a boy. They forced him to wear girl’s clothing and in some cases called him by a girl’s name. There also were mothers who had a special hatred toward women. In the case of William Heirens, his mother taught him that all sex was dirty and led to disease. This later caused him to vomit when he kissed a girl.

In the third group, the mothers established complete domination on their sons. Brainwashed not to make outside relationships, the subjects were totally isolated and had to follow whatever their mother said. Then, some intensely shocking event occurred. In the case of Ed Gein, his mother isolated Gein in a rural house, and taught him that all women were whores and evil. Harold Shipman’s mother rubbed his superiority in him, and decided whom he could make friends with. Both these mothers suddenly died, leaving their sons completely alone. Donald Harvey and Michael Swango also belonged to this group.

In some cases these characteristics overlapped each other. In the cases of Henry Lee Lucas and Ottis Toole, both mothers were aggressive, dressed their sons in a girl’s dress, and also tried to dominate them.

#### Type 2: Abuse and Home Terrorization by Father

Some subjects received a direct physical/mental abuse, or its equivalent from their father. For example, though left-handed, Robert Hansen was forced to use his right hand, and also work long hours at the family bakery. Others had to live in family environments which were

terrorized by their father. Although they were not under direct physical abuse themselves, they witnessed their father's violence on other family members. Such experience was no less traumatic as direct abuse. Those who belonged to direct abuse were Paul Bernardo, Albert De Salvo, Charles Ng, Danny Rolling, John Wayne Gacy, and Robert Hansen. Ted Bundy and Richard Ramirez belonged to home-terrorization.

#### Type 3: Hostilities by Both Parents

There were cases in which both father and mother were hostile to the subject. Gerard Schaefer, Hadden Clark, and Richard Chase belonged to this type. Such parents were usually authoritative, strict, critical, never satisfied, rejecting, and abusive. They were drunk very often, and constantly argued against each other. Clark and Chase both developed paranoid schizophrenia. Schaefer had thoughts of suicide and had a large preoccupation with death. He became sexually excited doing something to hurt himself. Allegedly, he sometimes reached the point where he did not know what was fact or fantasy. Clark's father called him a retard, and his mother dressed him in girl's clothing when drunk. Clark did not speak until six. Double hostilities by both parents seemingly had a greater psychological damage on the subjects than by a single parent.

#### Type 4: Bully at School

Donald Gaskins, David Parker Ray, and Patrick Kearney were in this type. Both Gaskins and Kearney were already abused at home by their family member(s) before entering school. Kearney had a trauma for being thin and sickly. These backgrounds caused them to be extremely shy, especially around girls, which consequently led them to be bullied by peers. Gaskins was called "Pee Wee" for being 5'4" tall. He was imprisoned for assaulting a girl, and was gang-

raped while in there. He later committed his first murder while he was still in prison to earn a fearsome reputation.

#### Type 5: Abuse at Orphanage

Albert Fish and Anatoly Onoprienko both alleged that what they experienced at the orphanage transformed their personalities entirely. Fish was put into an orphanage at age five, after his father died; Onoprienko at age four, after his mother died. Their institutionalizations soon after the death of one of their parents seem to indicate that their bonds with parents were not so close in the first place. Fish began to enjoy the pain via the physical beatings at the orphanage. This took root in his mind. He later hit himself repeatedly with a nail-studded paddle, and inserted wool doused with lighter fluid into his anus and set it on fire. After his arrest, X-rays found at least 29 needles lodged in his pelvic region. Onoprienko later confessed that his orphanage experience predetermined his destiny.

#### Type 6: Neglect + $\alpha$

A substantial number of the subjects were under constant emotional neglect in their dysfunctional families with occasional abuse at an early stage. Then they were subjected to additional trauma(s), which was extremely intense, shocking, and critical to the development of their later murderous acts: Jeffrey Dahmer underwent a hernia surgery at four; Dean Corll a rheumatic fever at seven; Coral Eugene Watts meningitis at eight; Dennis Nilsen faced sudden death of his beloved grandfather at six; William Bonin, after severely neglected by his mother, was sent to an orphanage between six and nine, and later to juvenile detention at 10. Tommy Lynn Sells contracted meningitis at 18 months, was physically abused by his mother, molested at age eight, and prevented from seeing his aunt,

who took a good care of him instead of his mother. He allegedly was pulled away from the body of his father in the middle of saying his final good-bye at age 11. Ivan Milat and Cary Stayner also belonged to this group.

#### Type 7: Adoption + $\alpha$

As in Neglect +  $\alpha$ , some subjects were adopted at an early age, and then placed under further trauma(s) in their new adoptive home. Although there is a possibility that these subjects inherited certain disadvantageous genes from their biological parents, who placed their biological child for an adoption in the first place, hostility in their adoptive home was also beyond normal levels. David Berkowitz was adopted within a few days of his birth. His adoptive mother was an idiosyncratic woman, hungry for others' attention, and loved showing off her new baby. One of Berkowitz's earliest memories was his parents intentionally telling him that he was adopted because his birth mother died at his birth. This made him feel extremely guilty, and caused him nightmares about his birth father coming to murder him for killing her. His oversize for his age also made him feel different and uncomfortable among his peers. Having been under the adoptive mother's total psychological control, he was devastated when he lost her for breast cancer at age 14. Kenneth Bianchi's mother was extremely controlling as well. Because of this stress, Bianchi occasionally lapsed into a trance-like daydreaming state with his eyes rolling back in his head. At age nine, Bianchi's mother made him wear sanitary napkins for his bedwetting problems. Joel Rifkin and Charles Albright also belonged to this group.

Some subjects were even deprived of basic care within their first year of life, which disrupted their normal development. They often developed autoerotic symptoms because of their ear-

ly maternal deprivation (Spitz & Wolfe, 1946; Spitz, 1949; Spitz, 1953). Gerald Stano was actually eating his feces before his adoption. Robert Black sexually fantasized about playing with his feces and pushing things up his anus. After such early deprivation, they were further neglected and abused at their adoptive homes.

## 4. Discussions

What is common among all these seven types? In the first five, whether physical, emotional, or both, there clearly exists direct aggressive force toward the subjects. However, such direct force is not as clear in Neglect +  $\alpha$  and Adoption +  $\alpha$ . In cases of neglect +  $\alpha$ , we saw a major disease followed by an operation or hospitalization, death of a loved one, institutionalization, or mother's psychological control. Neglect is known to aggravate the impacts of abuse if it precedes abuse (Ney, Fung, & Wickett, 1994). It is possible that these shocking incidents, mixed with already prevalent neglect and occasional abuse, played the same role as the direct aggressive force in the subjects' still premature mind. A similar explanation can be given about the cases of adoption +  $\alpha$ . The adopted child is already in a psychologically vulnerable state that could easily lead to dissociation between an artificial self shown in the adoptive family and a forbidden self clinging to the birth parents (Kirschner, 1992). Further psychological adversity such as a sudden deleterious disclosure of the subject's adopted status and mother's death in exchange for his own birth, father's disappointment about him and following suicide, and insecure mother's obsessive control could all lead to no less damage than the direct aggression, reinforced in their already vulnerable adopted situations.

In this way, early childhood environments of the serial killers examined in this study

were considered to be divided into two large groups: the group under direct aggression and the group under vulnerable condition plus indirect aggression, which is often hidden, unconscious, accidental, or sometimes unintended. Whether direct or indirect, aggressive force was unnaturally charged on the subjects of all these seven types. The serial killers' childhood environments were thus categorized as being abusive rather than neglectful in nature. In the first three types, there was constant aggression and domination at home beyond normal level. In the cases of bullying and orphanage, it started with abuse and neglect at home, followed by unimaginably intense and merciless threat and violence after entering school or orphanage. In the cases of neglect and adoption, the subjects' initial vulnerable conditions were followed by shocking events, adoptive parent(s)' abuse, or aberrant control.

In all seven types, such aggressive forces started to be in effect very early, sometimes as early as at the subjects' birth, and had been domineering in their lives at least during their primary years without interruption. There were no cases in which neglect alone caused serial murders. They were always accompanied with occasional or later abuse. All these seven types of charging unnatural aggression firmly infected violent images in the subjects' young minds. The fact that there were these seven clear patterns found in these serial killers' early environments suggests that postnatal environmental factors alone do have a substantial effect in the creation of serial killers outside of the subjects' possible innate aggressive predispositions. This indicates that there is a possibility that we could prevent serial murders by avoiding or modifying certain factors in early childhood. Further studies are highly recommended to test the validity of this newly found possibility.

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