

Psychological Description of Serial Killers

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ABSTRACT: Serial crimes have always had a strong impact on society and added more complexity to the legal investigative systems. Beyond that negative impact, history has documented with fascination those cases and the name of some killers remain in the memory of society and law with strong reverberation. Maybe an even more complexity is added in these cases, to the psychological and psychiatric examination of the offender, starting from the psychological autopsy, profiling of the killer and the actual examination of the guilty. Psycho-analysis in these cases follows the legal investigation closely as it starts from the first details of the case, the study of the biography and forensic evaluation of the victim, analysis of the operational pattern, estimations of possible motivation of the crimes and finally releasing a profile for the possible murderer. As complex as a serial murder can look and as hard as the investigation may go, psychological profiling and analysis can bring one of the best chances of prevention, if done in the most efficient and correct way. As such, this paper proposes a review of psychological and forensic concepts about different aspects of serial murders and murderers.

KEYWORDS: serial, killers, psychology, forensic, murder

Introduction

Psychology and psychiatry have brought a broad and profound comprehension about criminal offense patterns and have aided the legal investigative system throughout history, developing as individual and self-sustained scientific domains at the border of social sciences, medicine and law. Forensic psychological and psychiatric expertise are nowhere more challenged than in the cases of serial killers. Usually, an antisocial act is analyzed through the perspective of the presence of critical judgment and responsibility capacities as the corrective measures will depend on the criminal's ability of understanding their own actions, the consequences of those acts and the importance of the steps he will need to fulfill for an efficient social reintegration afterward. The unique features about serial killers consist in the complexity of the investigative elements that follows the forensic assessment, the psychological characteristics of the killer that bounce between psychopathology and psycho-emotional symptomatology and building the personality and entering the mind of a murderer without knowing anything about him (Marin 2015, 43).

The first stage of analyzing the personality of a serial killer is the assessment of the case, of the victim, of the details from the crime scene and building the general psychological image of a person capable of killing in that specific way by drawing out the unique features of the victim and crime mode. The first question of psychological investigation is the assessment of the organizational typology of the crime scene and killer. One important feature is the victim and crime scene aspect, as they are the first elements to talk about the way a murderer thinks. The psychopath is usually well organized with clean crime scene, certain modalities of killing, with no additional or unneeded lesions, with certain objects placed as statements of his message or emotional involvement or the scene chosen to transmit a certain characteristic about himself. This is the reflexion of a planned murder which means the killer has critical judgment, intelligence and patience and he often does not leave much clues as he is aware of the severity of the act he commits and the importance of not being caught. The psychotic is usually not organized at all and the characteristic of a psychopathic murder is usually the disorder of the scene and the aspect of the victim that add up to the image of impulsive, not planned, chaotic act with no emotional control. Crime scenes are usually exceptionally bloody and victims present much more violent aggression marks and deadly injuries are extreme, targeting the head or the heart, which reflects the direct intention but without clean and planned motivation. The problem about the last type of murders is that the lack of control of impulses can belong in the same time to a person with

psychiatric condition and lack of discernment, in a period of crisis (acute psychotic state) or it can also belong to somebody emotionally or intimately involved with the victim, in which case, there is no doubt of the presence of the discernment. Also, in some individuals, a first emotional crime is the first step and motivation in becoming a serial killer (Knight 2006, 1189-1206).

The second important feature within psychological investigation resides in the operational model of the killer which usually evolves as the crimes proceed and new elements may appear and the quality of the existing characteristics becomes more sophisticated but also, as the crimes proceed, the ego of the offender becomes more prominent and details about him or emotional details he wants to underline will appear more consistent. This element reflects directly the killer's intelligence but also his psycho-emotional disruptions. The psychological imbalance becomes more and more contrasting. In the first place, the fact that he isn't caught feeds his ego and motivates him into developing more elaborated criminal scenarios, defying the police and building more challenges for them in order to prevent future crimes. On the other hand, frustration and emotional disruption or absence of feelings still pushes him into the search for new victims that can satisfy and balance his inner self. In other words, the imbalance creates more imbalances, and some satisfaction don't completely fill the disruptions but only creates new ones (Keppel & Birnes 2003).

The third constitutive element of the killer's profile is the imprint of the murderer's personality and emotional state. Serial murders are characterized by the uniqueness of the crime scene which is a personal choice of the killer and by the victim bodies which tend to be displayed in certain ways that de-personalizes them as they become a statement for the killer's identity. These elements will form the killer's signature but his signature evolve and change in the investigation course in order to confuse the inquiry or because the killer's psycho-emotional level is changing (Pârvulescu, Butoi & Ștefan 2010, 111).

The personality of a serial killer

From a psychological point of view, the personality system is a complex interconnection of cognitive features, emotional elements, personal familial history and its imprint on the individual identity, social environment influences and intelligence structure. Personality is a psychological property of self that integrates an individual into his environment by projecting his character, attitude, impulses, behavior, emotions and thinking pattern in the outer world. Basically, the biological integrity and the brain function level are the bases for upcoming cognitive and emotional filters that will form a person's bio-psycho-social balance and construct his personality. It is a dynamic structure and never a passive, static characteristic. This is the foundation of the behavior sciences, including forensic psychiatry and psychology. In this matter there are 2 plans of assessment of personality, especially in the case of serial killers and those are the personality components and personality types each being formed on biologic, psychologic and social directions (Knight 2007, 21-35).

Biological features of the personality can be viewed as native characteristics or unchangeable legacies of the body and especially cerebral structure and functioning and thinking patterns. Many observational studies have revealed that deficits of brain structure and neuro-transmitting factors can alter the way a person acts as response to environmental factors and this is a hereditary feature or it can also be a developing issue during fetal stages or before pubertal age. Specifically, bypassing mechanism between amygdala and cortical regions of the brain are revealed to be causing behavioral defects such as impaired emotional responses to stress and impulsive activity. Cortical regions, especially the prefrontal area, are the center of cognitive filters for critical judgement, being activated by the balance of ventral striatum – the center that controls and backs-down the impulses to act in a certain direction and the amygdala, which activates mobilization based on emotional process, especially fear and anxiety (Von Borries, Volman, de Bruijn, Bulten, Verkes & Roelofs 2012, 761-766). The bypassing of avoidance circuits is usually pattern of brain function within individuals with antisocial behavior. Another

interesting biological feature resides in the cerebral function of the temporo-parietal junction which apparently is a center of pain management but also is the compassion center as it manages the pain of others through the ocular nerve and reflects it as it is a self-pain. This is one of the centers that have important matters in the social integration, moral delimitations and emotional involvement. Recent functional MRI studies have shown that adolescents with callous unemotional and even adults with affective impairment or psychopathic behavior have no activation of this center during visualization of intentional pain inflicted on others. This could be an evidence of a neurobiological base for the personality disorder and also a way to manage these cases in order to prevent a future antisocial behavior (Yang, Raine, Lencz, Bihrlé, LaCasse & Colletti 2005, 1103-1108).

The psychological component of the personality is something more complex as neurobiological bases are just part of the dynamic structure of a disrupted personality. The psychology and the biology of one self are a dynamic couple of features with contradictory and synergic functions. It is the attitude – aptitude mechanism that reflect that bio-psychological component of personality which will define that individual's prone to positive or negative social relationship status. For example, a native graphic talent will not make a person prone to involvement into money counterfeiting if his psychological and emotional status is not prone to antisocial behavior. So biological aptitudes are positive or negative tools in the hands of the psychological attitude of the person. Also, physical deficits are usually compensated by compensatory behaviors and those behaviors are very easily transitioned to deviant behaviors (Allely, Minnis, Thompson, Wilson & Gillberg 2014, 288-301).

Social components of the personality represent the effects of social and cultural agents on the psychological and emotional filters of the self, building psychological structures that evolve into motivational forces that shape the behavior patterns. Psychological components develop proportionally to the social, cultural and familial influences, building one's character. Although personality is a dynamic structure, the character remains somewhat stable as all outer influences build up to an inner model of emotional and thinking features. Deviant personalities can be seen as imbalanced characters with negative attitude towards others and to self and aptitude developments inclined to antisocial goals with poor emotional involvement (Pădureanu 2017).

Psychological description of serial killers

Disrupted connections between emotional filters and action control is one of the most related feature to serial killers. Usually, it is about inconsistent affective levels and extreme oscillations between emotional states. This is often seen in disharmonic personality disorders which is characterized by discontinuous reactions to outer stimuli because of the traumatized cognitive and emotional structure with low affective self-control, poor development of superior feelings, especially moral ones and a lack of realistic evaluation in report to self and others (Butoi 2004, 385-389).

Social inadaptation represents a characteristic of extreme deviant behaviors. The social un-adapted have roots in a disrupted familial and financial influence with low educational levels. In some cases, the first active symptom of social inadaptation is exactly the criminal offence as many of these individuals blame their difficulties on society or try to repair their problems by eliminating reflections of their trauma from the environment (Marono, Reid, Yaksic & Keatley 2020, 126-137).

The most spectacular characteristic of serial killers consists in their duplicitous behavior capacity. Being extremely conscient of the severity of his intentions he is able to plan and calculate every step in order to hide his activity and his true nature which himself often despises. He needs an alter-ego that rise to his desires an expectation so he will make all the efforts necessary in order to become a social, honest and morally preoccupied person, the perfect friend and community member, basically he will be the last person anyone would point to in a case of crime. Also, there is a contrast between the 2 sides of a killer because his desires push him and

isolates him so much from the society that he needs to get as closer as he can to the community and group acceptance as he can, so, he becomes split between 2 lives and 2 identities (Duță 2014, 47-62)

Affective immaturity is often another characteristic within serial killer and it resides in a cleavage within the cognitive and affective processes with a stronger proportion of the last. Emotional lack of maturity leads to psychological stiffness and disrupted reactions in order to obtain pleasure in a non-realistic mode. He is capable of intense reactions as a response to lowest level of affective stimuli in order to obtain sometimes, insignificant satisfactions. He is often incapable of self-criticism, of realistic analysis and he is inconsistent and ignorant about important problems (Keatley, Golightly, Shephard, Yaksic & Reid 2021, 2906-2928).

Inferiority complexes tend to appear in many of the cases of psychopathic serial killers. The interesting aspect is the fact that not always the individual has real physical deficit that becomes a reason for inferiority complexes but in many occasions, there are imaginary psychological deficits that the subject has been forced to believe in by the social environment or by family members in his childhood and adolescence stages (parent despise and disapproval by the social group). Inferior self-reflection in relationship with the environment and reported to himself, transition to frustration so, psychological filters and barriers activate defect emotional states in which the individual feel like he is deprived of certain rights and satisfactions that he feels he is entitled to and he often blames other for being the obstacle between him and his goals. Frustration is being sensed at the cognitive-emotional filtering line, acting as a strong excitatory factor and impacting the affective activity over the cognitive activity. Interestingly, the more the individual contain his frustration and postpone his satisfaction gaining, the more explosive will finally their action be. In the crisis moment, the lack of self-control can reflect in a chaotic, inconsistent extremely violent act (Miller 2014).

The inferior complex of the criminal is usually structured on 4 levels – egocentrism, lability, aggression and affective indifference. Egocentrism is the tendency of one individual to report every aspect of the outer and inner environment to himself, him being the center of all situations and possibilities. The interpretative level of such persons makes them think they are the center of everyone's attention, even strangers. The egocentric person is not able to see beyond his own desires and needs and he can become dominant and despotic in order to obtain what he wants. He is the always right and he feels he is always persecuted, he underestimates his defects and overestimates his qualities and when he becomes jealous or envious, he attacks with all strength. Lability represents the oscillation of emotional levels. The labile person is highly suggestible and easily influenced and responds with impaired emotional acts which makes him very unpredictable. This is a characteristic of criminals that are unable to inhibit their instinct and desires, not even under the probability of danger or legal sanctions. Aggression is a form of manifestation that appears when the individual cannot fulfil his intentions and desires, causing destructive behavior as a result of poor impulse control in the cases of serial killer aggression becomes a constant behavior, a part of the individual's personality, almost like a professional feature, as it manifests constant and conscious. Affective flattening or indifference is strongly related to egocentrism and it comes in parallel with poor moral principles. The phenomenon represents the individual's incapacity to understand the pain and needs of others and it manifests as a disproportional reaction to other people pain and even satisfactory response to such stimuli (Malatesti & McMillan (Eds.) 2010). These elements tend to appear even at young ages and recent studies have demonstrated that there is neurobiological alteration in the brain mechanisms that could lead to these clinical features. The altered behavior that leads to extreme aggression and sadism in some crimes could be explained by the fact that the lack of emotional sensitivity leads to frustration which lead to experimenting situations that bring some affective arousal. On the other hand, there are cases in which the individual has developed a protective mechanism through against abuse and trauma during childhood by banning emotions and blocking emotional filters. In this case, the person is not entirely aware of his affective inhibition and this could be another explanation for the sadistic and extremely violent crimes. Also, he is unable to understand the

guilt as a negative feeling about himself and a compassionate thought about the victim so he does not understand entirely the concept of punishment and the important consequences of the act. Still, the psychiatric expertise course remains to the hypothesis that he is responsible for his actions and he does not lack critical judgement, as he has neuro-psychological function integrity so emotional processes cannot be taken into consideration. More neurobiological studies are required in order to demonstrate an organic fundament of the psychopathic behavior and with them, there could be possibilities for clinical management (Wilson & Seaman 2007).

Characteristics of organized serial killer

Organized and planned criminal activity is a reflection of a premeditated act which means that the offender is someone with a strong critical judgement. In most cases, the offender is someone with a high IQ score that has great adaptative skills and improvisation talent and high social skills. He manifests positively inside social groups and he is a popular person. He often manifests defiant attitudes and he can easily get involved in professional and moral conflicts. He does not manifest inferiority complexes and he over-estimates his intelligence, defying the law and the investigative capacities. Intimately he is inconsistent and he is never strongly emotional involved in relationships. Sexually, he is dominant and even sadistic or masochistic but never entirely satisfied which easily drives him to extreme manifestations without caring for the partner's well-being. He is always capable of perfecting with way of operation and the crime scene has almost in every case, a certain logic, a rehearsed structure that is meant to bring him satisfaction. The tools used to commit the crime are never random, but they are personal and almost never left at the crime scene. He prefers to depersonalize the victim, transforming her into an object of his pleasure and a statement for the witnesses of the scene. He follows the mass media in order to feed his ego with the effect of the crime and he sometimes adds personal notes in the scene or sends them to the police or media in order to bring more fame to the case. For sexual motivated killers, torturing the victim in a certain direction brings them the feeling of power which they usually are not capable of feeling or the pain they inflict is a way for them to overcome their sexual frustrations. Also, the lack of emotional sensitivity is a motivation for him to bring more pain to the victim in order for them to reach a certain emotional state. Unfortunately, the recent crime is never enough and they usually already plan the next one by assessing what they think that was missing and what they can perfect for a more satisfactory result. The most important aspect is the fact that the organized offenders are representants of psychopathic personality and they are completely aware of the damage they cause but their instinctual response is more powerful than the cognitive one as they often cannot control the urges and the need to kill (Johnson & Becker 1997, 335-348).

Characteristics of disorganized serial killer

In contrast with organized serial killers, the inconsistent one is usually a person with psychopathologic disorders which makes them more spontaneous, rough and unpredictable. He is usually not a bright person and his adaptative skills inside society, professional field and family have deficits. He usually lives with an older familial who takes care of him, he is unable to perform efficiently at the job, he is socially un-adapted, introverted and finds comfort in isolation. He is incapable of empathy and emotional exteriorization which makes him low-responsive to psychotherapy but he wears an inner psychological tension based on frustrations. He has low self-esteem because of physical handicaps or because of psychological trauma inside the family and as such, he blames the society and refuses to insert himself. The crime scene is usually chaotic as he is not capable of premeditating the act. His crimes are spontaneous, the victims being chosen in the moment of high psycho-emotional lability and the crime scene lack coherence and logic. As well as the organized typology, the psychotic offender likes to depersonalize his victim but, in these cases, he performs mutilations on sexual areas or the facial area in order to deny the horror

he caused and lower his blame and not as a statement about himself. He doesn't have personal weapons but he randomly chooses one and he often leaves it at the scene which he also destroys and takes some bizarre objects, without apparent sense, in order to remind him of his act. The place of the murder coincides with the scene of crime finding which differs from the organized murderer who often prefers to change the location of the body, in order to make the statement more spectacular. Sexual aggression in these cases manifest after the death of the victim which comes by repeated and uneven blows in vital regions. The disorganized killer is never interested in feeding his egocentrism with popularity of the crime as he lacks the self-esteem level to think in that way. Discernment in these cases can be very debatable. If a psychopath is clearly an intelligent, cognitive capable person, the disorganized killer could be an impulsive offender with cognitive capacities still present but also, he can be a psychiatric patient or a limited intellect, in which case, IQ and psychometric evaluation would decide over his legal responsibility (Ürmösné 2018, 1-12).

Male versus female killers

It is a known fact that serial killers are statistically more men than females. The main characteristic of the serial killers, the disruptive emotional state, is not something to characterize women but can be a psychological trait of males. Women are known for aggressive manifestation in extreme heightened emotional states and the victim is almost always someone from the intimate close group. Searching for strangers is not something women usually do as they need to affectively connect even in a negative way. Some studies suggest that this difference between criminal acts in males and females represents a remanence of pre-evolutive instinctual characteristics of the social models. Men had the role of the hunter in order to sustain the family and women were always close to the house, keeping it organized and affectively merged. This is one of the explanations for the instinctual psychological aspects of the two genres when involved in criminal activity (Harrison, Hughes & Gott 2019, 295).

Conclusions

Aggression is a natural characteristic of every individual that can evolve into something instinctual and predominant, replacing emotional mechanisms that motivates activity of the self or it can develop cognitive control and emotional coating with strong connectivity in relationship with other human being. External factors are proportionally combined with biological features and psychological aspects when forming one's personality and disruptions inside that bio-psycho-social balance will transition the identity to an antisocial behavioral model.

Serial killer personality is a complex structure of emotional imbalance, social and educational influences and neurobiological mechanisms. These structures evolve into organized and disorganized antisocial behavioral patterns, proportional with the intelligence level and educational influence. The first image of a serial killer to be described is the organization of his crime scene which are the first clues about his profile. Psychological and psychiatric expertise must accompany the legal investigation step by step in order to efficiently asses and possibly prevent the criminal act.

Aggression must be understood as a physical and psychological act as well. It is a form of personal expression of the external reality through a contradictory state of intentions and materialization of the desired act. Murder can be viewed as a product of irrational elements but it can also be a cognitive act. The level of emotional and cognitive involvement into a criminal act is the key for identification and preventive measures during a legal investigation. The way the killer operates and understands the antisocial act he commits, determines the chances for his social rehabilitation. As such, a multiple crime scene investigation with one apparent author and little to no clues, reflect a planned and strong intention which means, chances of reiteration are high. A chaotic crime scene filled with clues and clumsy, indifferent operational mode reflect an

impulsive act with little cognitive involvement which could reflect the action of a psychotic person or someone who would not repeat the act again. Still, commentaries and analysis of psychological features of serial killers are most variable and need adaptation to each case. General features can only be discussed in scientific community in a pedagogical manner but in real situations, the complexity of the psychological profiling and legal investigation are proportional to the spectacular impact on both scientific world and civil observers.

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