

Serial Killers: Behavioral and Psychological Characteristics

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Received: March 14, 2022; **Published:** March 31, 2022

Abstract

A serial killer refers to a criminal with a psychopathological profile who commits crimes with a certain frequency. The modus operandi of a serial killer ranges from sexual abuse, torture, humiliation and domination. Sometimes he leaves a signature on the victim or at the crime scene. The difference between a serial killer and a common murderer is not only quantitative. The motivation of practicing crimes is the most important aspect to differentiate these criminal profiles. In the first moment, the deaths committed by serial killers seem to be random. However, after careful death analyses, an interconnection is realized. The behavioral pattern and psychological characteristics of a serial killer do not emerge at some moment. Instead, they consist of a process that develops over the years. Some behaviors in childhood can point to this misconduct, such as the mistreatment of animals or setting fire to places. These behaviors can be revealed in situations where the individual is exercising power. Serial killers are the murderers who commit a series of murders, with a certain interval between each one. They are extremely dangerous, use several strategies to earn the trust of their victims, and murder mercilessly only to satisfy their desires. One of the most remarkable characteristics of a serial killer is guiltlessness. These murderers kill without feeling any regret.

Keywords: *Conduct Disorders; Crime Victims; Forensic Psychiatry; Homicide*

Introduction

The expansion of violence and criminality requires adopting strategies to maintain a more effective control over this reality. The Law should indispensably materialize a new evolution of the criminal justice system to offer suitable answers to these phenomena. It has to be moved away from the legal positivism that imposes the predominance of the norm over the human solution of criminal proceedings. The criminal proceedings, in their turn, should not impose the deprivation of liberty as the only able answer to these cases [1].

In this context, a serial killer is an individual that commits at least three murders with a certain interval between the deaths. The interval between the deaths differentiates him from a mass murderer, who kills many people at once. Before being revealed, serial killers are commonly seen as respectable people by society, away from any suspicion [2].

A serial killer refers to a criminal with a psychopathologic profile that commits crimes with a certain frequency. The modus operandi of a serial killer varies among sexual abuse, torture, humiliation, and domination. Sometimes, he leaves a signature on the victim or crime scene. He demonstrates a wish of taking risks, living experiences, and sensations. He develops a personality that seems normal to society, allowing the community life without drawing the attention of authorities or victims [3].

The crimes practiced by these murderers are always linked to each other, and they carefully choose their victims, who are usually people with the same characteristics. The crimes are committed with the same modus operandi, which means they use the same manner to murder. The criminal signature is unique and is linked to the need of the serial killer to commit the crime [4].

Citation: César Augusto Trinta Weber., *et al.* "Serial Killers: Behavioral and Psychological Characteristics". *EC Psychology and Psychiatry* 11.4 (2022): 105-108.

Many theories analyzed the serial killer's personalities, leading to emerging several questions about their behavior: They suffer some psychotic disorder or practice their crimes only to satisfy their perverse desires? What is the most suitable punishment for these murderers? Answering these questions enables an in-deep understanding of the serial killer's mind, tracing their psychological profile.

In this sense, this article aims to reflect about serial killers' psychological and behavioral characteristics. Therefore, it was carried out a non-exhaustive bibliographic review of some of the main theoretical positions on the subject.

Behavioral characteristics

The difference between a serial killer and a common murderer is not only quantitative. The motivation of practicing crimes is the most important aspect to differentiate these criminal profiles. In the first moment, the deaths committed by serial killers seem to be random. However, after careful death analyses, an interconnection is realized [4].

The local where the crime is committed always means to the serial killer. The probability of killing or rape in non-familiar places is low once their acts are controlled crimes, and they will not feel safe at these places. Moreover, if the crimes are located inside a certain geographical layout, there is a great probability of the serial killer living or working in this area [5].

The serial killer can be classified according to the crime motivation, Holmes typology, or social and organizational patterns. The Holmes typology distributes the serial killers in different classes: visionaries, missionaries, sadists, and emotive. This classification is based on casual observations or interviews. Many serial killers can present characteristics of more than one group [4].

Visionaries are unsettled people who hear voices that control them and often have visions and hallucinations. Missionaries kill motivated by exterminating a group of people, generally prostitutes, homosexuals, women, or children. They believe they are doing good for society and want to free the world from what they consider immoral. The emotional are sadists and enjoy having total control over their victims. They kill motivated to satisfy their absurd pleasures. Finally, the libertines are those who seek the sexual pleasure obtained from the suffering and torture of their victims [6]. This category includes the torturers, who cause physical or psychological pain to others; the cannibals, who eat individuals of their own specie; and the necrophiles, who practice sexual acts with dead bodies [7].

The organized serial killers are lonely beings because they think they are superiors to others, where nobody is good enough for them. They carefully plan the crimes, pay attention to detail, and seek to commit perfect crimes, leaving no evidence. Frequently, they return to the place where they committed the crime, aiming to follow the investigation or take something from the victim, considered a trophy. Ed Kemper, for instance, was the most successful serial killer of history, who was only arrested when he surrendered to the police after killing her mother [8].

The disorganized murderers are also lonely beings. However, they do not commit their crimes so meticulously as the organized ones. They have this characteristic not only dealing with their crimes, but also with the care with their material things, such as cars and houses, and are careless with their physical appearance. They do not usually plan their crimes; they act motivated by their impulses and use anything they find in the place of the crime as weapons [9].

In a general way, the modus operandi of a serial killer could be identified by the stages of their actions, ordered in six phases: The first one is the golden phase when the notion of reality starts to be lost; The second is the fishing phase when the murderer chose their victims; The third is the philander phase when they conquer their victims; The fourth is the capture phase when the victims fall into the trap; The fifth is the murdering phase or totem when the peak of the murderer's pleasure occurs; and the sixth phase occurs when the murderer gets depressed and returns to the beginning of the cycle, which is the golden phase [6].

Psychological characteristics

The behavioral pattern and psychological characteristics of a serial killer do not emerge at some moment. Instead, they consist of a process that develops over the years. Some behaviors in childhood can point to this misconduct, such as the mistreatment of animals or setting fire to places. These behaviors can be revealed in situations where the individual is exercising power. In many cases, the individual acts severely towards the tortured animals or fired houses, reaffirming their power to others [4].

Serial killers have psychological aspects in common, especially when dealing with the past. Common childhood characteristics are compulsive masturbation, troubles to sleep, lies, isolation, possessiveness, refractoriness, and physical, emotional, or even sexual abuse [5].

Fantasy becomes something hugely present in their lives, confusing it with reality. The repetition and reenactment of their crimes contribute to enhancing their fantasy. Their crimes are experienced in their minds several times, before and after they were consummated. For this reason, they follow the same modus operandi, only changing it when they feel threatened [4].

The serial killer approximates their victims in a friendly way, aiming to earn their trust. They are cold, insensitive, manipulative, perverse, transgressor of the social rules, ruthless, immoral, unconscious, and do not feel guilt or remorse [8]. They are very watchful and always observe everyone who surrounds them once, at any moment, they can choose one more victim [3]. For these reasons, serial killers do not feel guilt related to the murders [5].

Psychopaths generally are intelligent people and have developed strategy skills, which are other characteristics that can be pointed out. It explains the great ability to evade authorities and the capacity to correct the modus operandi when committing mistakes, not jeopardizing the confidentiality of authorship [8].

Conclusion

Serial killers are the murderers who commit a series of murders (at least three), with a certain interval between each one. They are extremely dangerous, use several strategies to earn the trust of their victims, and murder mercilessly only to satisfy their desires.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of a serial killer is guiltlessness. These murderers kill without feeling any regret. Instead, their crimes increase the wish to kill. They are unceasing searching the pleasure through perverse ways, acting consciously, and are motivated by the cruelty. In many cases, they are triggered by the satisfaction of erotic impulses.

Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Funding Support

No funding.

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Volume 11 Issue 4 April 2022

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