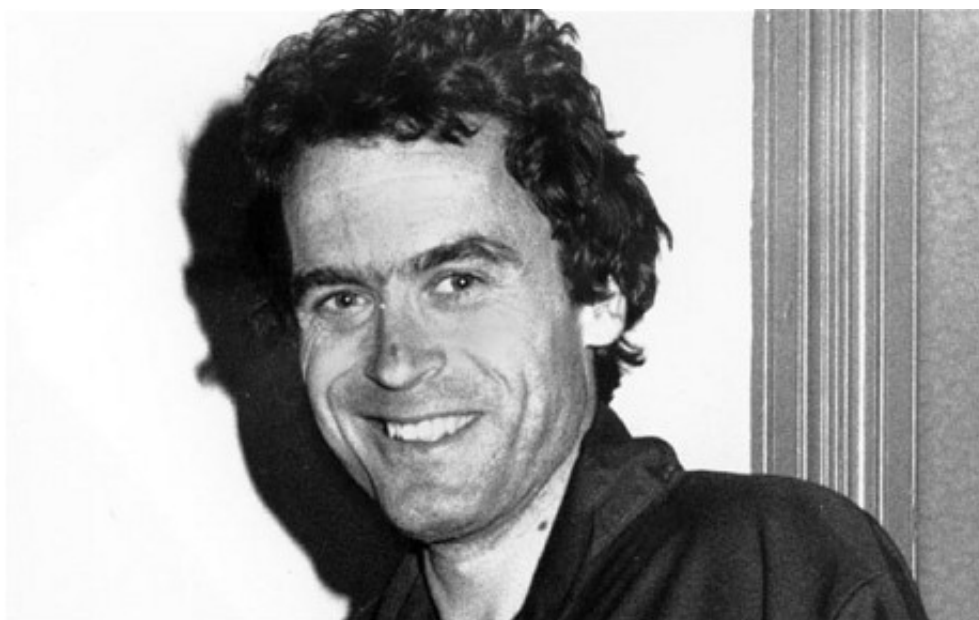


LIFE / SOCIETY & CULTURE / SOCIAL ISSUES

Part 2. What are the causes of serial murder? School, Social Life, and Role Models

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Here we continue the findings of research (Ritter, 1988) begun in the first article. When we last met serial murderers they were preparing to enter elementary school. What shape were they in as they prepared to go to school? To find out, every theory, such as the idea that, as children, serial murderers were rejected so severely that they experienced sensory and/or emotional deprivation, were subjected to tests of adequacy and validity. This was accomplished by bringing all the facts of the 27 cases studied to bear on the given thesis. But none of the purported deprivations or brutalities of childhood were supported by the facts of multiple cases. On the contrary, as with the psychopaths about whom Cleckley reported in *Mask of Sanity* (1982, p. 254), a large proportion of multiple murderers show “backgrounds that appear conducive to happy development and excellent adjustment.”

A somewhat surprising finding about the elementary school years was that 37 percent of the subjects received at least some religious training, and this was as likely to be found among the twentieth as the nineteenth century subjects. The main finding with respect to high school patterns comes from a longitudinal assessment – what happened to the subjects by the time they were in high school? With few exceptions, the subjects tended to “bloom” in school, or to make a better adjustment, or to do as well, if not better, academically as they had in elementary school. Of the 21 subjects who began high school, 63 percent completed some college.

The social life and background of serial murderers reveals that few are loners. None of the subjects studied were found to avoid all social interactions; nor were any of the subjects always avoided by others. The extent of social interactions that a given subject had is nothing more than what might be called the “popularity” of the subject. This simply means that John Collins, for example, had a broad spectrum of social interactions because he was well liked by a number of different kinds of people, from the adults of the community to the fraternity kids to kids on the fringes of crime. What is perhaps less obvious was that the majority of subjects studied tended to find approval to the extent that they extended themselves. For example, Ian Brady did not often extend himself, but when he did he was admired. He was the leader. With respect to the meaning others had for the subjects, one finding that emerged from the data was that the subjects often felt at odds with the world. This feeling was discerned among subjects whose social lives were very different: Charles Schmid, for instance, impressed adults, girls and some of his male peers who considered him a leader. On the other hand, Charles Starkweather was loved by his family and had a few friends in high school, but experienced little social success in the interim. And yet, much the same feeling was expressed when Schmid said that he was never a part of the world that others or God had created, and when Starkweather said he had never been able to find his own personal world.

Among the views on the sexual history of multiple murderers is the contention that such murderers rarely have any experiences of normal sexual intercourse. The findings indicate, however, that the sexual histories are far more diverse, and, individually, more complex than any single view would indicate. For instance, 7 of the 27 subjects began their sex lives early, by the time they were 13. Two of these (Ed Kemper and William Heirens) had perverse sexual histories, but few, if any, experiences of normal sexuality. On the other hand, little is known about the sex lives of two relatively recent subjects (David Berkowitz and Wayne Williams), and it is possible that these two had few sexual experiences.

Only two of the serial killers had personal role models, in both cases, a family member. A second type of role model is the real but remote person or group that exercises some influence or serves as a source of inspiration for the subject. Seven of the 27 subjects were found to have exhibited an interest in specific criminals. In all but one cases, the subjects were interested in a

particular murderer. In two cases, the model was Jack the Ripper. Three subjects were interested in Hitler and the Nazis. Additional readings among these subjects included the writings of the Marquis de Sade, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Spinoza.

Stay tuned for the continuation of these findings.

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