

SERIAL KILLERS

The Psychosocial Development
of Humanity's Worst Offenders



William M. Harmening

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Harmening is a recognized expert in the area of criminal behavior and is the author of “Criminal Triad Theory,” a widely-accepted psychosocial theory of criminality being taught in colleges and universities across the country. He serves as an adjunct faculty member at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where he teaches undergraduate courses in forensic psychology and criminology. In addition to his teaching duties, he is also a 33-year law enforcement officer who has commanded statewide units in Chicago, Illinois tasked with investigating such crimes as securities fraud and child exploitation/pornography. He is a licensed polygraph examiner and a certified forensic hypnotist, providing both services to law enforcement agencies throughout Illinois, Missouri, and Indiana. He has spoken internationally on the subject of criminal behavior and has appeared on national television multiple times. This is his eighth book.

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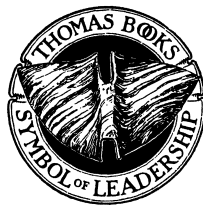
The Psychosocial Development of Humanity's Worst Offenders

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PREFACE

Whether it be Jack the Ripper in nineteenth-century England or Ted Bundy in 1970s America, the public has always been strangely fascinated by the criminal offender type we know as the *serial killer*. They are the subject of endless movies and books; the police and media assign them colorful monikers like comic book antiheroes; women agree to marry them while they await execution or live out their days in prison; and for the few who have never been caught, such as the infamous *Zodiac*, we continue to speculate and develop new theories about their identity decades after their crimes have ended.

But what is it that causes such evilness in an individual? What is it that compels a person to take an innocent life, not once but multiple times, and for no apparent reason beyond their own perverse psychological gratification? In the pages that follow we will explore this question by looking at the psychosocial determinants of criminal behavior, including serial murder. The role of such internal processes as *attachment*, *moral development*, and *identity formation* in the development of a person's predisposition to various forms of social deviance, including physical and sexual aggression, is reviewed. This information is then applied to actual serial killers in an effort to construct a psychosocial profile of each and to attempt to pinpoint the various developmental factors that contributed to their eventual criminality. Finally, early intervention strategies are explored that can potentially redirect a child's developmental trajectory away from crime and deviance, and toward a more adaptive and socially-acceptable behavioral repertoire.

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SERIAL KILLERS

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Peering into the Mind of Evil

INTRODUCTION

There are only three types of serial killers. During the last four decades, a number of typology schemes have been offered, many based on the apparent motive of the killer. But these types of schemes say little about the offender, at least little that can be used to identify such an individual in their preoffending stage of development. They tell us much about the killer's actions but say little about why those actions were viewed as a viable option in the first place. For example, it's easy to speculate that rage caused a killer to act as they did. But to truly understand this class of evildoers, we must first explore why they felt the level of rage they did, and further, why any amount of rage would lead them to kill multiple people. Also, while the emotion of rage has on many occasions led people to kill in the heat of the moment, the type of rage that leads one to commit multiple premeditated murders does not happen at a moment in time, but rather, develops over the course of a person's early psychosocial development. So once again, it is not enough to say that the person's rage caused them to kill, and that their rage was brought on by the victim's rejection of their sexual advances, for example. The fact is, for every serial killer who kills for reasons of rage, there are hundreds of thousands of people who experience that same rage and make the decision not to kill, or to commit any crime at all. So the question becomes, what is it in a serial killer's development that creates such a deadly pattern of behavior? That question will be the focus of our inquiry.

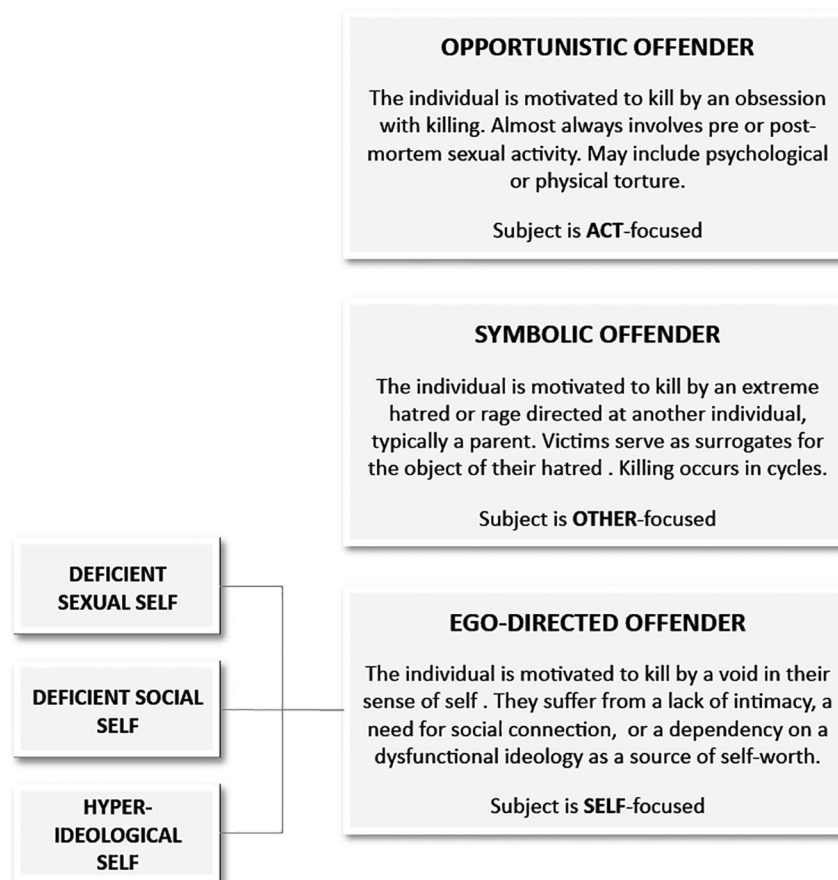


Figure 1.1. Serial killer types.

What are the three types of serial killer? As shown in Figure 1.1, the first is the *opportunistic* killer, or the person who simply kills for the enjoyment of the act, or for some material or psychological gain. The second is the *symbolic* killer, or the person whose victims serve as surrogates for someone else, such as an abusive parent. And the third type is the *ego-directed* killer, or the person whose heinous acts serve the purpose, at least in the short term, of filling some perceived void in their sense of self. Under this type we will discuss three subtypes: the *deficient sexual-self*, *deficient social-self*, and the *hyper ideological-self*. Another way of looking at this simple scheme is to say that the motivations empowering serial killings are either *other-focused* (symbolic), *act-focused* (opportunistic), or *self-focused* (ego-directed). Which type it is

will determine the type of victims they select, the level of cruelty they may dole out, the extent to which rehabilitation is a possibility, and in the event that they have eluded identification and capture, the probability they will eventually cease their deadly routine. In the chapters to follow we will explore each of these serial killer types, including their psychosocial development, as well as their methods and the characteristics of the crime scenes they leave behind. While the foregoing is not intended as a *profiling* system per se, we will explore ways in which a thorough understanding of the serial killer's psychological functioning and development can lead to information and clues that will potentially benefit the investigation of an unknown serial offender.

Misconceptions

Many misconceptions have arisen over the years about serial killers, many the result of Hollywood's creative license. But still others, perhaps the majority, have been the product of an academic community's efforts to explain this purely psychological phenomenon from a sociological or criminological perspective, a truly difficult task, if not impossible. In doing so, they tend to look at serial killing at a point in time, typically the period of the killer's known offenses, rather than over the entire course of their psychosocial development, extending all the way back to their first year of life. As we shall see in the chapters to follow, the etiological factors giving rise to serial killing occur years before the serial killer ever takes their first victim. It is critical to our understanding of this phenomenon that we not let these misconceptions cloud our inquiry:

1. *Serial killers are motivated by the desire to gain power and control over their victims.* This is true only in the case of opportunistic killers, and not even all of them. Symbolic killers tend to seek power and control over the haunting remnants of a dysfunctional development. For them, their heinous acts are intended to quiet the demons that remain after years of parental abuse, neglect, or abandonment. The victims they select are simply a means to an end. And ego-directed killers seek power and control over their own sense of personal failure or emptiness. For them, the experience of their victims is secondary to their own. As we shall see, some ego-directed killers have little contact with their victims, killing them from a distance, or, in the case of Ted Kaczynski, a.k.a. the *Unabomber*, without ever laying eyes on them at