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The psychology of a serial killer: A comparative case study

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Abstract

Serial killers are known to experience disorders that lead them to believe killing innocent people is normal. Traits or behaviors that may reinforce this belief includes abuse as a child, torturing animals, and bizarre sexual fantasies. These traits are usually develop as children are experiencing unusually traumatic events. This research is a case study, comparing two well-known serial killers – Richard Ramirez and Jeffrey Dahmer – to identify common themes in their upbringing and crimes. Findings have implications for professionals working in the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems.

Case 1 – Richard Ramirez, “Night Stalker”

- Born February 29, 1960.
- Killed at least 14 people, while sexually assaulting and torturing many other victims (Stone & Brucato, 2019).
- At an early age, Ramirez experienced head injuries, which resulted in epileptic seizures.
- Ramirez was introduced to drugs by his family while growing up.
- Ramirez reportedly killed his first victim in June, 1984, sexually assaulting and stabbing Jennie Vincow, a 79 year old woman “After murdering Jennie Vincow, the killer[Ramirez] slipped deeper and deeper into intravenous cocaine addiction; the drugs became his life, his main preoccupation” (Carlo, 1996).
- In the next year, Ramirez had killed and tormented over dozens of people.
- Ramirez was captured in August, 1985. On September 20, 1989, he was convicted of thirteen counts of murder, five attempted murders, and multiple charges of sexual assault (Bruno, 2012).
- Ramirez was sentenced to die in a gas chamber, but died on June 7, 2013 of cancer, at the age of 53 (Botelho, 2013).



Figure 1: Richard Ramirez, mug shot taken following his arrest for auto theft in Los Angeles, CA in 1984. From Biography.com

Case 2 – Jeffrey Dahmer, “Milwaukee Monster”

- Born May 21, 1960.
- Killed 17 men and boys from 1978 – 1991 (Masters, 1993).
- Dahmer seemed to have a normal childhood, but his mother suffered from significant mental health problems, leading to psychiatric hospitalization. His father was a student, frequently absent while pursuing his PhD program (Harold, 2011).
- Dahmer reportedly was fascinated with dead animals as early as age four, dismembering road kill.
- Dahmer became an outcast and isolated himself from his peers, becoming a severe alcoholic (Martens, 2011).
- Committed his first murder at age 18, a few weeks after his high school graduation, then masturbated over his corpse and dismembered the body in his house. A few weeks later he proceeded to dissolve the victims’ flesh in acid, while also crushing his bones (Norris, 1992).
- Dahmer dismembered his victims and ate their body parts (Bardsley, 2011). And frequently had sexual intercourse with the corpses (Saunokonoko, 2019).
- In an interview with Dahmer, he explained that one of the During sentencing, Jeffrey stated “I didn't ever want freedom . . . Frankly I wanted death for myself. This was a case to tell the world that I did what I did not for reasons of hate. I hated no one. I knew I was sick or evil, or both. Now I believe I was sick” (Adams, 2016).

Figure 2: Jeffrey Dahmer, mug shot taken following his arrest in Milwaukee, WI on July 22, 1991 (Tulos, 2016).



Factors Common to Serial Killers

- Abuse can be traumatizing for children, leading them to experience emotional pain that continues through adulthood (Brogaard, 2012).
- Serial killers often torture their victims so they experience the same emotional pain the killer endured as a child (Welton, 2019).
- Emotional abuse is a significant factor in poor mental health; a common factor in emotional abuse is alcoholism. Many serial killers’ parents were severe alcoholics, taking their rage out on their own children, destroying and traumatizing their minds (Fagan, 1997).
- Torturing animals, is an unusual characteristic that children develop. Those who develop this, are people who tend to feel no type of remorse. Hurting animals is a way to practice hurting humans later (Watts, 2018).
- Watts (2018) explains that serial killers tend to torture animals because “people who are harming animals go after someone they perceive as weaker.” Many serial killers face rejections from people they love, and tend to feel powerless.
- Most people who commit crimes start off with fantasizing people in a sexual way at a young age (Lee & Reid, 2018).
- Many serial killers have sex with prostitutes and hitch hikers to fulfill fantasies. Prostitutes are most commonly killed because they go home with whoever pays them money, not knowing that it could be their last moment on this earth.
- Lee and Reid (2018) confirmed that female sex workers are 18 more times to be killed by a serial killer than someone who does not participate in sex work.

Policy Implications

Serial killers have generally experienced some type of emotional trauma during their upbringing. The consequences of this trauma is often visible through behavioral problems. It is crucial that professionals who work with children be comfortable in reporting concerns as soon as they are evident. Early identification can get children into therapeutic programs to deal with the traumatized emotions before they lead to at-risk or dangerous habits, including sexual assault and murder. Early intervention can reduce the number of individuals that go on to kill. This means fewer crimes left to resolve by the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This means fewer killers like Richard Ramirez and Jeffrey Dahmer.

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