

The crimes of serial killers: Are there victim-types? (Part 14)

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Serial killers are presumed to select victims who look similar or share similar lifestyles, habits or occupations. This presumption has multiple, and major, implications for our ability to apprehend or even account for the killer's actions. The more the victims look alike, the more they are viewed in psychoanalytic terms, as symbolic representatives of someone who hurt the killer, either as a child or adult. The more readily the victims can be categorized as, say, prostitutes or drug addicts, the less they mean to us as human beings. In both cases, the victims become slightly less innocent and more culpable in the process of grouping them together. *The more they are categorized, the less they become like us.* Random victims, on the other hand, are innocent victims and any of *them* may resemble *us*.

In general, the belief that multiple murderers methodically choose victim-types is a reflection of the more fundamental assumption that they kill because they have been hurt and need to avenge themselves, or have failed and need to feel powerful. (The more general categories of victim-types cited in the literature include women, children, the elderly, homeless, as well as prostitutes.) The findings of the present study (Ritter, 1988) did not support the pervasive belief in the existence of types. In not a single case out of a total of 27 were the victims so strikingly similar in both appearance and lifestyles or occupations that differences were hard to

detect.

This was true even for the **Ted Bundy** case, where the victims were not nearly as similar as Ann Rule (U.S. Congress, 1984, p. 15) claimed when she said Bundy looked for “slim, pretty young women with long dark hair parted in the middle.” Most, but not all, of his victims were young, white college co-eds. What is rarely mentioned is the fact that most co-eds of the 1970s wore their hair long and parted in the middle. This description is about as distinctive as it would be if one were to describe male victims of a killer of the 1950s as wearing their hair short. Further, when Bundy was asked whether his victims shared some detectable vulnerability, he responded that this was *not* the case, that selection was all a matter of opportunity.

A similar situation developed with New York’s “Son of Sam.” Both during and subsequent to the murders, much was made of the symbolic significance of the victim-type and the relationship of this to the killer’s “real” motives. During the murders, careful attention was paid to the subtle signs and characteristics of each victim, for these were the “stimuli” that would lead to the killer. Or as Dr. Emanuel Hammer, a leading forensic psychologist and former director of the Psychological Section of New York County Criminal Court put it: “The common denominator is that the victim must be a symbolic representation very vital and important to the killer’s life” (Carpozi, Jr., 1977, p. 246).

Such stimuli could be something as obvious as hair length and color. It remains a widely held belief that the victims almost all had long, dark hair. They did not. Under interrogation by police, **David Berkowitz** was asked whether he was attracted to girls with this description. The question provoked laughter from the suspect, who responded that, “Hair had nothing to do with what I did” (Carpozi, Jr., 1977, p. 299). Indeed, it is improbable, if not impossible, for hair or any other such stimulus to have been the trigger for the killings: Berkowitz usually struck at night at victims he could barely see, particularly when they were inside their cars. And, as we will see in the next article, Berkowitz could not possibly have stalked his victims.

Out of 27 cases, 20 (or 74 percent), could not be categorized as involving the selection of a victim-type. In the other 7 cases, the similarities among the victims outweighed the differences, and, together with the stated or implied intent of the killer, the similarities constituted the selection of a victim-type. Two such cases (**Dean Corll** and **John Wayne Gacy**) involved the explicit desire on the part of the killer for victims who were young, white and male.

The **Juan Corona** and **Wayne Williams** cases also involved almost all male victims, from two different but equally vulnerable populations. These were, respectively, middle-aged, itinerant farm workers, homeless, drinkers and white with two exceptions; and, in the Williams case, poor blacks who ranged from children to adults – but included two females. Other than a possible bigotry motive, there is still no explanation as to why the killers selected their victims, if indeed there was such a selection.

The remaining three cases (**Charles Schmid**, **George Smith** and **Henri Landru**) involved, with one exception, female victims. Schmid killed young white girls whom he knew; they were different and he had differing reasons for killing them. The latter two cases were “ladykillers,” and with such “killers for profit, women victims were necessary with the marriage-proposal gambits of Smith and Landru” (Dickson, 1958, p. 207).

In addition to the finding that the majority of multiple murders involved relatively diverse victims, it was found that such victims could not readily be categorized. The victims were not women who possessed some

symbolic or psychological significance to the killer, for in 18 out of 27 cases, or 67 percent, anywhere from 1 to all the victims were male. And these males were not found to be primarily the very old or very young. Even the so-called Atlanta “child killings” included adults who were bigger and stronger than Williams – who was convicted for the killing of two adults. Many of the victims of the two female murderers, **Kate Bender** and **Belle Gunness**, were men who were strong, healthy and relatively young.

Rarely could all the victims fit into a category such as prostitutes, homosexuals or transients – because the victims were not all weak and/or vulnerable people, separate from everyone else and possessing some psychological significance in and of themselves.

In the next article, we explore the methods used by serial murderers to obtain their victims.

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