

LIFE / SOCIETY & CULTURE / by **Barrie Ritter, Ph.D.**

Part 9. Serial murderers: Major personality characteristics

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Ted Bundy eyes only

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The critical issue with serial murderers is that they kill. If there is such a thing as their “essence,” it lies in their personality traits. In “**Part 8. What are the causes of serial murder?**” we added ambitiousness and greed, ambition and dominance, and the feeling of being different to the other major factors in the personalities of these killers. These were discussed in **Part 5, Part 6,** and **Part 7.** Here, we conclude the section on personalities with the additional traits reported in a study by **Ritter, 1988.**

Serial killers are more apt to present a superior – rather than inferior—posture to the world. It is true that the feeling of being different can include a sense of insecurity. In time, however, this

difference can become exaggerated. In many of the cases studied, it was nurtured by having been dwelt upon, philosophized about and examined in great detail. This exaggeration was due to the highly egocentric and egoistic nature of the multiple murderers studied. One could argue that **Ted Bundy** became engrossed with the killer part of himself he called “the entity,” that **Peter Kurten** came to enjoy and nurture an originally small or nonfatal perversity, and that **William Heirens** invented his multiple personality “George” to account to himself and to authorities for his own actions without ever having to stop them. **Charles Starkweather** and, particularly, **Charles Manson**, dwelt upon their experiences as a bum or downtrodden criminal, but that was only because the heights to which they rose were then made to seem all the higher, and the past all the more romantic or even heroic.

These are the clues that indicated this superior posture toward the world: (a) the killers were often described as arrogant, cynical, shrewd, scornful, prideful or appraising. The word “supercilious” was invariably associated with **John George Haigh**, for example. (b) Multiple murderers were found to like challenges; many took up crime just to see if they could get away with it. Here, the individual manifested a belief in himself and a simultaneous disdain relative to the rest of the world. (c) It was common for the individuals of the study to manipulate or use others to get what they wanted. Simply having the presence of mind to use others to one’s own ends is indicative of a feeling of general capability, a trust in self, and a feeling that one is superior to others.

Many serial killers appeared to have a low tolerance for monotony and boredom. While often fearless in behavior, they had an apprehensiveness about boredom.

Underlying many of the preceding findings is the idea of a person who did not obey the rules and did not feel a part of the society. Some complimentary findings include that they (a) never felt bound to exercise self-restraint and (b) had few emotional ties to bind them.

And lastly, some serial killers had explosive tempers. **John Collins’** eyes were particularly indicative of his inner state. According to observers, he could appear to be unmoved – except for telltale changes in his eyes. His eyes were described as blue, sometimes icy, but when angry, they seemed to turn darker (**Keyes, 1978**). The same phenomenon occurred with Bundy. As a child who kept himself aloof, he was also known to have a short fuse. One friend recalled:

***It was really easy to see when Ted got mad.
His eyes turned just about black. I suppose***



that sounds like something out of a cheap novel, but you could see it. He has blue eyes that are kind of flecked with darker colors. When he gets hot, they seem to get less blue and more dark. . . .Someone [need only] say something, and. . . . the dark flecks seemed to expand (Michaud & Aynesworth, 1984, p. 51).

Their eyes turn black when they are angry. The implications of this is not fully understood.

Stay tuned. In the next article in the series, we begin to examine the crimes.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- **Part 8. What are the causes of serial murder? Major personality characteristics**
- **Part 7. What are the causes of serial murder? Major personality characteristics**
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