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The crimes of serial killers: Motives (Part 12)

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Most criminologists and profilers seek to discover the **motives** behind behavior. However, since the 1950s, psychologists have been questioning the two main explanations for motives, that is, that there are innate biological forces that predispose behavior (instincts) or internal drives that *push* us into action (drive reduction theory). Motivation is viewed as arousal of needs stemming from an internal deficit or disequilibrium within the organism. Actions are propelled by *deficit motives* and are presumably quelled when the physiological needs are satisfied, when the body is in a state of *homeostatis*.

These notions have been dramatically updated with studies of the brain and the limits of biological explanations. The upshot is that, in the fields that actually study motives, such as

experimental psychology, motives are no longer viewed as the true explanation for complex behaviors. Internal, unconscious motives are not seen as the sole or sufficient impellers of action. Rather, motives have been replaced by the concept of *arousal level*. There are *incentives* for actions, both positive and negative, and they often come from the external environment. Like one's ideas, the environment can instigate and profoundly effect the direction of actions taken even when bodily needs are satiated.

People – and animals – seek stimulation from the environment, even in a condition of homeostasis. Sensory deprivation experiments, in which subjects were put into conditions with minimal outside stimulation, have repeatedly shown detrimental results in terms of the ability to function and the emergence of psychiatric symptoms (Heron, Doane and Scott, 1956). “People need stimulation and react adversely to its absence,” as Zubek, 1969, is quoted as saying in Atkinson, Atkinson and Hilgard (1983, p. 312).

This introduction helps us to better understand how something like serial **murder** - that would seem to be caused by adverse internal conditions - may actually be “caused” by positive incentives. In fact, that is why such murders so often seem motiveless. Incentives, after all, are instigators of actions aroused by nothing more than curiosity and stimulus-seeking. The absence of this knowledge also explains why students of serial murder still believe that apparently motiveless murders can, with sufficient examination, become understandable and will ultimately be explained as the result of identifiable needs, emotions, or past experiences - that is, that motiveless murders “really” do have motives.

The findings of the present study of 27 **serial killers** indicated that, in general, just the opposite may be true. Even among those crimes which the media, for instance, regards as apparently motiveless, some sort of explanation for the murders can be found. However, upon further examination and reflection, these explanations break down because these were crimes that did no one any good (Wilson & Seaman, 1983).

The phenomena works in the following way: (1) the victim is, for instance, an impoverished, elderly woman, so the crime is considered motiveless; (2) later, the motiveless crime may be viewed as a “sex murder,” and the murderer as a psychotic man in search of his potency; (3) while the sex crime definition may not change, the murderer may be found to have been highly potent, and highly active, sexually, as well as legally sane.

The two main ostensible motives for serial murder are murders for profit or for sex. Nine of the 27 subjects (33 percent) were motivated by profit – whether or not the motive applied to all or just a few of the murders, and whether or not additional motives could be identified. Five of the nine subjects (**Kate Bender**, **Belle Gunness**, **H.H. Holmes**, **H.D. Landru**, and **G.J. Smith**) were

representatives of that always rare and now almost extinct type of killer, the person who murders a succession of victims of the opposite sex as a mean of making a living. This category has been referred to as the “ladykiller” (Hall, 1974).

Of all the murderers who presumably were motivated by profit, **Marcel Petiot** seems to be the only one who became a rich man doing so, although Belle Gunness might be included too. The two most recent American subjects who attempted to rob in the course of their murders (**Charles Starkweather** and **Charles Manson**) had additional motives for the majority of their murders. A secondary motive in many of these cases was found to be murder for the purpose of eliminating witnesses.

Even in the nine cases of murder for profit, where murder presumably had some advantage, this explanation often broke down upon further reflection. Considering what paltry sums were usually made and how able many of the subjects were, it seemed likely that most could have made at least as much money in ways that did not entail the risks of murder, the constant pressures of detection or of a life on the run. It consequently seemed likely to think that there was something *appealing* about a career of murder to such persons.

The sexual motive is the one most often associated with multiple (or serial) murders, and under the umbrella of the so-called “sex murder” falls all those cases of the male murderers of women (such as **Ted Bundy** or **Ken Bianchi**), the male murderers of boys or men (such as **John Wayne Gacy** or **Dean Corll**), the female murderers of primarily men (such as Bender), and the male murderers of men, women and children (such as Holmes or **Peter Kurten**). In other words, most of the subjects of the study have been referred to as sex murderers, or murderers involved in crimes with a sexual element.

And, indeed, there were, depending upon the criteria involved in the counting, approximately 18 cases (or 67 percent) in which 1 or more of the victims either were, or were believed to have been, sexually assaulted, in which sadism was involved, in which the perpetrator was considered perverted (whether or not this was exhibited in the crimes), and, in the **Juan Corona** and **Wayne Williams** cases, 2 instances in which the murders were still presumed to be (homo-)sexual murders despite the absence of evidence of homosexuality or of sexual assaults upon the victims. While it was obvious that a sexual element was involved in many cases, it was not at all clear what was meant by a “sex crime” or exactly what characterized a sexually motivated murder.

Please stay tuned for the continuation of findings on motives, where these issues will be clarified for your reading pleasure and enlightenment.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [The crimes of serial killers: Link between murderers and victims \(Part 11\)](#)
- [Part 10. Serial killers: The Crimes](#)
- [Part 9. Serial murderers: Major personality characteristics](#)
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