

## Part 8. What are the causes of serial murder? Major personality characteristics

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Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, Moors Murderers  
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In this article, we continue identifying the major personality traits found in a cross-national, historical study of 27 multiple murderers (Ritter, 1988)

To summarize, high dominance-feeling and psychopathic personality are the two fundamental characteristics of serial murderers. Expanding upon these fundamentals, we have noted additional traits – a tendency toward dissembling, egocentrism, egoism and ambitiousness. Now, moving on to new findings, *ambitiousness and greed* appear to be related, although not in all cases. Several killers were described as willing to do anything for money. Belle Gunness was said to be “money mad” but not “crazy.” Above all, she was an “entrepreneur. As such, she was intelligent, original, energetic, persistent, ambitious, [and] thoroughly American. . . . She was a sort of female Henri Landru [the famous French ladykiller]” (Jones, 1980, p. 137). Ted Bundy’s greed was more subtle, even though his emotions seemed to be grounded in greed and materialism. He was a snob from the time he was a small child: he was aware of money and status and liked to think of himself as royalty mistakenly placed in a lower middle-class home.

It was found that often the greediest of subjects – e.g. Kate Bender, Gunness, H.H. Holmes, George Haigh, Landru, Marcel Petiot, George Joseph Smith – took needless risks and failed to channel their energies into amassing great wealth. Petiot was cited (Hall, 1974) as an example of the true greed criminal. On the other hand, he had a history of committing the most absurd kinds of thefts, and, despite his considerable talents and status as a doctor and as a mayor, he preferred **murder** to talent when it came to enriching himself.

*Ambition and dominance* (a will to power or an “urge for primacy”) also appeared to be related. Petiot was

used by Gaute and Odell (1984, p. 137) to illustrate dominance theory. In the following, Petiot implies that wealth was a means rather than an end in itself. "To succeed in life, Petiot said, "one must have a fortune or a powerful position. One must want to dominate those who might cause one problems and impose one's will on them." Ambition-as-dominance helps to explain Kenneth Bianchi's sense of ill-defined greatness, John Christie's stated ambition: to be somebody, and Charles Starkweather's spoilt-child reaction when his ambition for the good things in life did not immediately spring forth for him.

The craving for dominance appeared to be a more fundamental aspect of ambition than greed, for one of two reasons. It was found that the subjects either had (1) goals which were too ill-defined or unobtainable (such as, respectively, the desire for "greatness" or to rule the world) to be explained by greed alone, or (2) had met or could have met their stated occupational objectives but were striving for something more.

Multiple murderers were, in general, possessed of the feeling that they were *different*. This feeling was occasionally articulated, as when Haigh said he knew he was different or Charles Schmid and Starkweather felt they were on the outside looking in. With such subjects as Williams Heirens and Bundy, the feeling of being different led to an awareness of the need for a plausible, public persona. Further, the processes by which perverse fantasies, fed by environmental suggestions, were eventually followed by violent actions were recognized by both Heirens and Bundy. That is, essentially, each approached crime and the matter of self control much in the manner of a game, and were, consequently, acutely aware that they were playing.

The manifestation of the feeling of difference may be expressed in a view that social laws have no meaning, as when Schmid indicated that rules and regulations did not really exist for him. Charlie Manson (Emmons, 1986, p. 206) acknowledged that he was without conscience or remorse by the time of the murders when he said that, "A normal person would find the details of the [August 8, 1969] night's events [at Tate's house] shocking and horrifying, but I had long ago stopped measuring myself by society's standards."

The subjective feeling of being different in an intelligent individual may lead, as it did in the present study, to a great deal of philosophizing. It was found that the subjects were fairly articulate and that they tended to present an intellectualized view of the world which served as a rationalization for their own actions and/or a substitute for emotions. David Berkowitz ("Son of Sam – Pen Pals," 1980) illustrated this point when he told the press that it was often pretty hard to feel any guilt over his victims since the media wanted only to explore his crimes, making them seem exciting, and the victims unimportant – except as the objects of those crimes. He also claimed that there would always be killers like him since anyone who wanted recognition was guaranteed publicity by committing murder(s).

There was also a convergence found between the susceptible (perhaps the suggestible) personality and preexisting philosophies. Ian Brady and William Heirens both felt superior (and were not deeply tied to anyone). Each was drawn to the world view of the Nazis.

Bundy, speaking in the third person (Michaud & Aynesworth, 1984, pp. 104-105), reflected that ". . . he got sucked into the more sinister doctrines that are implicit in pornography – the use, abuse, possession of women as objects."

By high school, Bundy said he realized that he was different and that he had little understanding of social relationships. However, when he was asked by Michaud and Aynesworth (1984, p. 104) to speculate about

“the murderer,” Bundy “began his story with a preamble of operatic sweep and dimension,” from which the feeling of superiority could be discerned.

"Much of [the preamble] was sociological twaddle, comments on the dissolution of society and the fracturing of the nuclear family, or historical ruminations. It was a picture of the world as he saw it. . . . The other important ingredient, said Ted, was a flaw, a congenital predisposition [which he called his ‘entity’], that was exploited by his environment."

When Bundy went on to explain the development of the psychopath, he was doing what others had done: that is, he was tracing an evolution from the feeling of difference, through the loosening of all social bonds, to the development of full-blown remorselessness.

*For more on the characteristics of serial murderers, stay tuned to “Part 9. What are the causes of serial murderers?”*

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