

## Part 7. What are the causes of serial murder? Major personality characteristics

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In Part 6 we reported on two attributes of [serial killers](#), dissimulation and egocentrism, that help to define the broader characterizations used to describe such killers: psychopathic personality and high dominance. Here we continue to report the attributes found from a careful reading of all the available materials published on the case histories of serial killers.

The *egoism* that characterizes serial killers goes beyond self-centeredness. While the egoist may be as conceited as the egocentric, he may not show it by boasting. The definition relevant here is the articulation of a belief that one's own interests and appetites count more than anything else. Egoism, in ethics, is the "doctrine that self-interest is the proper goal of all human actions: opposed to *altruism*" (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, 1964, p. 463).

Germany's Peter Kurten exemplified the self-indulgent person who could articulate the belief he has the right to do whatever he wanted. (Also see John Collins, Ann Arbor Co-ed Killer, and John Haigh, English Acid-Bath Murderer, below.) One psychiatrist testified that Kurten's "egotistical mania for grandeur" gave him subjectively the "right" to seek relief without regard for harm. Another psychiatrist contended Kurten's experiences with a particular woman and his academic readings combined with his "egotistical megalomania"

to make him a sadist (Wagner, 1933, p.202). Kurten used his time in prison to deliberately immerse himself in killing fantasies, aided by stories of e.g. Jack the Ripper, but when released, he blamed the criminal justice system for his murders. The Attorney-General at his trial, noting that the psychiatrists had all found him to be sane, called Kurten an “unappeasable sadist and egocentric indulger in delusions of grandeur.”

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**“ Kurten’s theory of expiation, by which he sought a victim to appease his wronged sense of justice for evil done to himself, was not a delusion but a creation of his own imagination . . . which he invented consciously to defend his own actions to himself. Nor are his delusions of grandeur . . . a morbid disease. These are important as a motive. Kurten believed he had the right to indulge himself at will at the expense of his victims. The psychiatrically technical expressions . . . [he] used to explain his motives were derived from his readings of Lombroso’s works . . . . Kurten consciously permitted himself full reign (Wagner, 1933, pgs. 202-204).**

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John Collins told a date that he did not believe in the Fifth Commandment, reasoning that

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**“ . . . If a man had to kill, he killed. Whatever someone decided was right for them to do they had to do it. . . . He said: Did she know what the perfect crime was? It was when there was no guilt. Without guilt, there was no crime; and without guilt, there was no way a person could get caught (Keyes, 1978, p. 249).**

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Collins further wrote – in an English paper – that

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***If a person wants something, he alone is the deciding factor of whether or not to take it – regardless of what society thinks may be right or wrong. For example, [if a person likes a piece of jewelry] it is up to him to take it or not, and up to his own intellect if he is to get away with it . . . . It's the same [where one holds a gun] – it's up to him to decide whether to take the other's life . . . . The point is: It's not society's judgment that's important, but the individual's own choice of will and intellect (Keyes, 1978, p. 249).***

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This egotism corresponds to Maslow's (1973) findings on high dominance-feeling as an expression of an incompletely socialized inner personality. Maslow contended that such high dominance persons are apt to recognize few restraints beyond their own desires or set of rules. As Wilson (1984, pgs. 619-620) explained, in the 1960s there were more murderers who could argue intelligently that crime was merely a matter of law and laws need not be obeyed.

Most of the subjects in the study were found to be highly *ambitious*. They exhibited a strong, if sometimes vague, desire to succeed – in a hurry. Those killers who were ambitious wanted, at least, wealth, power and status. While some were willing to work hard, many preferred not to wait or work for success that *might* come eventually and legitimately. These killers often found legitimate work boring, whereas crime offered a challenge and short cut. Aside from philosophical justification, few subjects cared whether their means were right or wrong by social standards. Haigh articulated this position, as well as egoism:

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***To find the reason for anti-social conduct involves consideration of the question of right or wrong. What the world regards as right is what the world can get away with. And if the aim can be achieved without discovery it is called "Success" whatever the purpose might be. Condemnation is the consequence of failure, not the sanction of the wrong.***

***When I first discovered there were easier ways to make a living than to work long hours in an office, I did not ask myself whether I was doing right or wrong.***

***This seemed to be irrelevant. I merely said, ‘This is what I wish to do.’ And as the means lay within my power that was what I decided (Lefebure, 1958, p. 54).***

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Ambition is part of a complex set of characteristics, desires or motivating factors. Haigh wanted, on one level, to have money, excitement and an easy life; and, on another level, the fame of being a “great” criminal. With his capabilities, he might have succeeded at legitimate endeavors or nonviolent crimes – had he put forth the effort he did for his murders. That he chose **murder** puts “ambitiousness” in a slightly different light.

*This discussion of personality will be continued in the next articles on serial murder causes.*

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