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whether or not serial killers
control their urges

Stalkers

a review on how and why



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MONSTERS OR VICTIMS?

It was an urge. . .

I was taking risks to go out and kill people—risks that normally, according to my little rules of operation, I wouldn't take because they could lead to arrest.

—Edmund Kemper

Where does this urge come from, and why is so powerful? If we all experienced this urge, would we be able to resist?

Is it genetic, hormonal, biological, or cultural conditioning? Do serial killers have any control over their desires? We all experience rage and inappropriate sexual instincts, yet we have some sort of internal cage that keeps our inner monsters locked up. Call it morality or social programming; these internal blockades have long since been trampled down in the psychopathic killer. Not only have they let loose the monster within, they are virtual slaves to its beastly appetites. What sets them apart?

Serial killers have tested out a number of excuses for their behavior. Henry Lee Lucas blamed his upbringing; others like Jeffrey Dahmer say that they were born with a “part” of them missing. Ted Bundy claimed pornography made him do it. The ruthless Carl Panzram swore that prison turned him into a monster, while Bobby Joe Long said a motorcycle accident made him hypersexual and eventually a serial lust killer. The most psychopathic, like John Wayne Gacy, turn the blame around and boast that the victims deserved to die.

They must be insane—what normal person could slaughter another human, for the sheer pleasure of it? Yet the most chilling fact about serial killers

is that they are rational and calculating. As the “British Jeffrey Dahmer” Dennis Nilsen put it, “a mind can be evil without being abnormal.”

What They Are

Before we look at who they are, we must first describe what they are. In his book *The Killers Among Us*, Steven Egger defines serial murder:

- A minimum of three to four victims, with a “cooling off” period in between;
- The killer is usually a stranger to the victim—the murders appear unconnected or random;
- The murders reflect a need to sadistically dominate the victim;
- The murder is rarely “for profit”; the motive is psychological, not material;
- The victim may have “symbolic” value for the killer; method of killing may reveal this meaning;
- Killers often choose victims who are vulnerable (prostitutes, runaways, etc.)

Statistically, the average serial killer is a white male from a lower to middle class background, usually in his twenties or thirties. Many were physically or emotionally abused by parents. Some were adopted. As children, fledgling serial

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killers often set fires, torture animals, and wet their beds (these red-flag behaviors are known as the “triad” of symptoms.) Brain injuries are common. Some are very intelligent and have shown great promise as successful professionals. They are also fascinated with the police and authority in general. They will either have attempted to become police themselves but were rejected, or worked as security guards, or had served in the military. Many, including John Gacy, the Hillside Stranglers, and Ted Bundy, will disguise themselves as law enforcement officials to gain access to their victims.

Who They Kill

Serial killers choose victims weaker than themselves. Often their victims will fit a certain stereotype which has symbolic meaning for the killer. David Berkowitz, aka “Son of Sam,” was not so particular—he hated all women: “I blame them for everything. Everything evil that’s happened in the world—somehow goes back to them.” Gacy savagely strangled young men, some of them his own employees, calling them “worthless little queers and punks.” Some believe that Gacy’s homicidal rage was projected onto the boys who represented his own inadequacy in the eyes of his own domineering father.

With rare exception, serial killers objectify and humiliate their victims. Bundy deliberately kept the conversation brief—if he

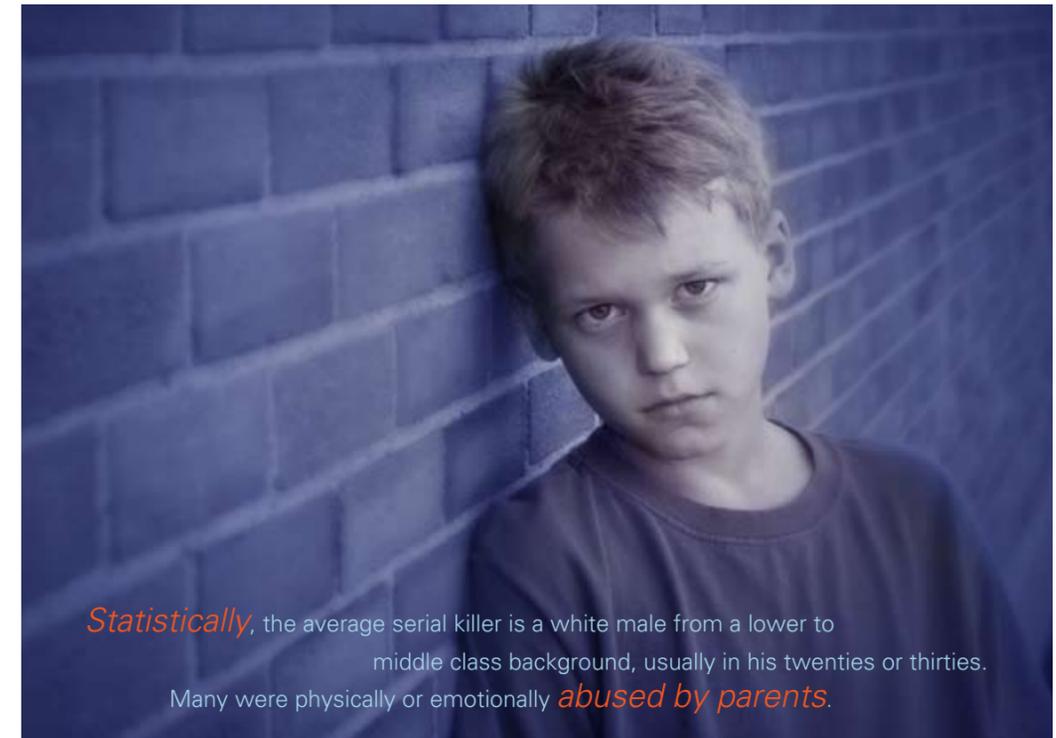
got to know the victim and saw her as a real person, it would destroy the fantasy.

Serial killers are sadists, seeking perverse pleasure in torturing the victim, even resuscitating them at the brink of death so they can torture them some more. (“How’s it feel, knowing you’re going to die?” Gacy asked his victims as he strangled them, even reciting the 23rd Psalm, urging them to be brave in the face of death.) They need to dominate, control, and “own” the person. Yet when the victim dies, they are abandoned again, left alone with their unfathomable rage and self-hatred. This hellish cycle continues until they are caught or killed.

Why Are They So Difficult to Spot

We think we can spot lunacy, that a maniac with uncontrollable urges to kill will be unable to contain himself. On the bus, in the street, it is the mentally ill we avoid, sidestepping the disheveled, unshaven man who rants on over some private outrage. Yet if you intend to avoid the path of a serial killer, your best strategy is to sidestep the charming, the impeccably dressed, polite individual. They blend in, camouflaged in contemporary anonymity. They lurk in churches, malls, and prowl the freeways and streets.

“Dress him in a suit and he looks like ten other men,” said one attorney in describing Dahmer. Like all evolved predators, they



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know how to stalk their victims by gaining their trust. Serial killers don’t wear their hearts on their sleeves. Instead, they hide behind a carefully constructed facade of normalcy.

Mask of Sanity

Because of their psychopathic nature, serial killers do not know how to feel sympathy for others, or even how to have a relationship. Instead, they learn to simulate it by observing others. Serial killers are actors with a natural penchant for performance. Henry Lee Lucas described being a serial killer as “being like a movie-star . . . you’re just playing the part.” The macabre Gacy loved to dress up as a clown, while the Zodiac suited up in a bizarre executioner’s costume that looked like something out of “Alice in Wonderland.” In court, Bundy told the judge “I’m disguised as an attorney today.”

The most coveted role of roaming psychopaths is a position of authority. Gacy was an active, outgoing figure in business and society, became a member of the Jaycees. Many joined the military, including Berkowitz who was intensely patriotic

for a time. Playing police officer, however, is the most predictable. Carrying badges and driving coplike vehicles not only feeds their need to feel important, it allows them access to victims who would otherwise trust their instincts.

Yet, when they are caught, the serial killer will suddenly assume a “mask of insanity”—pretending to be a multiple personality, schizophrenic, or prone to black-outs—anything to evade responsibility. Even when they pretend to truly reveal themselves, they are still locked into playing a role. What nameless dread lies behind the psychopath’s mask?

“What’s one less person on the face of the earth anyway?” Ted Bundy’s chilling rationalization demonstrates the how serial killers truly think. “Bundy could never understand why people couldn’t accept the fact that he killed because he wanted to kill,” said one FBI investigator.

What Makes a Serial Killer Tick?

Just as these killers rip open their victims to “see how they run” (as Ed Kemper put it),



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prowl in your offices, freeways and streets.

forensic psychiatrists and FBI agents have tried to get inside the killer's mind. Traditional explanations include childhood abuse, genetics, chemical imbalances, brain injuries, exposure to traumatic events, and perceived societal injustices. The frightening implication is that a huge population has been exposed to one or more of these traumas. Is there some sort of lethal concoction that sets serial killers apart from the rest of the population?

When caught and tried in a court of law in the United States, some serial killers will plead not guilty by reason of insanity. In most US jurisdictions, the legal definition of insanity is still generally based upon the classic common law "right or wrong" test delineated by an English court in the 1843 M'Naghten case. The M'Naghten rule, as it is generally known in the legal profession, hinges upon whether the defendant knows the difference between right and wrong at the time of the offense.

With some serial killers, extensive premeditation, combined with lack of any obvious delusions or hallucinations that would hinder the defendant's ability to elude detection after committing multiple murders, make this defense extremely difficult and almost uniformly unsuccessful in achieving a not guilty verdict. However, it does allow the defense to introduce

evidence about the killer's background that would normally be deemed inadmissible (for example, a history of having been abused as a child), in hopes that some sympathy from the jury will spare the client a death sentence. Many experts have claimed that once serial killers start they cannot (or only rarely) stop. Recently this view has been called into question as new serial killers are caught through methods that were previously unavailable, such as DNA testing. Some argue that those who are unable to control their homicidal impulses are more easily caught and thus over represented in the statistics.

We believe that we have control over our impulses—no matter how angry we get, there is something that stops us from taking our aggressions out on others. Do serial killers lack a moral safety latch? Or are they being controlled by something unfathomable? "I wished I could stop but I could not. I had no other thrill or happiness," said Dennis Nilsen, who wondered if he was truly evil. Serial killers are undeniably sick, and their numbers seem to be growing. Are we in the midst of a serial killer "epidemic," as Joel Norris describes it?

If this is a disease, what is the cure? 