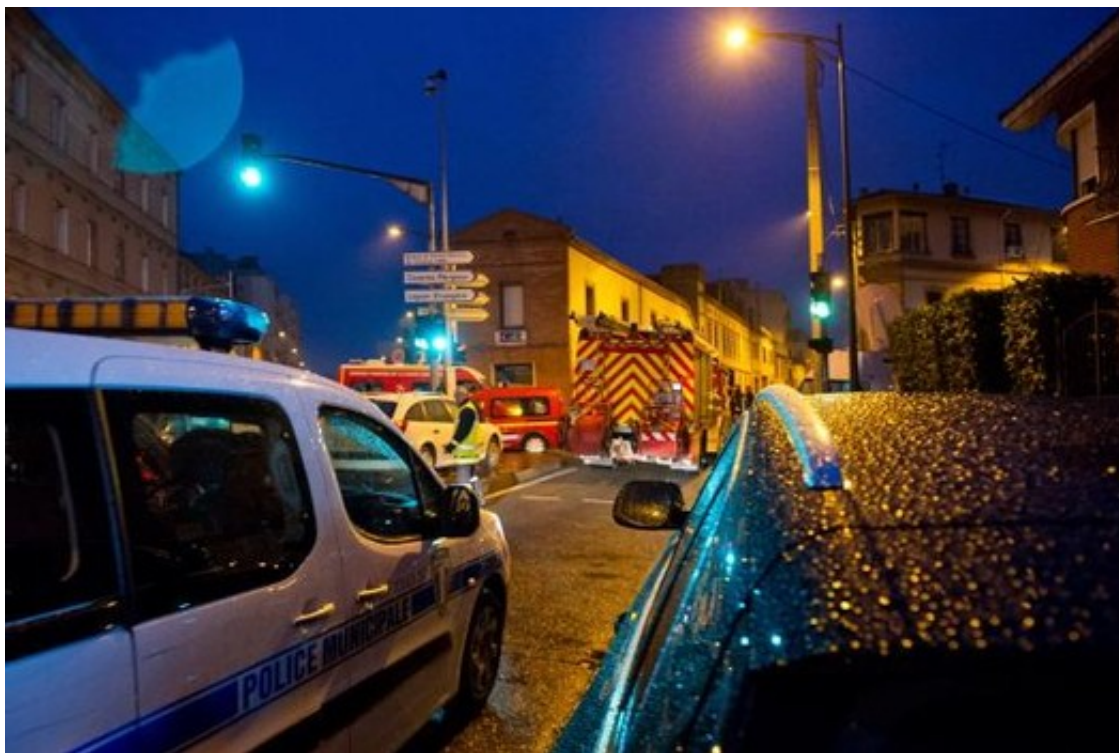


LIFE / SOCIETY & CULTURE / SOCIAL ISSUES

The crimes of serial killers: Motives, continued (Part 13)

Barrie J. Ritter, Ph.D.© 2016



Toulouse France, 3-21-12 Police seal off road to arrest suspect in 7 killings

Getty Image

As we noted in the previous article, the motive most often associated with serial **murder** is sex. The findings of this study indicated, however, that there are three types of sex-related murder series which are probably not sexually motivated: (1) murder series with a sexual overtone, such as **Wayne Williams** in Atlanta; (2) murder series with a sexual element, that is, murders in which one or more victims were sexually assaulted and/or injured in the genital area before, during or after death; and (3) murder series in which the sexual assault is consistent and obvious to investigators. It could be argued that, in regard to the latter, even such so-called “sex killers” as **Albert DeSalvo** and **Ed Kemper** may not have been motivated by sex alone.

The sexually active DeSalvo admitted that sex played a part in his stranglings, but he did not believe this was the only reason, or particularly, that it was a sufficient reason, for his victims to die. According to him, there was no motive, or none that he could use to account to himself for his crimes. Kemper had had no normal sex life. Yet his so-called sex murders involved little sex: he ejaculated only once. While Kemper said that the sexual excitement was the thrill, he went on to explain that in some ways the crimes actually replaced the sex drive. Where DeSalvo felt anger at himself for his murders, Kemper exalted over his. If DeSalvo and Kemper were sex killers (as Lunde, 1976, described them), it seems likely that: (1) sex would have played a greater part in the murders themselves; (2) these men would not be so completely different in their sexual histories and adult sex lives; and (3) they might have committed somewhat similar crimes.

Crimes with a sexual element, whether the sexual assault occurred once (as with **Charles Starkweather**), more than once, or almost always, are not, by any means, crimes that are motivated by sex alone. This point was illustrated by **Roy Norris, who, with Lawrence Bittaker**, tortured, raped and murdered five girls in 1979. As Norris admitted, “the rape wasn’t the important part, it was the dominance” (Levin and Fox, 1985, p. 68).

Norris was making a fundamental point, for, as Storr (1975) explained, human cruelty is not really a sexual phenomenon. Storr reported that, independent of each other, Maslow and Russell both concluded in the 1950s that much of what seemed to be sexual behavior in humans and primates was not what it appeared to be, but was, rather

“ . . . concerned much more with aggression, status, dominance, and related concepts than with sensual pleasure or with sexual satisfaction. Both Professor Maslow and Mrs. Russell refer to the behavior they are describing as ‘pseudo-sex.’

One of the remarkable features of behavior which has been repeatedly observed in different species. . . . is that behavior patterns which are clearly sexual in their original intention are not used for sexual purposes,

but to indicate or to establish dominance relationships (Storr, 1975, pgs. 52-53).

Storr (1975) pointed to another reason to believe that the sex of a sex crime is really a pseudo-sexual activity more concerned with power than pleasure: Repeated observations of human and primate behavior disclosed a tendency for extensive, even indiscriminate, sexual activities to occur after a time of shock or threatened survival, and, further, that such sex served as both a diversion and a reassurance. Certainly the act of murder is a **high stress situation**.

Wilson (1984, pg. 611) argued that the rise in sex crimes can be traced to the combination of two factors – “man’s violent reaction to boredom, and his sexual response to any survival problem. . . .” What this means is that Wilson's “high IQ killer” (Wilson and Seaman, 1983) is a thinking man with too much time to brood and a low “violence threshold” for boredom. He tends to be motivated by a vague sense of resentment against society, a desire for adventure, and a need to eliminate boredom in a manner that heightens and assures his sense of primacy. Wilson saw recent sex murders as expressions of a passionate ego assertion, rather than of desire.

The questions that remain to be answered are, what characterizes a murder that *is* sexually motivated, and what cases in the present study can be so categorized? The findings indicate that murders that are sexually motivated seem to involve particularly sadistic killers who enjoy the killing because of the sex.

Dean Corll was the best example of the sexually motivated murderer, for his motivation was simply to have “his fun,” as he put it. He was uninterested in the “hunt” or in outwitting police. Corll’s fun was in having a helpless victim so that he could do whatever he wanted to him. **John Wayne Gacy**, who copied Corll’s use of a torture board, was another example, although he had rationalizations that indicated other motives. **Peter Kurten** was a sexually motivated murderer who allowed himself the right to indulge himself at his victim’s expense. **John Christie’s** primary motivation was sexual and the same can be said of Thomas Cream.

In summary, a majority of multiple murderers committed crimes with some sexual element, although sex was not a primary characteristic in the sense of a motive.

Perhaps the most basic finding in regard to motivation was that, for almost all of the subjects, murder was a volitional act, a positive declaration or affirmation, a statement which said, “I was here.” Multiple murder is perceived as an alternative to boredom and obscurity, and it proceeds from a spirit of adventure, a desire to get away with something, and a love of challenges and

thrills. It is sustained by rationalizations, by being in a position of power with respect to the police, by being the center of media attention and public fear, and by the resultant notoriety. In the end, the motives for this type of crime are about as significant as the motives for choosing a career or a hobby or sport, for that is the spirit in which most subjects pursued their murders.

In the next article, we will take up the issue of victim-types, that is, whether [serial killers](#) select victims who are similar.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- **The crimes of serial killers: Motives (Part 12)**
- **The crimes of serial killers: Link between murderers and victims (Part 11)**
- **Part 10. Serial killers: The Crimes**
- **Part 9. Serial murderers: Their eyes change color: Bundy and Collins**
- **Part 8. Major personality characteristics: Superman Philosophy and Ordinary Greed**



Barrie Ritter

Crime & Justice Examiner