

LIFE / SOCIETY &amp; CULTURE / SOCIAL ISSUES

# Part 3. What are the causes of serial murder?

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The Yorkshire Ripper has been banned from watching a film about his killings  
*12/4/11 Lewis Panther, The People.co.uk*

This article continues the report of research findings on the characteristics of serial murderers (Ritter, 1988). Basically, we want to know whether the life histories of such killers constitute the causes of their crimes. Another important consideration is whether the lives and personalities of the killers dictate how they commit their crimes. This is the fundamental idea behind profiling as practiced by both law enforcement such as the FBI and academics. For profiling to work, we would anticipate the life history to be full of traumas and deprivations the nature of which should correspond to what is done to the victims. Did the mother torment the child in a way that corresponds to what the adult then does to his female victims? Unfortunately for this idea, as we have seen so far, [serial killers](#) experienced few significant traumas at the hands of their mothers.

We see little evidence of low self-esteem as serial killers mature into adults and begin to express

their aspirations. Of the 27 subjects in the study, at least 17 exhibited an aspiration for extraordinary fame or notoriety. This aspiration ranged from a desire to rule the world to the more commonly expressed desire – to be a great criminal. Considering the aspirations of several of the remaining 10 subjects, this is a conservative assessment. Several others expressed a desire for great wealth, social status, and, in some cases, power. Ted Bundy's ambitions, for instance, which encompassed each of these desires, were so less great than John Christie's, but Christie wanted a name for himself. Several of the subjects expressed a desire to better themselves, some by pretense, and some by hard work.

Perhaps the most mundane of the subjects' aspirations was Peter Sutcliffe, the so-called Yorkshire Ripper: he wanted to become a long distance lorry driver (and did). Even here, Sutcliffe believed he could obtain more, that he held some extraordinary power, as the following poem (found in his truck later by the police) disclosed:

In this truck is a man

Whose latent genius if

Unleashed would rock the

Nation, whose dynamic energy

Would overpower those

Around him. Better let him sleep? (Cross, 1981, p. 250).

It has often been reported that serial killers are infatuated with law enforcement and such symbols of authority as police sirens and uniforms. This study did find evidence of this infatuation for a variety of different types of subjects. Viewed in the context of the different subjects, this infatuation seems to mean different things. By no means was it an inevitable response to feelings of inadequacy. Kenneth Bianchi's fascination with law enforcement, for example, was different from Edmund Kemper's. Bianchi sensed a future of greatness for himself, while Kemper was more concerned with genocide (or, killing large numbers of people).

One of the most important patterns found emerged from an assessment of occupation(s) in relation to aspiration(s). Most of the 27 subjects had, or were in the process of, achieving some portion of their expressed objectives at the time they were arrested or began their murders. Even where the aspiration was extraordinary, such as William Heirens' desire to rule the world, and the occupation (in this case, a university student) appeared to be mundane, the gap was not as wide as it seems: Heirens was studying the issue of leadership and his reading focused on the principles of power. In some cases the extraordinary aspiration was accompanied by a

more achievable objective, such as the desire to be involved in law enforcement, and the subjects found work as security guards. In several cases, subjects who were overly ambitious, who wanted great success, might have succeeded legitimately. Kate Bender, for instance, had won some local acclaim as a professor and lecturer, and there were three subjects who were doctors and could presumably have attained some legitimate successes.

Looking solely at the occupations of the subjects, few patterns were found to emerge. Instead, multiple murderers were found to have worked in a number of different types of settings or occupations. These ranged from those who held odd jobs to one who became a doctor – and a mayor. With respect to the belief that mass killers suffer from frustration from their work lives, either because of objective failure such as unemployment or such perceived failure as being underemployed – the following can be noted: the subjects generally did not take their official occupational status too seriously or personally. John George Haigh had a long criminal record but considered himself a “gentleman” criminal and he admired great criminals. Manson, who had spent much of his life in institutions by the time he began to gather his “family,” referred so often to his prison years that he seemed to wear his criminality as a badge of distinction.

The cases of Bianchi and of Heirens were particularly instructive insofar as any relationship between failure and frustration is concerned. Bianchi did not take it personally when he was rejected for a job with the Sheriff’s Department. He blamed the nature of the entrance exam. And when, because of his larceny, he was forced to change jobs repeatedly, he never blamed himself. He blamed his employers for failing to understand his “needs.” Bianchi utilized the world view of psychology to provide himself with explanations and excuses for his own failures and illegalities (O’Brien, 1985).

The author of a psychiatric report on Heirens wrote, under the heading of “Leadership: There is in this young man an immense egocentricity. Despite his continuing failure to rule himself, he has no anxiety, fears or lack of confidence in his abilities and power. . . ‘Am I not the leader of the world?’ . . . “ (Freeman, 1955, p. 314).

What seems to be the case is that serial killers seem to want something different out of life – whether or not it was something extraordinary – and their aspirations were often accompanied by a view of the world with themselves at the center. The person who aspires to great fame or notoriety can, as the subjects of this study did, turn to a career of killing. And all of the subjects of this study can be characterized as career killers; they were conquerors in a challenging field of endeavor. They could torment the populace, the police and their victims, and then go back to being ordinary men and women, their secrets known only to themselves.

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