**What Makes Serial Killers Tick?**

By Shirley Lynn Scott

**Monsters or Victims? What They Are and Who They Kill**

*"It was an urge. ... A strong urge, and the longer I let it go the stronger it got, to where 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. Herbert Mullin, Santa Cruz killer of thirteen, blamed the voices in his head that told him it was time to "sing the die song." 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, turned the blame around and boasted 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."

Before we look at who they are, we must first describe what they are. The FBI defines serial murder as:

* 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 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 have either attempted to become police themselves but were rejected, worked as security guards, or served in the military. Many, including John Gacy, the Hillside Stranglers, and Ted Bundy, have disguised themselves as law enforcement officials to gain access to their victims.

**Why Are They So Difficult to Spot?**

**Getting Away with Murder**

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 individuals. They blend in, camouflaged in contemporary anonymity. They lurk in churches and 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 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 relationships. Instead, they learn to simulate normal behavior by observing others. It is all a manipulative act, designed to entice people into their trap. 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." Bundy had previously "disguised" himself as a compassionate rape crisis center counselor.

The most coveted role of roaming psychopaths is a position of authority. Gacy was an active, outgoing figure in business and society; he even 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, but also allows them access to victims who would otherwise trust their instincts and not talk to strangers.

Yet, when they are caught, serial killer wills 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.

Edmund KemperJust as these killers rip open their victims to "see how they run" (as Ed Kemper put it), 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?

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?

**Childhood Events**

**Adoption**

Adoption as a potential contribution to the serial killer's motivation is fascinating because it creates two questions. The first one is that the biological parents may have left their child with deviant genes. (We will look into the genetics of serial killers shortly.) Finding out that one was adopted may also undermine the sense of identity in a fragile youth, and make the child prone to fantasizing an identity of his "true" parents, either good or bad. Was the mother a prostitute? A nun? Was the father a gangster? A hero? And why did they "reject" their child? This sense of rejection can have profound consequences on an already unstable psyche. If the child actually meets his biological parent and is again rejected, the damage is worse. David Berkowitz was deeply hurt when his biological mom brushed him off. Some have speculated that Berkowitz's "Son of Sam" was an fantasy attempt to reclaim a parent/child identity that had been crushed in real life. According to Bundy biographers Michaud and Aynesworth, Ted's emotional growth was stopped in its tracks after he learned that he was illegitimate at age 13. "It was like I hit a brick wall," Bundy had said. Of course, he tried out every excuse he could rummage, so it's difficult to take his word on this when his family life appeared otherwise healthy.

It goes without saying that adoption does not create serial killers. At worst, it may dislodge a child's self-identity. But that does not mean that finding oneself in multiple murder is the only option available to adopted children.

**Witnessing Violence**

Some lust murderers claim that exposure to violent events ignited their thirst for blood. Ed Gein, among others, said that seeing farm animals slaughtered gave him perverted ideas. But wouldn't that make 4-H a breeding ground for serial killers? Both Albert Fish and Andrei Chikatilo blamed their sadistic bloodlust on frightening childhood stories. Does this mean we can expect Stephen King's children to top the murder charts? Even truly traumatic experiences don't automatically create a serial killer. "Acid Bath Murderer" John Haigh, as a child, ran outside after a WWII bombing at his London home. The bomb came with "a horrifying shriek, and as I staggered up, bruised and bewildered, a head rolled against my foot." Joel Peter Witkin, a well-known artist who's work is admittedly gruesome but fascinating, experienced the same event after witnessing a car accident. So what makes one person become a serial killer, and another a famous artist?

**Juvenile Detention**

Reform school in the early 20th century did anything but reform. The stories of sadistic guards and medieval punishments are almost paralleled by the violent behavior of the prisoners who went on to serial killing. Fortunately, this sort of extreme discipline is no longer openly tolerated.

Although 1920's killer Carl Panzram was an incorrigible juvenile delinquent, the brutal torture he received in reform school aggregated his violent rage. "From the treatment I received while there and the lessons I learned from it, I had fully desided when I left there just how I would live my life. I made up my mind that I would rob, burn, destroy and kill every where I went and everybody I could as long as I lived. Thats the way I was reformed ... " Henry Lee Lucas also claimed prison transformed him into a serial killer. Manson said that he was raped and beaten by other prisoners when he was 14. The grandfatherly pervert Albert Fish blamed his sadomasochistic impulses on his experiences at a Washington, D.C. orphanage: " I saw so many boys whipped, it took root in my head."

**Peer Rejection**

For different reasons, many multiple murderers are isolated as children. Lucas, who was already a shy child, was ridiculed because of his artificial eye. He later said that this mass rejection caused him to hate everyone.

Kenneth Bianchi was also a child loner, with many problems. One clinical report said that "the boy drips urine in his pants, doesn't make friends very easily and has twitches. The other children make fun of him." Dahmer was antisocial as a kid, laughing when he saw a fellow classmate injured. He later became an alcoholic teenager, routinely ignored by his peers.

As the isolation grows more severe, the reliance on fantasies, especially destructive ones, can grow. These fantasies of violence often reveal themselves through two of the three "triads" of predicting criminal behavior, firestarting and animal cruelty.

**Psychopaths?**

**Twisted Rationalizations**

"I'm the most cold-blooded sonofabitch you'll ever meet," said Ted Bundy. "I just liked to kill, I wanted to kill." The hallmark of the psychopath is the inability to recognize others as worthy of compassion. Victims are dehumanized, flattened into worthless objects in the murderer's mind. John Gacy, never showing an ounce of remorse, called his victims "worthless little queers and punks," while the "Yorkshire Ripper" Peter Sutcliffe brashly declared that he was "cleaning up the streets" of the human trash.

In the 19th century, psychopathology was considered to be "moral insanity". Today it is commonly known as "antisocial personality disorder" or "sociopathology." Current experts believe that sociopaths are an unfortunate fusion of interpersonal, biological and sociocultural disasters.

Psychopaths/sociopaths are diagnosed by their purposeless and irrational antisocial behavior, lack of conscience, and emotional vacuity. They are thrill seekers, literally fearless. Punishment rarely works, because they are impulsive by nature and fearless of the consequences. Incapable of having meaningful relationships, they view others as fodder for manipulation and exploitation. According to one psychological surveying tool (DSM IIIR) between 3-5% of men are sociopaths; less than 1% of female population are sociopaths.

Psychopaths often make successful businessmen or world leaders. Not all psychopaths are motivated to kill. But when it is easy to devalue others, and you have had a lifetime of perceived injustices and rejection, murder might seem like a natural choice.

The following are environmental factors, psychiatrists say, which create a sociopath:

•Studies show that 60% of psychopathic individuals had lost a parent;

•Child is deprived of love or nurturing; parents are detached or absent;

•Inconsistent discipline: if father is stern and mother is soft, child learns to hate authority and manipulate mother;

•Hypocritical parents who privately belittle the child while publicly presenting the image of a "happy family".

**Genetics**

Tests are showing that the nervous system of the psychopath is markedly different they feel less fear and anxiety than normal people. One carefully conducted experiment revealed that "low arousal levels" not only causes impulsiveness and thrill-seeking, but also showed how dense sociopaths are when it comes to changing their behavior. A group of sociopaths and a group of healthy individuals were given a task, which was to learn what lever (out of four) turned on a green light. One lever gave the subject an electric shock. Both groups made the same number of errors, but the healthy group quickly learned to avoid the punishing electric shock, while sociopaths took much longer to do so.

This need for higher levels of stimulation makes the psychopath seek dangerous situations. When Gacy heard an ambulance, he would follow to see what sort of exciting catastrophe was in the making. Part of the reason for many serial killers seeking to become cops is probably due to the intensity of the job.

Genetics and physiological factors also contribute to the building of a psychopath. One study in Copenhagen focused on a group of sociopaths who had been adopted as infants. The biological relatives of sociopaths were 4-5 times more likely to be sociopathic than the average person. Yet genetics don't tell the whole story; it only shows a predisposition to antisocial behavior. Environment can make or break the psychopathic personality.

When a psychopath does inherit genetically-based, developmental disabilities, its is usually a stunted development of the higher functions of the brain. 30-38% of psychopaths show abnormal brain wave patterns, or EEGs. Infants and children typically have slower brain wave activity, but it increases as they grow up. Not with psychopaths. Eventually, the brain might mature as the psychopath ages. This may be why most serial killers are under 50. The abnormal brain wave activity comes from the temporal lobes and the limbic system of the brain, the areas that control memory and emotions. When development of this part of the brain is genetically impaired, and the parents of the child are abusive, irresponsible or manipulative, the stage is set for disaster.

Can psychopaths be successfully treated? According to the psychiatrists, "No." Shock treatment doesn't work; drugs have not proven successful in treatment; and psychotherapy, which involves trust and a relationship with the therapist, is out of the question, because psychopaths are incapable of opening up to others. They don't want to change.

**Inside the Psychopathic Mind**

**Most psychopaths end up in prison, instead of psychiatric hospitals.**

According to Dr. J. Reid Meloy, author of The Psychopathic Mind: Origins, Dynamics, and Treatment, the psychopath is only capable of sadomasochistic relationships based on power, not attachment. Psychopaths identify with the aggressive role model, such as an abusive parent, and attack the weaker, more vulnerable self by projecting it onto others. As multiple murderer Dennis Nilsen put it, "I was killing myself only but it was always the bystander who died."

Dr. Meloy writes that in early childhood development, there is a split in the infant psychopath: the "soft me" which is the vulnerable inside, and the "hard not-me" which is the intrusive, punishing outside (neglectful or painful experiences.) The infant comes to expect that all outside experiences will be painful, and so he turns inward. In an attempt to protect himself from a harsh environment, the infant develops a "character armor," distrusting everything outside, and refusing to allow anything in. The child refuses to identify with parents, and instead sees the parent as a malevolent stranger.

Soon, the child has no empathy for anyone. The wall has been built to last. "Human nature is a nuisance, and fills me with disgust. Every so often one must let off steam, as it were," said "Acid Bath Murderer" John Haigh.

In normal development, the child bonds with the mother for nurturing and love. But for the psychopath, the mother is experienced as an "aggressive predator, or passive stranger." In the case of violent psychopaths, including serial killers, the child bonds through sadomasochism or aggression. According to Meloy, "This individual perversely and aggressively does to others as a predator what may, at any time, be done to him."

**The Victim Through the Psychopath's Eyes**

When they are stalking a victim, psychopaths don't consciously feel anger, "but the violence shows the dissociated effect." Many killers seem to go into a trance during their predatory and killing phases. The psychopath seeks idealized victims in order to shame, humiliate, and destroy them."'I must have' ends with 'It was not worth having,'" says Meloy. By degrading the victim, the psychopath is attempting to destroy the hostile enemy within his own mind. At Gacy's trial, forensic psychiatrist Richard Rappaport said that "he is so convinced that these qualities exist in this other person, he is completely out of touch with reality ... and he has to get rid of them and save himself ... he has to kill them."

The victim is seen as a symbolic object. Bundy described it by using the third person: "Since this girl in front of him represented not a person, but again the image, or something desirable, the last thing we would expect him to want to do would be to personalize this person. ... Chattering and flattering and entertaining, as if seen through a motion picture screen." And later, "They wouldn't be stereotypes necessarily. But they would be reasonable facsimiles to women as a class. A class not of women, per se, but a class that has almost been created through the mythology of women and how they are used as objects." If Bundy got to know anything too personal about the victim, it ruined the illusion.

**Deluded Warriors**

In a manic state, the psychopath is fearless and thinks he is omnipotent, sometimes evil incarnate, as we have seen in Richard Ramirez's "Night Stalker" run. They are completely out of touch with reality. One psychopath, while in custody, would dress himself as an Indian warrior using his own feces as warpaint. Many serial killers identify with the myth of the warrior. Calavaras County torturer Leonard Lake was fascinated by medieval knights, and on a more modern cinematic note, many serial killers, including Gacy and Kemper, worshipped John Wayne, the American archetype of the lone warrior.

**Smooth Talkers**

Psychopaths know society's rights and wrongs, and will behave as if they sincerely believe in these values. "There are individuals who are so psychopathically disturbed that, in my opinion, no attempts should be made to treat them," says Meloy. Many psychopaths will read psychology books, and become skilled at imitating other more "sympathetic" mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia. They will use any means possible to manipulate their evaluators. Do psychopaths ever legitimately hear voices in their heads? According to Meloy, "most functionally psychotic individuals do not experience command hallucinations, and those who do generally successfully resist them."

John Gacy was "a smooth talker and an obscurer who was trying to white-wash himself of any wrongdoing. He has a high degree of social intelligence or awareness of the proper way to behave in order to influence people," said Eugene Gauron, who evaluated Gacy before the killings began. Still, he was released. Perhaps the most dramatic duping of the doctors was Ed Kemper's evaluation. Two psychiatrists interviewed him and agreed that he was now "safe." All the while, Kemper had the head of one of his victims sitting in the trunk of his car, parked outside the doctors' office. Bundy charmed his way into the good graces of his jailers, only to escape when they became more lax in their watch of him.

**Are They Insane?**

Are serial killers insane? Not by legal standards. "The incidence of psychosis among murderers is no greater than the incidence of psychosis in the total population," said psychiatrist Donald Lunde. The legal definition of insanity is based on the 19th century McNaghten Rules: Does the offender understand the difference between right and wrong? If he flees or makes any attempt to hide the crime, then the offender is not insane, because his actions show that he understood that what he was doing was wrong. Yet what person in their right mind would filet young children and write letters to the parents, rhapsodizing over what a fine meal their child made? In the case of Albert Fish, the jury found him "insane, but he deserved to die anyway." Only a few, including the dimwitted Ed Gein and sadistic Peter Sutcliffe have successfully pleaded insanity.

Always looking to manipulate, serial killers will do just about anything to convince the authorities of their insanity. Being declared "legally insane" means avoiding death row, and if the criminal can convince his keepers that he has fully recovered, there is the hope of actually being released.

"Acid Bath Murderer" John Haigh drank his own urine in front of a jury to convince them of his insanity, but only served to repulse them more. William Hickman was stupid enough to put in writing his intention to convince the jury he is crazy: "I intend to throw a laughing, screaming, diving act before the prosecution finishes their case. ... " (He closes this letter to a fellow inmate with "P.S. You know and I know that I'm not insane however."

**Alter Egos**

One of the most predictable attempts to shift the blame is by creating an evil dark side, or alter ego. Some of these creations are named as the true culprits of the crimes. While in custody H. H. Holmes invented "Edward Hatch," who he claimed was the shadowy mastermind behind the murder of the young Pietzel children. "Lipstick Killer" William Heirens created George Murman, and actually corresponded with George by letters. John Gacy based his alter ego, "Jack Hanley," on a actual cop by the same name. Gacy's Jack was tough, in control, and loathed homosexuality. When Gacy drank too much, the punishing hand of Jack would take control. One of the most notorious alter egos is "Hillside Strangler" Kenneth Bianchi's "Steve Walker." Steve came out during hypnotic sessions as the aggressive opposite to Ken's gentle guy act. Clever hypnotists were able to snare Steve as a hoax. (It was later revealed that Bianchi had seen the movie "Sybil" two days prior to his psychiatric evaluation.)

Fabricating an alter ego is a convenient way to pin the guilt on another, even if that other is within. It's a psychological variation of "the devil made me do it." But diabolical alter egos are usually clumsy constructions that fall apart under scrutiny. At best, a legitimate split personality could hope for a mental institution instead of death row. But authentic cases are exceptionally rare.

**Schizophrenia**

Most schizophrenics will resist the aggressive commands of the auditory hallucinations they hear, according to Dr. Meloy. Santa Cruz in the 1970's had a renaissance of psychopathic killers. Of course, there is Edmund Kemper, the most articulate of them the batch. His schizophrenic colleagues, however, are frightening examples of the truly mentally-ill serial killer.

Herbert Mullin heard his father's voice in his head, commanding, "Why won't you give me anything? Go kill somebody move!" By killing people, Mullin was convinced, he was actually preventing earthquakes and tidal waves. Unlike most serial killers, he was not seeking a certain type of victim. His 13 "sacrificial" victims included a family, a priest, a homeless man and some hapless campers.

Upon his arrest everyone agreed that Mullin was a paranoid schizophrenic, but was found "legally sane." Unlike many serial killers who try to convince the authorities that they are crazy, Mullin tried to prove his sanity, stating that he was the victim of a huge conspiracy. He declared that he "a good American person who was tricked into committing the crimes. I know I deserve my freedom."

On a self-described "divine mission": John Linley Frazier, slaughtered a wealthy Santa Cruz family in 1970 because he believed they had been "polluting and destroying the Earth." Initially he was called an "acid casualty," but later tests revealed Frazier as an acute paranoid schizophrenic. Nonetheless, Frazier was declared legally sane and sentenced to life imprisonment.

David Berkowitz's "Son of Sam" routine was a well-constructed attempt to appear schizophrenic. "There is no doubt in my mind that a demon has been living in me since birth," he raved. "I want my soul back!" he wrote. "I have a right to be human." Later he held a press conference, announcing that his story of demons had been an invention.

**Natural Born Killers**

Genetics/Bad Seeds are the psychopathic criminals really different from birth? Many parents say that their children who grow up to be violent offenders are markedly different from their non-violent siblings. Three-year-old Ted Bundy sneaked into his teenage aunt Julia's room one morning, and slipped butcher knives under the covers of her bed. "He just stood there and grinned," she said. Serial killer Carl Panzram himself wrote: "All of my family are as the average human beings are. They are honest and hard working people. All except myself. I have been a human-animile ever since I was born. When I was very young at 5 or 6 years of age I was a thief and a lier and a mean despisable one at that. The older I got the meaner I got." German child killer Peter Kurten had drowned two playmates by the tender age of nine.

Are these children just born bad? Environment alone cannot explain deranged behavior too many abused and neglected children grow up to be law-abiding citizens. If there is a genetic explanation, its a slippery, discreet mutation. We don't see entire families of serial killers. There is no such thing as a "kill gene", but research is revealing some genetic tendencies to violent behavior. In other words, bad seeds blossom in bad environments.

One study of twins who were raised apart, done by Yoon-Mi Hur and Thomas Bouchard in 1997, revealed a strong link between impulsivity and sensation-seeking behavior, "attributed almost entirely to genetic factors." Both sensation-seeking traits and impulsivity have been "found to be higher in drug abusers, delinquents, and psychopaths."

**Do Serial Killers Have an Extra Chromosome?**

Multiple murderer Bobby Joe Long had an extra X (female) chromosome, otherwise known as Klinefelter's syndrome, which meant he had the female hormone estrogen circulating in higher amounts in his system. His breasts grew during puberty, which caused him great embarrassment. Long, however, has an abundance of other serial killer prerequisites. He suffered traumatic and repeated head injuries, among other things.

Conversely, an extra Y (male) chromosome was once in vogue as an explanation to violence. Mass murderer Richard Speck's legal defense said he had an XYY genetic makeup, but further tests proved this wrong. While an extra male chromosome seems like a logical explanation for mutant-aggressive behavior, there is not much evidence that links the X or Y chromosome to serial killers.

**Testosterone**

High testosterone in itself is not a dangerous thing, but when it is combined with low levels of serotonin, the results might be deadly. Testosterone is associated with the need for dominance (many successful athletes and businessmen have high testosterone levels.) But since not everyone can be the top dog, serotonin keeps the tension from peaking, and mellows us out. When serotonin levels are abnormally low, however, frustration can lead to aggressive, even sadistic behavior, according to a study by Paul Bernhardt.

**Heavy Metals**

Some research has shown that violent offenders have higher trace levels of toxic heavy metals (manganese, lead, cadmium and copper) in their systems. Excess manganese lowers the level of serotonin and dopamine, which contributes to aggressive behavior. Alcohol increases the effects. James Huberty, the mass murderer, had excessive amounts of the toxic substance cadmium in his system.

**Brain Defects**

"After I'm dead, they're going to open up my head and find that just like we've been saying a part of my brain is black and dry and dead," said Bobby Joe Long, who suffered a severe head injury after a motorcycle accident. According to many researchers, brain defects and injuries have been an important link to violent behavior. When the hypothalamus, the temporal lobe, and/or the limbic brain show damage, it may account for uncontrollable aggression.

The hypothalamus regulates the hormonal system and emotions. The "higher" brain has limited control over the hypothalamus. Because of the physical closeness of sexual and aggressive centers within the hypothalamus, sexual instinct and violence become connected for lust murderers. The hypothalamus may be damaged through malnutrition or injury.

The limbic brain is the part of the brain associated with emotion and motivation. When the limbic brain is damaged, the individual loses control over primary emotions such as fear and rage. The predatory gaze of the psychopath, according to Meloy, lacks emotions, and is as cold as a reptile's blank stare. Reptiles are missing the limbic part of their brain, where memories, emotions, socializing, and parental instincts reside. In other words, serial killers are aptly described as "cold-blooded," just like their scaly reptilian brethren.

The temporal lobe is highly susceptible to injury, located where the skull bone is thinnest. Blunt injuries, including falling on a hard surface, can easily damage this section of the brain, creating lesions, which cause forms of amnesia and epileptic seizures. Damage to the temporal lobe can result in hair-trigger violent reactions and increased aggressive responses. As a child, Ken Bianchi fell off of a jungle gym, and landed on the back of his head. He soon began to have epileptic seizures.

Researcher Dominique LaPierre believes that the "prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain involved in long-term planning and judgment, does not function properly in psychopathic subjects." Paleopsychologists also believe that there is some sort of malfunction in the brain of serial killers, that somehow their primitive brain overrides the "higher" brain: reason and compassion take a backseat to lust, aggression, and appetite. A study by Pavlos Hatzitaskos and colleagues reports that a large portion of death-row inmates have had severe head injuries, and that approximately 70% of brain-injured patients develop aggressive tendencies.

Some of these brain injuries are accidental, but many of them were inflicted during childhood beatings. Among the many serial killers who had suffered head injuries are Leonard Lake, David Berkowitz, Kenneth Bianchi, John Gacy, and Carl Panzram, who, as a child, had some sort of head infection. "Finaly my head swelled up as big as a balloon. ... I was operated on in our own home. On the kitchen table," he wrote. "I would sure like to know if this is the cause of my queer actions." Ted Bundy, however, had extensive X-rays and brain scans, which revealed no evidence of brain disease or trauma.

**No Fear**

Crime Times reports on findings that psychopaths have a greater fear threshold, and are less likely to respond to fear-inducing stimuli, such as sudden, loud noises. In other words, psychopaths may be immune to fear. The psychopath's heart rate and skin temperature are low, and their "startle reaction" was substantially less than the average person. The autonomic nervous system of intensely violent people is intensely sluggish. ... They need a higher level of thrill or stimulation in order to have an intense experience," says forensic psychologist Shawn Johnston.

**Sensory deprivation**

Studies show that the lack of physical touch can be harmful to the child's development. In a study of chimpanzees, the babies who were not handled became withdrawn, and later began to attack others. Some serial killers had been separated from parents at early age, or were denied their mother's love and physical touch.

**Conclusion**

These physiological characteristics, however, do not guarantee a serial killer. Many, who are not violent, have brain injuries and biological abnormalities. A lump on the head is no singular forecast for a serial killer. Can evil be reduced to a chemical equation? Perhaps it is a combination of environment and chemical predispositions. What we do know is that no singular pattern emerges for serial killers. Many of these biological studies are new, so perhaps in the future the chemical profile of serial killers will be revealed.

**Deadly Fantasies**

Strange and bizarre fantasies thrive in isolation and anger. For the fledgling serial killer, fantasies of violence prompt further isolation, which in turn creates a greater reliance on fantasy for pleasure, according to Robert Ressler (et al) in Sexual Homicide. "As I grew up I realized, though imperfectly, that I was different from other people, and that the way of life in my home was different from that in the homes of others. ... This stimulated me to introspection and strange mental questionings," said "Acid Bath Murderer" John Haigh.

Eventually, to sustain the fantasy, serial killers come to a point where they need to live it out. They will dwell on the murder act for years, and drift into almost trance-like states days before the murder, completely enraptured by their fantasy. Their victims are reduced to hapless pawns in their wicked reverie. Much of the strange, ritualized mutilations come from an inner drama that only the killer can understand. "I made another world, and real men would enter it and they would never really get hurt at all in the vivid unreal laws of the dream. I caused dreams which caused death. This is my crime," said Dennis Nilsen. Nilsen's American counterpart Jeffrey Dahmer had a similar insight: "I made my fantasy life more powerful than my real one."

Yet the brutal, messy reality of murder never completely fulfills the power of the fantasy. In fact, it is usually a letdown, but the fantasy won't go away it is too deeply ingrained in the killer's psyche. This accounts for the serial nature of lust murder. "The fantasy that accompanies and generates the anticipation that precedes the crime is always more stimulating than the immediate aftermath of the crime itself," observed Ted Bundy.

Many serial killers will keep "souvenirs" of their crime, which later refuels the fantasy. When Bundy was asked why he took Polaroids of his victims, he said, "when you work hard to do something right, you don't want to forget it."

Doctors B. R. Johnson and J. V. Becker at the University of Arizona are attempting to understand how deeply fantasy warps the serial killer's mind. They are studying nine cases of 14 - 18 year olds who have "clinically significant fantasies of becoming a serial killer." The research is attempting to see if we can spot potential killers based on the potency of the sadistic fantasies of teenage boys, and if there is any way to interrupt the link between fantasy and action.

**The Last Straws**

It's one thing to fantasize about killing someone, but it's another thing to do it. What prompts serial killers to cross the line, again and again? Drugs are often involved, especially alcohol, as we see in the case of Gacy (who also had Valium, amphetamines, and pot in his arsenal).

**Stressors**

According to Ressler et al, "stressors" are events that trigger the killer into action. They can be "conflict with females, parental conflict, financial stress, marital problems, conflict with males, birth of a child, physical injury, legal problems, and stress from a death." As the killer grapples with frustration, anger, and resentment, the fantasies of killing can eclipse reality. "Many triggering factors center around some aspect of control," says Ressler. Gein's mother's death sent him over the edge, while Kemper's fight with his mom made him crazed ("I remember one roof-raiser was over whether I should have my teeth cleaned.") Christopher Wilder, who traveled across the country, raping, torturing, and murdering eight women, claims his murderous rampage began after his marriage proposal was rejected.

**After the Murder**

According to Joel Norris, there are 6 phases of the serial killer's cycle: 1) The Aura Phase, where the killer begins losing grip on reality; 2) The Trolling Phase, when the killer searches for a victim; 3) The Wooing Phase, where the killer lures his victim in; 4) The Capture Phase, where the victim is entrapped; 5) The Murder or Totem phase, which is the emotional high for killers; and finally, 6) The Depression Phase, which occurs after the killing.

Norris writes that when depression sets in, it triggers the phases into beginning again. Bundy said he never really got what he had hoped for out of the murders, and always felt emptiness and hopelessness after. Joel Norris aptly describes the "post-homicidal depression" the serial killer experiences: "The killer is simply acting out a ritualistic fantasy ... but, once sacrificed, the victims identity within the murderer's own fantasy is lost. The victim no longer represents what the killer thought he or she represented. The image of a fiancee who rejected the killer, the echo of the voice of the hated mother, or the taunting of the distant father; all remain vividly in the killer's mind after the crime. Murder has not erased or changed the past because the killer hates himself even more than he did before the climax of emotion ... it is only his own past that is acted out. He has failed again. ... Instead of reversing the roles of his childhood, the killer has just reinforced them, and by torturing and killing a defenseless victim, the killer has restated his most intimate tragedies."

**Social Evils**

Violent Contemporary Culture Many multiple murderers blame our violent culture for feeding their appetites. Days before he was executed, Bundy declared that hard-core pornography was responsible for his murderous rampage. In our entertainment, sex and violence seem to go hand in hand. Is there any validity to Bundy's claim?

Many serial killers adopt violent figures as their role models. Mild mannered Peter Kurten, who on the surface was a polished and polite gentleman, idolized Jack the Ripper while in jail (Weimar Germany as a culture seemed fascinated by the Ripper's nefarious deeds.) "I thought of what pleasure it would give me to do things of that kind once I got out again," he said. Both John Wayne Gacy and Ed Kemper worshipped John Wayne, who obviously had a broader fan base than only serial murderers, but his vigilante justice appeals to the killer who feels he has been wronged. To this day many homicidal acts are blamed on movies and music. Although there is no direct proof that violence in the media creates serial killers, it may activate the fantasy, and perhaps legitimizes it for some. As Ed Kemper said regarding violent pornography, "That didn't make me mean. It just fueled the fire."

According to Elliot Leyton, in his book Hunting Humans, serial killers are "not alien creatures with deranged minds, but alienated men with disinterest in continuing the dull lives in which they feel entrapped. Reared in a civilization which legitimizes violence as a response to frustration, provided by the mass media and violent pornography with both the advertising proclaiming the 'joy' of sadism and the instruction manual outlining correct procedures, they grasp the 'manly' identity of pirate and avenger."

**Stranger Society**

It is easier for us to see each other only as strangers, or stereotypes. The serial killer stalks stereotypes. "We are creating strangers of each other," says Steven Egger. "As we become strangers we begin to see others more as objects and less as human beings."

"Its the anonymity factor," said Bundy on the ease of killing. In the 20h century, the angst of the city continues to spawn both killers and victims. Serial killers can easily troll for victims among the "forgotten": runaways, prostitutes, drug addicts, and the poverty-stricken. Perhaps the anonymity itself is a factor that creates a serial killer. Feeling disenfranchised, forgotten, ignored in the looming crowd, the psychopath not only kills those who mirror back his own forgotten, anonymous identity, but even makes a name for himself, "becomes somebody" in the process.

**Serial Killing as a Career?**

David Berkowitz illustrates this possibility. "Hello from the cracks in the sidewalks of New York City, and from the ants that dwell in these cracks. ... " he wrote. Berkowitz had no stable identity no achievements, no friends, no attachments. Just isolation. The "Son of Sam" identity gave him great notoriety and power over others. "I believe they were rooting for me," he said of the general public. He was thrilled to hear co-workers at the post office chat about the Son of Sam, with no idea that the mild-mannered David was the same psycho-killer in the daily newspapers.

Notoriety as a possible incentive is indeed frightening. The serial killers who are initially motivated by a need for power love the media attention. Gacy treasured his scrapbook of all the press he received. Jeffrey Dahmer's trial had "the air of a movie premiere, complete with local celebrities, groupies who hounded for autographs, and a full-scale media onslaughtof which I was a part," wrote Dahmer biographer Anne Schwartz.

But Dr. Meloy, author of The Psychopathic Mind, warns us against celebrating serial killers: "If the murder attracts media attention and catalyzes both public fear and fascination, it will reinforce the psychopathic's concept of self as larger than life. ... In a real sense, the popular media may mythologize predators to the degree that they do become a legend in their own minds. This verification in reality of that which heretofore had only been experienced in fantasy leads the psychopath to consider predation as the sole means to achieve notoriety."

**Conclusion**

When Do They Stop? When does a serial killer stop? Either when they are caught or killed. Very few have turned themselves in. Only Ed Kemper called the police to confess, and waited at a phone booth to be picked up. Recently, a Humboldt county truck driver walked into a police station with a female breast in his pocket as proof of his deeds. Some plea to be caught, yet coyly disappear before the cops arrive to arrest them. William Heirens wrote his memorable message ("For heavens sake catch me before I kill more I cannot control myself") in bizarre, red lipstick cursive on the wall, while his victim lay dead, shot and stabbed in the neck. If there are any serial killers who quit because they were satiated or bored, we cannot know because they are not in captivity.

Some claim that if they could they would have indulged in mass destruction. The "Vampire of Dusseldorf" Peter Kurten said "the more people the better. Yes if I had the means of doing so, I would have killed whole masses of people brought about catastrophes." When Carl Panzram wasn't fantasizing about poisoning towns with arsenic, he spent his time plotting a grand scheme to incite war between the British and the Americans. "I believe the whole human race should be exterminated, I'll do my best to do it every chance I get," he told a jury before their deliberation (they sentenced him to death in less than a minute.)

**Are There Any "Reformed" Serial Killers?**

Fortunately, our society is not willing to risk the opportunity to find out by releasing them. In fact, one of the most outspoken critics of "reform" is a serial killer himself, the unrepentant Carl Panzram: "I have no desire to reform myself. My only desire is to reform people who try to reform me. And I believe that the only way to reform people is to kill em. My Motto is, Rob em all, Rape em all and Kill em all."

**"A person was a blank"**

In the end, all we can conclude is that serial killers are human black holes. That they are so normal, so generic, so invisible, they terrify us because they mirror us. Henry Lee Lucas grimly proclaimed that "All across the country, there's people just like me, who set out to destroy human life." Many of them describe themselves as having a piece missing, something dead within, or as Bundy said, a void inside. Not only are the victims "a blank" to the killer, as Lucas put it, they are blank to themselves. "What I wanted to see was the death, and I wanted to see the triumph, the exultation over the death. ... In other words, I was winning over death. They were dead and I was alive. That was a victory in my case," mused Ed Kemper. In other words, "Get a life" becomes "Take a life."

Killing others is not an attempt to fill the void, but to spread the void. To make the other into a lifeless object mimics the killers own lifelessness. "It didn't mean nothing, it just didn't mean nothing." said DeSalvo. "It was so senseless that it makes sense, you know?"

The serial killer lives on the other side of our social boundaries. He is an embodiment of the darkness, desire, and power that we must repress within ourselves. He is not a creature of reason, but of excess and transgression and voracious appetites - selfish, carnal desire. He breaks the social rules that confine the rest of us- our outrage keeps the boundaries intact, while our curiosity can explore the dark recesses of our own repressed desires from a safe distance. He crosses the line into a world of mayhem and depravity. We recoil at their bloody antics, but remain transfixed.