

Part 6. What are the causes of serial murder?

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Charles Starkweather

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Academics and writers of all sorts pursue an interest in serial **murder**, motivated (in part) by the desire to answer questions like: What is *wrong* with serial murderers? Why do they *need* to kill? This series of articles on causation presents findings from a large research project that described the life histories, personality characteristics and crimes of 27 of the best-documented serial murderers from four Western nations over the past 100 years (Ritter, 1988). As the findings from the life histories demonstrates (Parts 1-3), few traumas or adversities consistently characterize these subjects. The biographical data reveal no sufficient or persistent adverse factors that could be said to cause serial murder.

The personalities of the killers, although not causal, do have more explanatory significance. As indicated in Part 4, these killers do not suffer from any major mental illness, or psychosis, that would diminish their capacity to distinguish right from wrong. Part 5 reported that the two fundamental characteristics of serial murderers are psychopathic personality and a high level of dominance. ("Psychopathic," the term used here, has also been called "sociopathic" and now "antisocial.") And so this condition is currently listed as "antisocial personality disorder" in the psychiatric community's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*. Despite this inclusion, personality disorders are not major mental illnesses. In fact, one of the fundamental features of the disorder is

the absence of any signs of psychosis. Consequently, psychopathy and psychosis should not be confused. Psychopathic personality and dominance, the two findings reported in Part 5, need to be elaborated, and related more specifically to serial murderers. That is the focus of this article, and those that immediately follow it. They review those traits found to best describe serial murderers.

There was a strong and consistent tendency for these killers to *dissemble*, as when Ken Bianchi (Hillside Strangler) "arose from the cradle dissembling" (O'Brien, 1985, p. 89), or Peter Kurten (Dusseldorf Ripper) possessed masterly powers of dissimulation (Wagner, 1933). Dissembling is defined as falsely resembling, simulating, feigning or pretending to be something one is not (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, 1964). Dissembling was found to be both a general character trait and a specific way of behaving. Ted Bundy, for instance, had to pretend to social development he did not actually go through, just as he pretended to be a faithful boyfriend and law-abiding law student. Both [David Berkowitz](#) and Bianchi feigned illnesses as children to be the center of attention, and feigned insanity after their arrests.

Dissimulation helps to explain the observation that multiple or serial murderers often seem so friendly, e.g., they "wouldn't hurt a fly." Norris (1988), whose popular book explains serial murder as a disease, claims that these killers are suppressing anger at their tormenting parents, by becoming automatons. They are good people making heroic efforts to keep their rage from hurting others. Dissimulation explains the good person as pure expedience. In this study, killers who dissembled knew they were playing a role. They often did so in the furtherance of criminal pursuits, and always in the furtherance of their own self-interests. William Heirens, (Lipstick Murderer), articulated the volitional quality of dissembling when he said:

. . . I feel that I have a better understanding of myself than people realize. I had to have, to have been able to carry on my high school and university work and still lead a double life and not show it in my everyday actions and responses (Freeman, 1955, p. 198).

Most of the subjects in the present study were found to be *egocentric*. The definition most relevant here is, "viewing everything in relation to oneself; self-centered" (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, 1964, p.463). The egocentric is characterized by a concern with self rather than with society (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1986). The nature of the egocentrism found here is particularly consistent with Bolitho (1929, p. 7) who wrote that multiple murderers often construct a romantic view of themselves. The secret of their life is "a personal myth in which they are the maltreated hero" Charles Starkweather was an excellent example of the egocentrism that was found.

Starkweather portrayed his early childhood home as idyllic. But, at school, he claimed he suffered the scorn of his classmates, because of traits that he couldn't help (such as his red hair,) and then that he was deprived of all the good things in life. (Actually, his schoolmates tended to overlook even his temper tantrums, and *he* was quite proud of his hair.) He believed that anyone as hated as he was had a right to kill. He even claimed that his murders were acts of self-defense, in this sense: his rationale for killing a stranger (asleep in a car) was that if the stranger had known him (Starkweather), he would have hated him. Starkweather had "constructed a self-illusion, and he made it an object of derision. . . a defensive form of make-believe" (Reinhardt, 1962, p. 104).

Egocentrism is clearly related, then, to the failure to take responsibility for one's actions. Egocentrics can never really be wrong, since their view of themselves is so inflated. When things do go wrong, they usually

blame someone else. Egocentrism (and egotism) were also involved in the inflated view that Starkweather and Charles Schmidt had of themselves, vis-à-vis the world.

Both Starkweather and Schmidt, believing they were people “worth watching,” wove fantasies about Death. They both liked to fantasize that Death was hovering nearby, daring them to take risks. It was a perception of themselves as walking on the edge, or driving in the fast lane. Death was a potent friend who did not take time out for just anybody.

Stay tuned for more findings on personality characteristics, in the next installments of “What are the causes of serial murder?”

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