

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND SERIAL KILLERS

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the correlation between childhood trauma and serial killers, specifically the extent to which child abuse plays a role in the development of a serial killer. Previously done research has shown that the typical 'profile' of a serial killer usually includes some kind of abuse during childhood (Ressler, Burgess, Douglas, & Depue, 1985). Based on results of a study done by Mithell and Aamodt in 2005. On average, 50% of serial killers have experienced psychological abuse, 36% have experienced psychological abuse and 26% have experienced sexual abuse. This essay relies on a mix of primary and secondary research to explore the topic of child abuse and serial killing, with a focus on existing case studies from around the world as well as research done by renowned psychologists. Findings suggest that there is a definite correlation between child abuses and the development of a serial killer. However, the extent to which it plays a role is limited as there are other factors such as genetics, brain damage, mental illness and changes to the structure of the brain that may also have an impact on the development of a serial killer.

Introduction

This paper discusses the extent to which childhood trauma, specifically abuse, plays a role in the development of a serial killer. A serial killer is an individual that commits a series of three or more murders following a predictable pattern involving a specific selection of victims, locations, and methods.¹ Research has shown that the typical 'profile' of a serial killer usually involves childhood abuse of some kind, either physical, sexual or psychological.² The World Health

¹ "Apa Dictionary of Psychology," American Psychological Association, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://dictionary.apa.org/serial-killer>.

² Marono, Abbie Jean, Sasha Reid, Enzo Yaksic, and David Adam Keatley. "A Behaviour Sequence Analysis of Serial Killers' Lives: From Childhood Abuse to Methods of Murder." *Psychiatry, psychology, and law: an*

Organisation defines child abuse as “all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child”.³

This paper will examine four kinds of specific child abuse, namely physical, sexual, emotional and neglect, and will explore how each kind of abuse may lead to a specific kind of murder. Often times, there is a combination of different types of child abuse that together lead to one becoming a serial killer. This paper will also explore how the line between each kind of abuse is often blurred and therefore how it may be difficult to understand which specific kind of abuse led to one’s criminal history. Finally, this paper will uncover how child abuse may contribute to the development of a serial killer by examining the relationship between the two drawing on relevant case studies.

In a study done by Mitchell and Aamodt on the relationship between child abuse and serial murder, results showed that 74% of serial killers in their participant group suffered psychological or emotional abuse as children, while 42% suffered physical abuse.⁴

According to Mitchell and Aamodt, on average, “50% of serial killers suggest that they have experienced psychological abuse, 36% have experienced physical abuse, and 26% have experienced sexual abuse.”⁵ In the book *Whoever Fights Monsters*, FBI agent Robert Ressler wrote that each and every one of the murderers he interviewed were subjected to serious emotional abuse during their childhood. He reports that 40% of the serial killers interviewed were physically abused and 70% had been part of or had simply witnessed sexually stressful events.⁶

interdisciplinary journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law, February 6, 2020.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7144278/#:~:text=Psychological%20abuse%20includes%20the%20lack,%2C%20%26%20Depue%2C%201985>)

³ Child Maltreatment,” World Health Organization, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment>.

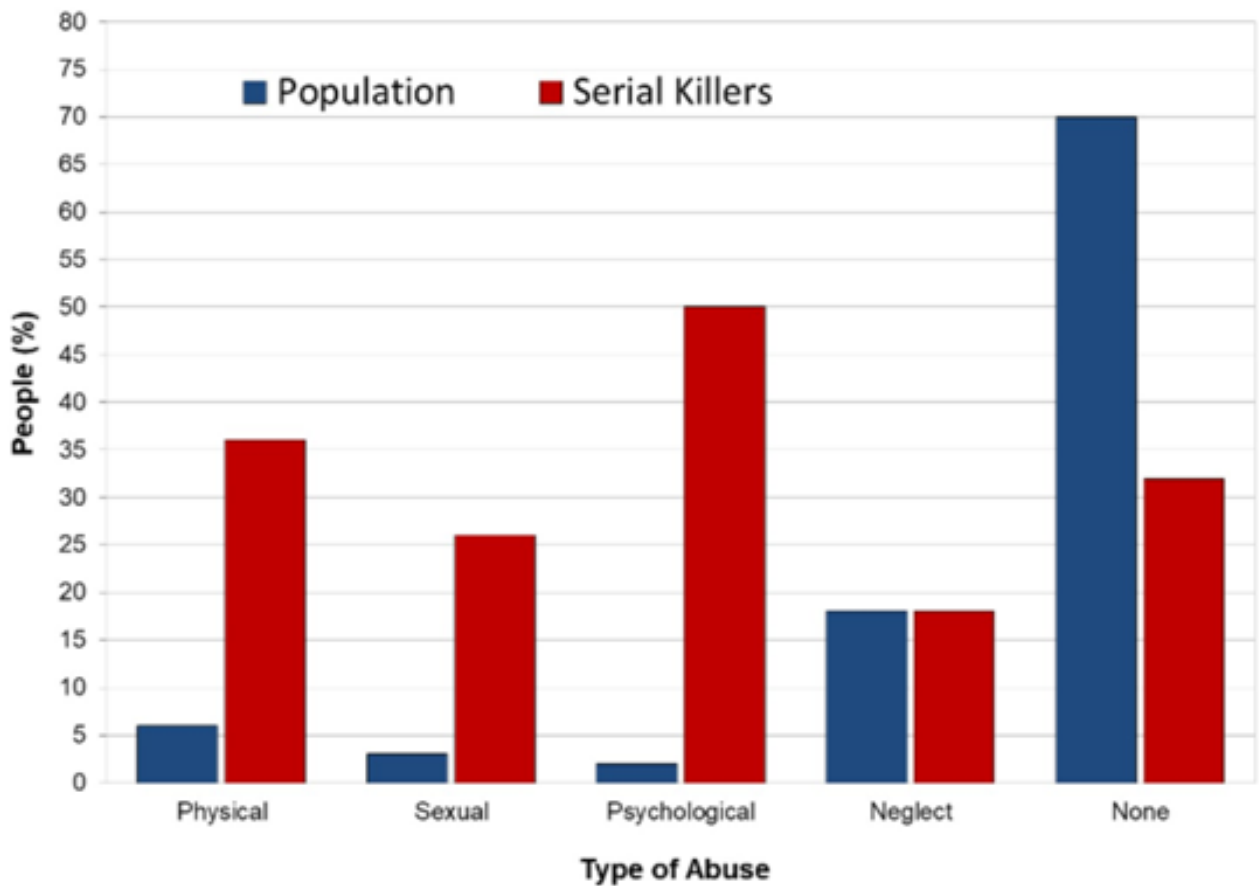
⁴ “To What Extent Does Childhood Trauma Influence One to Become a Serial Killer?,” Edubirdie, April 26, 2023, <https://edubirdie.com/examples/to-what-extent-does-childhood-trauma-influence-one-to-become-a-serial-killer/>.

⁵ Abbie Jean Marono et al., “A Behaviour Sequence Analysis of Serial Killers’ Lives: From Childhood Abuse to Methods of Murder,” *Psychiatry, psychology, and law: an interdisciplinary journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7144278/>.

⁶ Fiona Guy, “Serial Killers and Childhood Abuse: Is There a Link?,” *Crime Traveller*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.crimetraveller.org/2015/07/serial-killers-childhood-abuse/>.

There are specific characteristics associated with each kind of abuse that will be examined below. This paper will also highlight how the kind of abuse suffered also affects the typology of serial murder and the ways of the murderer.

Reported Abuse: General Population Compared To Serial Killers



Data Source: Mitchell, H., and Aamodt, M.G. (2005) The Incidence of Child Abuse in Serial Killers

Typologies of Murder

One classification of different types of killers is based on their motivation and actions before and after the murder. These typologies will be discussed in relation to the case studies examined in

this paper and therefore will be defined below, acting as a foundation to the following arguments.

One such typology is the lust/rape killer. These individuals engage in murders that involve sexual elements such as rape or sexual assault. Their motivations stem from seeking sexual gratification or acting out fantasies. Another typology is that of the powerkiller. Power killers get pleasure from exercising control and dominating their victims.

They find satisfaction in the act of taking another person's life. The financial gain killer typology commits their crimes with the goal of gaining material possessions or financial benefits. They view murder as a means to achieve those ends. Finally, the anger killer typology carries out murders driven by intense feelings of anger, frustration, or perceived betrayal. Their actions are often impulsive and triggered by a strong emotional response to a real or perceived injustice or wrongdoing.⁷

Specific Kinds of Abuse

Physical Abuse

Moving onto the specific kinds of child abuse, physical abuse is defined as “deliberately aggressive or violent behavior” by an individual towards another that results in “bodily injury”. This includes “punching, kicking, biting, choking, burning, shaking, and beating, which may at times be severe enough to result in permanent damage” or even lead to death.⁸

William George Bonin or “The Freeway Killer,” is famous for being a notorious serial killer, pedophile, and rapist. Both of Bonin's parents, Robert and Alice Bonin, struggled with alcoholism. His father had a short temper and would often take his anger and frustration out on Bonin in the form of physical beatings and abuse. Bonin was only six years of age when he was put into an orphanage in hopes for a “better life,” however at the orphanage, a young Bonin faced frequent brutal beatings, was made to drown in water sinks, and was held in uncomfortable positions for prolonged periods of time. He remained in the orphanage until he reached the age of nine, when he returned home to his parents. What initially started off as petty theft soon turned into acts of molesting children, committing rape, and carrying out murders. His main

⁷ David Adam Keatley et al., “A Behaviour Sequence Analysis of Serial Killers’ Lives: From Childhood ...,” A Behaviour Sequence Analysis of Serial Killers’ Lives: From Childhood Abuse to Methods of Murder, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13218719.2019.1695517>.

⁸ “Apa Dictionary of Psychology,” American Psychological Association, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://dictionary.apa.org/physical-abuse>.

target was young males from the ages of 12-19⁹, thus highlighting how trauma from his abusive childhood home and then orphanage manifested in his behavior as a serial killer.

Another example that emphasizes the correlation between child abuse and the development of a serial killer is the famous psychological case study about the duo of serial killers, Ottis Toole and Henry Lee Lucas. They were responsible for murdering hundreds of people and it was later found that they were in fact both victims of abuse, specifically physical and psychological abuse. They were made to dress up as young girls and were then beaten.¹⁰

In a study done by Marono, Reid, Yaksic and Keatley, results showed that victims of physical abuse were the rape/lust and anger typology and were therefore more likely to carry out the murder quickly and more importantly, impulsively. Crime scenes of this particular typology “exhibited signs of the victim having been bound” and depicted evidence of overkill. Interestingly, in all the cases where overkill occurred, the body had been left at the crime scene.”¹¹

Sexual Abuse

This is characterized by “violation or exploitation by sexual means”, often in a “relationship of trust”, although the term is typically used to refer to sexual violation between a child and an adult.¹²

Aileen Wuornos was a high profile serial killer whose youth involved several instances of sexual and physical abuse. Her mother was an absent parent and left Aileen and her brother with their grandparents when Aileen was just four years of age. She also happened to have abusive grandparents suffering from alcoholism. Apart from constant beatings, she was raped by different family members including her own grandfather. By the time she reached eleven years

⁹ Dexter Filkins, “The Twisted Life That Led Bonin to Death Row,” Los Angeles Times, February 18, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-02-18-mn-37410-story.html>.

¹⁰ Nicola Davies, “From Abused Child to Serial Killer: Investigating Nature vs Nurture in Methods of Murder,” Psychiatry Advisor, August 24, 2022,

<https://www.psychiatryadvisor.com/home/topics/violence-and-aggression/from-abused-child-to-serial-killer-investigating-nature-vs-nurture-in-methods-of-murder/>.

¹¹Marono AJ;Reid S;Yaksic E;Keatley DA,; “A Behaviour Sequence Analysis of Serial Killers’ Lives: From Childhood Abuse to Methods of Murder,” Psychiatry, psychology, and law : an interdisciplinary journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32284784/>.

¹²“Apa Dictionary of Psychology,” American Psychological Association, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://dictionary.apa.org/physical-abuse>.

of age, she began to endure assault by neighborhood men in return for cigarettes and alcohol. By the age of fourteen, she had been impregnated by one of her rapists and eventually gave the child up for adoption. More than anything, this trauma left her with long lasting Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which triggered her to commit the heinous crimes she did. She was also known to have been a prostitute who was responsible for shooting dead and robbing seven of her male clients. After she was convicted, when asked why she had committed these murders, she claimed that the men had tried to rape her and she killed them simply as a means of self defense.¹³

Unlike victims of other kinds of abuse, those who had been sexually abused as a child were linked with all four typologies of murder. Among these, the rape/lust typology showed a higher incidence of torture rather than overkill, the power typology showed a stronger likelihood of swiftly completing the murder rather than mutilating the victim, the anger typology showed a correlation with rapid completion of murder and finally the financial typology also happened to be linked with quick completion. Furthermore they were more likely to torture and bind the victim.

Research done by Briere and Elliott in 1994 and Wyatt and Newcomb in 1990 suggests that these patterns could be due to the deep seated anger and self blame experienced by sexually abused victims. Their emotional state may cause a violent outburst towards their victim followed by a bout of guilt which is why there is often less evidence of an overkill.¹⁴

Emotional Abuse

Often used interchangeably with psychological abuse, this abuse involves a pattern of behaviour that hinders a child's emotional development and diminishes their sense of self worth. This could be due to constant criticism, threats, rejection as well as withholding love, support and guidance.¹⁵

Serial Killer Ed Kemper is known to have murdered 6 female students as well as his mother and her friend. Throughout his childhood, Kemper was emotionally and physically abused by his

¹³Julie Bindel, "Aileen Wuornos Was No Monster," UnHerd, November 14, 2020, <https://unherd.com/2020/11/aileen-wuornos-was-no-monster/>.

¹⁴ Abbie Jean Marono et al., "A Behaviour Sequence Analysis of Serial Killers' Lives: From Childhood Abuse to Methods of Murder," *Psychiatry, psychology, and law : an interdisciplinary journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7144278/>.

¹⁵ "Identification of Emotional Abuse," Identification of Emotional Abuse - Child Welfare Information Gateway, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/identifying/emotional-abuse/#:~:text=Emotional%20or%20psychological%20child%20abuse,love%2C%20support%2C%20or%20guidance.>

alcoholic mother who was divorced from his father. At the age of fourteen he ran away to his father hoping that he would accept him. After being rejected by his father as well, he was sent to live with his grandparents. He stated that his grandmother was also very abusive and disliked him immensely. At the age of fifteen, he killed his grandmother and then his grandfather. He further embarked on six more murders, before killing his own mother. He was known to decapitate the victims' bodies and engage in post mortem sex with the corpses, once again highlighting the specific typology of murder based on his personal childhood experiences of emotional abuse combined with physical abuse.

Shedding light on the effect of parental abuse on a child, Robert Ressler and Tom Shachtman are known for having studied 36 murderers, most of whom had poor relationships with their mothers¹⁶. Mackey and Immerman, through their research in 2004 claimed that the presence of a father or a father-like figure during childhood prevents aggressive behaviour in adulthood. Hickey, in a study done in 1997 on 62 male serial killers, found that 48% of them received some form of rejection from a parent or another important person in their childhood.¹⁷ The murderers who suffered emotional or psychological abuse belonged to rape/lust typology, where there was evidence of torture, overkill and mutilation. Some murdered for financial reasons as well and those murders were carried out quickly.

Neglect

Neglect is characterized by persistent failure to meet a child's fundamental needs. A child may be deprived of basic food, clothing, medical care, cleanliness or even shelter.

There are four kinds of neglect. Physical neglect, which involves food, shelter and clothing, educational neglect, involving a child's right to receive education, emotional neglect, which includes ignoring, humiliating, intimidating or isolating the child and finally medical neglect which is the failure to provide healthcare to the child.¹⁸

¹⁶ Robert K Ressler and Tom Shachtman, "Patterns of Childhood Neglect (from Serial Killers, P 98-105, 2000, Louise Gerdes, Ed. -- See NCJ-182588)," Patterns of Childhood Neglect (From Serial Killers, P 98-105, 2000, Louise Gerdes, ed. -- See NCJ-182588) | Office of Justice Programs, 2000, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/patterns-childhood-neglect-serial-killers-p-98-105-2000-louise>.

¹⁷ Meher Sharma, "The Development of Serial Killers: A Grounded Theory Study," The Development of Serial Killers: A Grounded Theory Study, 2018, <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4722&context=theses>.

¹⁸ Nspcc, "Neglect," NSPCC, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/neglect/>.

In a study of 50 lust serial killers, results showed that 18% had experienced neglect in their childhood.¹⁹ Holmes and DeBurger found that the majority of serial killers were born to single mothers. In a study done in 1997, criminal psychologist Eric Hickey found that out of 62 serial killers that were studied, 48% faced rejection from their parents or immediate loved ones.²⁰ Results of this study suggest that neglect during childhood makes one feel powerless as well as socially and sexually inadequate.²¹

A prime example of this is Jeffrey Dahmer, a serial killer who murdered 17 people over 13 years. It was found that Dahmer only experienced neglect and emotional abuse as a child which makes his case quite unique. Jeffrey Dahmer began to display anti-social behavior as a result of regular and long term neglect as a child. It is believed that this neglect is what led Jeffrey Dahmer to devalue life, develop antisocial traits and lack empathy for his victims.²²

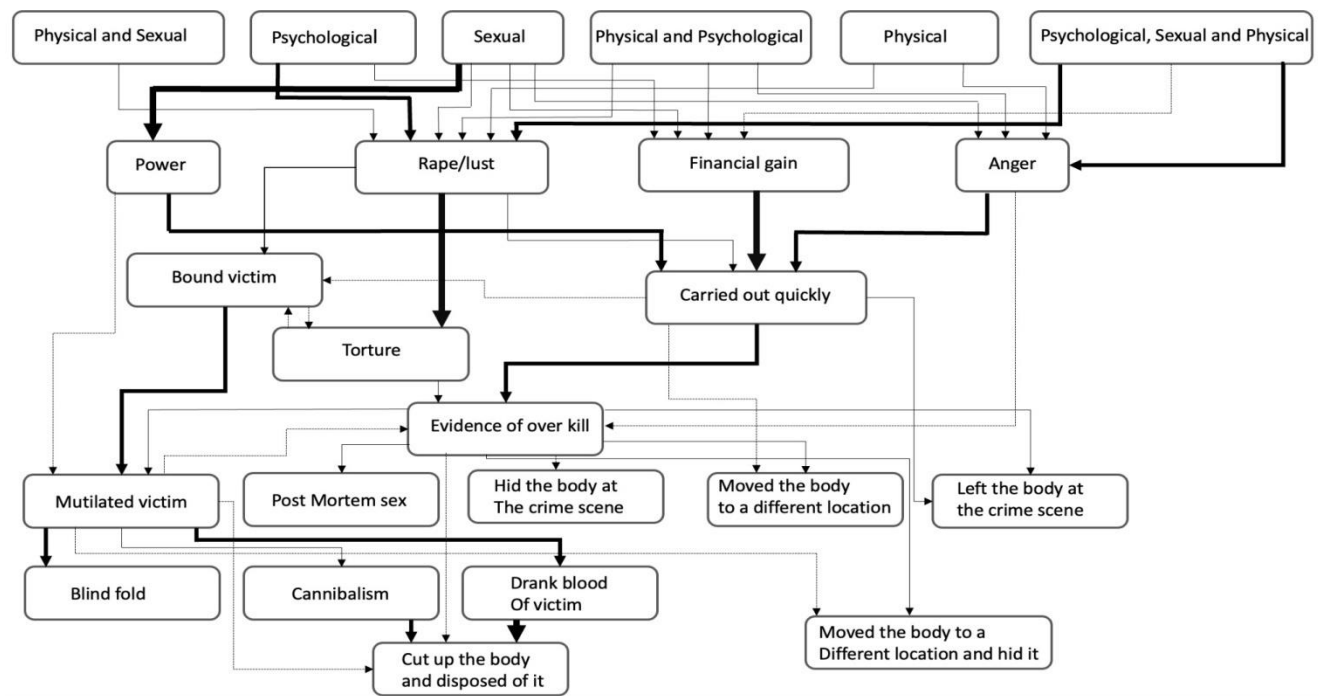
In 1994 in an interview with Stone Phillips, Jeffrey Dahmer admitted that he had never had a meaningful conversation with his father, Lionel Dahmer. It is believed that Lionel Dahmer ignored his child to finish his PHD in Chemistry. Jeffrey's mother on the other hand was a drug addict who had no time for him. This attention was further reduced after the birth of his younger brother. His parents divorced when he was eighteen years of age and his mother took his younger brother with her. It was at this stage that he started seeking out younger men, having sex with them and then killing and dismembering their bodies. His father Lionel Dahmer, also confessed that he was not aware of his son's state of mind until the trials and Jeffrey's confessions. His mother, Joyce Flint also seemed to be ignorant of her son's actions and claimed she had never noticed any warning signs until the media started reporting it.

¹⁹ Heather Mitchell and Michael G. Aamodt, "The Incidence of Child Abuse in Serial Killers - Radford University," *The Incidence of Child Abuse in Serial Killers*, 2005, <http://maamodt.asp.radford.edu/Research%20-%20Forensic/2005%2020-1-Mitchell-40-47.pdf>.

²⁰Sage Publications, "Seven - Au.Sagepub.Com," *Serial Killers*, 2019, https://au.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/94240_Chapter_7_Serial_Killers.pdf

²¹ Abdulaziz Al Odhayani, William J Watson, and Lindsay Watson, "Behavioural Consequences of Child Abuse," *Canadian family physician Medecin de famille canadien*, August 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3743691/>.

²² Higgs, Tamara. "Jeffrey Dahmer: Psychopathy and Neglect - Regis University." *Jeffrey Dahmer: Psychopathy and Neglect*, 2012. <https://epublications.regis.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1240&context=theses>.



Neglect - Stages of Attachment

A component of neglect is absent parenting. The stages of attachment help explain the relationship between absent parenting and the development of a serial killer. Attachment is the emotional connection between infant and caregiver particularly.

Bowlby speculated that the DNA bond between the child and the caregiver has a long lasting impact on the child's life in the future according to his theory of attachment functions to keep infants close with their mothers, thereby increasing their chances of survival.²⁴

- a) Asocial (0 – 6 weeks): Newborns tend not to have specific attachment with humans, although they do demonstrate a preference for faces over non faces
- b) Indiscriminate Attachments (6 weeks to 7 months): Babies are able to tell people apart

²³ Abbie Marono et al., "A Behaviour Sequence Analysis of Serial Killers' Lives: From Childhood Abuse to Methods of Murder," ResearchGate | Find and Share Research, last modified February 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/figure/State-transition-diagram-for-type-of-abuse-experienced-typology-and-crim-e-scene_fig1_339078665.

²⁴ MEd Kendra Cherry, "How Attachment Theory Works," What Is Attachment Theory? The Importance of Early Emotional Bonds, February 22, 2023, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-attachment-theory-2795337>.

and therefore start to develop attachments however they do not show an aversion towards strangers or a specific need for a specific person.

- c) Specific Attachment (7 – 9 months): At this age infants demonstrate separation anxiety when they are away from their primary attachment - usually a parent. Babies also get stranger anxiety and start to demonstrate a dislike for being around strangers. Overall, they prefer to be with their primary attachment most of the time.
- d) Multiple Attachment (10 months and onwards): Babies start developing many attachments not just their primary attachment, they will demonstrate a significant liking towards familiar adults.²⁵

Children with poor attachments tend to display negative socioemotional effects, such as poor social, coping, and problem solving skills, tantrums, clingy, withdrawn, or aggressive behaviors, etc.²⁶ Being abandoned at a young age or not being able to develop these bonds can severely impact one's behaviour as they may not have an idealistic attachment that shows them how to behave in certain situations or relationships.

Harlow's research into attachment using monkeys, although ethically wrong, gives an insight into the importance of an attachment with a primary caregiver, also known as the "mum". Harlow wanted to find out if food was the main reason for attachment. To do this he took away newborn monkeys from their mothers and put them in a cage with two "mum" figures, one that fed them and the other that provided comfort. He found that whether or not the comfort "cloth" mother gave them food, the monkeys preferred it much more than the "wire" mother even if she was the one to provide food. This shows that babies tend to cling to their mother for support and safety.

Once Harlow released these monkeys and put them with other monkeys, he found that they didn't know how to behave. They were either too timid or too aggressive around other monkeys as they never had their mother around to show them the "normal" or right way to behave. He also found that female monkeys in his experiment that grew up to be mothers did not know how to act with their children and ended up abandoning or sometimes even killing their own offspring.

²⁵ Daniel Edward, "Schaffer & Emerson's Four Stages of Attachment," Psychology Unlocked, April 8, 2017, <http://www.psychologyunlocked.com/schaffer-emerson/>.

²⁶ Ashiko E. Newman, "CSUSB ScholarWorks," POOR ATTACHMENT AND THE SOCIOEMOTIONAL EFFECTS DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD, 2017, <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1596&context=etd>.

Although this study was done on monkeys, if generalized with humans it may be able to show why some of these serial killers behave in the way that they do, especially if they were abandoned and left without attachments early on in life.

Case Studies

From the examples of the kinds of abuse and particular studies depicting the effects of the same on an individual, it is clear that there is often an overlap or a combination of abusive behaviors that lead to an individual becoming a serial killer. Before moving onto factors apart from child abuse, below are three specific case studies that highlight the extent to which child abuse plays a role in the development of a serial killer: Stuart Wilken, John Wayne Gacy and Surinder Koli.

Stuart Wilken

Stuart Wilken was born on the 11th of November in 1966 to a couple in South Africa and has often been referred to as The Boetie Boer. His main victims were female prostitutes or young boys, as well as his daughter Wuane. Some examples of the abuse he suffered from are cigarette burns on his genitals and having to share food with the household dogs from their bowls. When he was just two years old, he was adopted by his neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Wilken. However when he turned nine, his adoptive father passed away and his adoptive mother sent him to a reformatory. There, he once again suffered sexual and physical abuse from an older boy who used to sodomise him and strip him naked as a punishment. Based on Bowlby's theory of attachment, it is during the stage that Stewart should have formed a firm attachment to his mother that she abandoned him. It is also during this time that he should have started learning right from wrong. Instead, he was treated inhumanely and this is where the lack of morals and values began. Years later, between 1990 and 1997, Wilken went on a 'reign of terror' in Port Elizabeth, murdering several prostitutes and young children.²⁷ Stewart Wilken's childhood involved neglect, physical, sexual and psychological abuse, thereby shaping him into an adult that later became a convicted serial killer.

John Wayne Gacy

John Wayne Gacy is another example of a convicted serial killer with a traumatic childhood. Also known as The Clown Killer, he suffered years of abuse and trauma as a young child. Gacy was born into an upper middle class family in Chicago. His father, John Stanley Gacy was an auto-repair machinist and a paragon of American masculinity. As a child, Gacy was always slightly more on the feminine side, something that was unacceptable to his father. John Stanley

²⁷ Juan Ignacio Blanco, "Stewart Wilken: Murderpedia, the Encyclopedia of Murderers," Stewart Wilken | Murderpedia, the encyclopedia of murderers, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://murderpedia.org/male.W/w/wilken-stewart.htm>.

would often get drunk and demean his son, calling him a “sissy” and humiliating him in the basement. It is in this drunken state that John Stanley would also beat John Wayne and his mother.

What is intriguing is the way in which John Wayne Gacy conducted his murders. He was known to put victims in the same positions he was put in as a child. Essentially he wanted his victims to feel endangered and helpless. He would punish them for being scared or being “cowards”. This is exactly how his father made him feel as a child. He would bind and torture his victims and would tell them about his plans to hurt them. He would further torture them and kill them as they begged for mercy. He ultimately ended up killing and raping a total of thirty three victims, some of whom were just fifteen years of age. According to Richard Rappaport, who served as the chief psychiatrist for John Wayne Gacy’s defense, the trauma of his father’s abuse was central to his mental and emotional dysfunction.²⁸

Surinder Koli

The last case study is that of Surinder Koli, who began his killing spree in 2005, committing heinous crimes such as cannibalism, necrophilia, strangulation, rape, mutilation, and murder. An abnormally high number of women and children were reported missing in Sector 31 of the Nithari village, in Noida. They went missing only after a new domestic staff member, Koli, had begun working in a big bungalow in the same area in 2003.²⁹

In 2005, a fourteen year old girl from the area went missing and a month later, a human hand was found in a plastic bag behind the same house. In 2006, a woman named Payal went missing and her phone was traced back to the bungalow with her last call being to the domestic help, Surinder Koli. Koli was arrested and questioned, but his rich and influential boss was easily able to get him out of prison as they did not have enough information to keep him detained. Following this, several plastic bags of human skeletons were found in a drain behind the bungalow. The owner later went missing and Koli was arrested. Koli confessed that he invited people into the house, murdered them and then raped their dead bodies. After this, he would

²⁸ Tate Delloye Delloye, “Killer Clown John Wayne Gacy Refers to His Victims as ‘inhuman’ Possessions in Chilling Prison Tapes,” Daily Mail Online, April 20, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10720069/Killer-clown-John-Wayne-Gacey-calls-victims-possessions-chilling-prison-tapes.html>.

²⁹ Ajay Singh Negi, “A Study on 2006 Noida Serial Murder: Nithari Hatyakand with Special Reference to the Psychology of the Accused,” Legal Service India - Law, Lawyers and Legal Resources, accessed June 15, 2023, <https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-11680-a-study-on-2006-noida-serial-murder-nithari-hatyakand-with-special-reference-to-the-psychology-of-the-accused.html>.

chop the bodies up and eat the meat. His victims included nine young girls, two young boys and five women.

Upon further investigation according to the Joint Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation, it is said that Koli was sexually abused by students senior to him in school in Uttarakhand. This highlights how sexual abuse in one's childhood can have a lasting impact on an individual, leading to dangerous behaviour at a later age.³⁰

Other Factors

While this paper discusses the extent to which child abuse is a factor in the making of a serial killer, there are other factors that may lead to the same outcome. In the book "Anatomy of Violence", author Adrian Raine writes "genetics and environment work together to encourage violent behaviour." There are several other factors such as genetics, the environment and personality traits that can contribute to the making of a serial killer.³¹

Genetic Factors

In 1993, Professor Han Brunner from the Netherlands made a discovery about the MAOA gene, also now known as the "Serial Killer Gene". The Monoamine-oxidase-A gene, plays a crucial role in the breakdown of molecules and particularly neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine. Individuals with a mutation in this gene may face an accumulation of these neurotransmitters in their brain, making it more difficult to regulate their impulses. The presence of this gene mutation has been linked to violent outbursts, thereby earning the nickname, "Serial killer or Warrior gene" (Steig, 2019). This gene is also linked with various psychiatric disorders.³²

Brian James Dugan is a convicted serial killer who raped and killed three girls between 1983 and 1985 in the suburbs of Chicago. Kent Kiehl, a prominent neuroscientist discovered that there was low gray matter density in Dugan's brain which proved that people like him lack emotional ability. He claimed that Dugan had no understanding of the harm he had caused and showed no

³⁰ Vishwa Mohan, "Koli Faced Childhood Abuse: Delhi News - Times of India," The Times of India, March 27, 2007, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/koli-faced-childhood-abuse/articleshow/1812726.cms>.

³¹ Hasti Shabani, "Are Serial Killers Born or Made?," Are Serial Killers Born Or Made?, September 17, 2021, <https://www.thethoughtco.in/blogs/news/serial-killers>.

³² Laura Rivard and Kelly Hatter, "Case Study in Behavioral Genetics," Case Study in Behavioural Genetics, July 22, 2015, <https://www.nature.com/scitable/forums/genetics-generation/case-study-in-behavioral-genetics-136071665/>.

remorse or guilt. Kiehl put Dugan through the Hare Psychopathy Checklist, on which Dugan scored 37 out of 40³³. He was found to have the serial killer gene.³⁴

This study does not suggest that having a warrior or serial killer gene leads to the individual becoming a serial killer. However, if they are neglected or abused during their childhood, having the gene increases their chances of becoming a serial killer .³⁵

Mental Illness

One of the most common mental illnesses found in serial killers is Schizophrenia (WebMD, 2020). Schizophrenia is an illness that affects the prefrontal cortex and it is characterized by delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech and behaviour (Hurley, 2018). While poor mental health and personality disorders do not necessarily make a serial killer, there is an increased risk of developing such behaviour in people who have certain personality and mental disorders.

Another disorder that is common in serial killers is Antisocial Personality disorder affecting 47% of male serial killers and 21% of female killers. (WebMD 2020). People suffering from this disorder show no or little regards to the feelings of others.

Ted Bundy, one of the most notorious serial killers, was diagnosed as a psychopath by Hervey Cleckley, also known as the "Father of Psychopathy". A study done by 73 psychologists and the University of Kentucky concluded that Ted Bundy has Antisocial Personality disorder.³⁶ Bundy was also diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, necrophilia, paraphilia and sadism.³⁷

³³ . Michael Haederle, "A Mind of Crime ," A MIND OF CRIME How brain-scanning technology is redefining criminal culpability., June 14, 2017, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/a-mind-of-crime-8440>

³⁴ Sanjana Korpai, "The Truth about the Serial Killer Gene," Th eTruth about serial killer gene, February 15, 2022, <https://sqonline.ucsd.edu/2022/02/the-truth-about-the-serial-killer-gene/>.

³⁵ Sarina Marquez, "Research Project The Making of a Serial Killer," The making of a serial killer, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://sarinamarquez.weebly.com/research-project.html>.

³⁶ Marissa Gainsburg, "This List of Ted Bundy's Potential Mental Health Disorders Is Bizarrely Fascinating," So, Exactly Which Mental Health Disorders Did Ted Bundy Have, Anyway?, May 7, 2019, <https://www.womenshealthmag.com/life/a27346043/ted-bundy-mental-health-disorders-antisocial-behavior-personality/>.

³⁷ Lindsey Plercy, "A&S Psychology Researcher Unravels Serial Killer Ted Bundy's Mental Health," A&S Psychology Researcher Unravels Serial Killer Ted Bundy's Mental Health | University of Kentucky College of Arts & Sciences, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://psychology.as.uky.edu/psychology-researcher-unravels-serial-killer-ted-bundys-mental-health>.

Dr Dorothy Lewis, a psychiatrist from Yale, diagnosed him as manic depressive after conducting a series of tests on him.³⁸

Rohan Parashar, a psychoanalyst and psychotherapist based in Delhi has previously worked at the Center for Death Penalty. While discussing his experience, he mentioned that several murderers are schizophrenic patients. However he has not seen a direct connection between childhood trauma and mental illness. He believes that those who are more susceptible to mental illnesses can be triggered by childhood trauma.³⁹

Structure of the Brain

The serial killer's brain displays decreased connectivity within the brain that is responsible for processing negative stimuli which contributes towards their inclination to kill.⁴⁰ Neurologists have been aware of a strong link between damage to the prefrontal cortex and development of anti-social, psychopathic personality changes for many years. The prefrontal cortex is fundamental to controlling emotion, arousal and attention, enabling people to restrain themselves from acting on impulse. It is believed to be critical in developing a child's feelings of remorse, conscience and social sensitivity.

In a study by Adrian Raine, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, he found that murderers appeared to have reduced nerve cell activity in the brain as compared to other people with similar mental conditions. The 21 men studied had all been diagnosed with Antisocial Personality Disorder characterized by irresponsibility, deceitfulness, impulsiveness, lack of emotional depth and remorse. All of them had committed serious, violent crimes. They also found these men had a significant 11 to 14 percent reduction in the volume of nerve cells in the prefrontal cortex as compared to other males. According to Dr Raine, these deficits in the prefrontal cortex lead to a lack of self restraint and foresight, an inability to learn from punishment and a propensity to seek out behaviors that provide excitement and arousal.⁴¹

Richard Cottingham, also known as "The Butcher of Times Square" killed 80 sex workers between 1967 and 1980. His childhood seems to be almost ideal, with loving parents and

³⁸ Sharon Lynn Pruitt, "Was Ted Bundy Diagnosed with a Mental Illness?," Was Ted Bundy Diagnosed With A Mental Illness?, January 25, 2019, <https://www.oxygen.com/martinis-murder/was-ted-bundy-diagnosed-with-a-mental-illness-ted-bundy-manic-depressive>.

³⁹ Based on my interview of him in April, 2023

⁴⁰ Misa Kori, "The Difference Is in the Brain - University of Nebraska–Lincoln," The difference is in the brain, 2022, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1164&context=ncpacapstone>.

⁴¹ Matthew Blakeslee, "Size of Brain Region Linked to Violence," USC News Size of Brain Region Linked to Violence, February 7, 2000, <https://news.usc.edu/7879/Size-of-Brain-Region-Linked-to-Violence/>.

siblings. There is no record of any abuse in his childhood. The only possible factor could be the brain damage to his frontal lobe when he was hit by a car at the age of four.⁴²

Conclusion

In conclusion, child abuse, according to Dorothy Otnow Lewis, M.D, a clinical professor in the Child Study Center, can lead to the making of a serial killer due to various factors. Firstly, the abuse may cause damage to the brain leading to an inability to control impulses. It also leads children to learn unhealthy patterns of behavior since children learn from what they see. Repeated physical and verbal abuse can also cause stress that overtime changes the structure of the brain. And finally, she believed that victims of abuse have feelings of rage that are not expressed towards the perpetrators but displaced towards others.⁴³

Based on previously done research, it is confirmed that there is a definite correlation between child abuse and the development of a serial killer, however it is clear that just this one factor alone is not solely responsible and that other factors, such as genetic factors, brain damage, mental illness and changes to the structure of the brain can also play a role. It is important to note that child abuse in itself can lead to the other factors mentioned above but it would be a generalisation to state that childhood trauma, specifically child abuse alone causes an individual to become a serial killer.

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⁴² Adam Janos, "How to Explain Serial Killers Who Come from Good Homes," *How to Explain Serial Killers Who Come from Good Homes*, September 5, 2009, <https://www.aetv.com/real-crime/serial-killers-who-came-from-good-homes>.

⁴³"A Fascination with Violence," Yale School of Medicine, 2007, <https://medicine.yale.edu/news/yale-medicine-magazine/article/a-fascination-with-violence/>.

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