

The social study of serial killers

Kevin Haggerty and Ariane Ellerbrok
examine the cultural and historical context
of serial killing

The study of serial killers has been dominated by an individualised focus on studying the biography of offenders and the causes of their behaviour. Popular representations of Jeffrey Dahmer, Harold Shipman, John Wayne Gacy and other notorious figures emphasise the sociopathic tendencies of the lone serial killer, presented in accounts that accentuate how assorted personality traits and risk factors ostensibly contribute to their otherwise unfathomable behaviour. While this emphasis on personal biography lends itself to much needed psychological analysis, the cumulative effect of such accounts is that serial killing can appear a-historical and a-cultural, as though such predispositions might manifest themselves in identical ways irrespective of context.

In fact, serial killing is intimately tied to its broader social and historical setting, something that is particularly apparent when such killing is considered in relation to a series of broad historical changes that have occurred over approximately the past 400–500 years, commonly associated with the rise of modernity. So, while throughout human history there have probably always been individuals who engaged in serial predation, in previous eras it was not possible for an individual to be a serial killer. Serial killing is a distinctly modern phenomenon, a product of relatively recent social and cultural conditions to which criminologists can provide fresh insight by accentuating the broad institutional frameworks, motivations, and opportunity structures within which serial killing occurs (Haggerty, 2009).

Serial killing is the rarest form of homicide, occurring when an individual has killed three or more people who were previously unknown to him or her, with a ‘cooling off’ period between each murder. This definition is accepted by both police and academic experts and therefore provides a useful frame of reference. Unfortunately, it also narrows the analysis of such crimes, as it fails to incorporate many of the familiar (although not inevitable) characteristics of serial killing. These include such things as the diverse influences of the mass media on serial killers as well as their tendency to select victims from particular walks of life. Attending to these (and other) factors can provide insight into the broader social and historical contexts that constitute the structural preconditions for such acts.

Here we briefly identify three aspects of serial killing that are often taken for granted, but that are intimately tied to the emergence of serial murder in its contemporary guise. These include the rise of a society of strangers, the development of a culture of celebrity, and cultural frameworks of denigration and marginalisation.

Society of strangers

Mass urbanisation is a distinctive characteristic of the modern era, something that has profoundly altered the nature of human relationships by virtue of generating an unprecedented degree of anonymity. In pre-modern societies individuals knew one another by name, often having intimate knowledge of their neighbour’s family history, daily routines and personal predilections. Strangers were rarely encountered, and when

encountered were the subject of rumour and suspicion. The average medieval citizen might have only met 100 strangers during the course of their entire life (Brady, 1986), a number markedly low by contemporary standards, where one could confront hundreds of strangers simply on the daily commute to work.

The rise of capitalism and related processes of mass migration to urban centres resulted in individuals being immersed in a sea of strangers (Nock, 1993). This development also proved to be a key precondition for the emergence of serial murder, given that a defining attribute of serial killers is that they prey on strangers (something that distinguishes them from the vast majority of homicides, which typically involve some form of prior relationship between killer and victim). Thus dense modern urban environments represent ideal settings for the routinised impersonal encounters that operate as a hallmark of serial killing.

Mass media and the culture of celebrity

Although serial killing is statistically rare, it is nonetheless a ubiquitous cultural phenomena, one that for the vast majority of people is best understood as a media event (Gibson, 2006). Serial killers have become an inescapable point of reference in movies, television fiction, novels, true crime books and video games. This global system of mass media – again, a characteristic attribute of modernity – has made many citizens intimately familiar with the dynamics of serial killing and the lives of particularly notorious offenders.

The relationship between media and serial killing is, however, not straightforward. By widely circulating the details of specific serial killers, the mass media establishes the ‘serial killer’ as a dominant cultural category. One upshot is that, whereas in antiquity killing sequentially may have been something that someone *did*, today a serial killer is something someone can *be*. By placing the category of ‘serial killer’ into wide circulation, the media makes the specifics of



drawn from modernity's disposable classes can also mean that these victims are outside of effective systems of guardianship, and are targeted not only because they are more accessible, but also because their deaths are less likely to generate timely investigation or legal consequences.

Modern phenomena

While serial killing is routinely presented as the unfathomable behaviour of the lone, decontextualised and sociopathic individual, here we have emphasised the unnervingly familiar *modern* face of serial killing. Several distinctively modern phenomena, including anonymity, a culture of celebrity enabled through the rise of mass media, and specific cultural frameworks of denigration, each provide key institutional frameworks, motivations and opportunity structures for analysing such acts. To exclusively focus on aetiology and offender biography systematically ignores this larger social context, and elides a more nuanced understanding of the hows and whys of serial killing. ■

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such behaviour open to potential imitation, although this is not to suggest that serial killing might be the product of some straightforward 'media effect'.

The media has also fostered a culture of celebrity. In our predominantly secular modernity the prospect of achieving celebrity has become desirable to the extent that it promises to liberate individuals from a powerless anonymity, making them known beyond the limitations of ascribed statuses such as class and family relations. For some this promise of celebrity is merely appealing, while for others it is an all-consuming passion, to the point that not securing some degree of fame can be experienced as a profound failure. Serial killers are not immune to the appeals of celebrity. As Egger (2002) has demonstrated in his analysis of seven of the most notorious American serial killers, the majority 'seemed to enjoy their celebrity status and thrive on the attention they received'. Hence the complaint of a serial killer to local police is telling: 'How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention?' (Braudy, 1986).

Marginalisation

Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of serial murder is that such killings appear random. This, however, is a misleading characterisation, for while serial killers do target strangers, their victims are not haphazard (Wilson, 2007). Rather, the victims of serial killers tend to mimic the wider cultural categories of denigration

characteristic of contemporary society. All societies have their own distinctive structures of symbolic denigration, whereby certain classes of people are positioned as outcasts or 'lesser' humans. Such individuals, often singled out by modern institutions for reprobation, censure and marginalisation, are also disproportionately the targets of serial killers, who tend to prey upon vagrants, the homeless, prostitutes, migrant workers, homosexuals, children, the elderly and hospital patients (ibid.). Gerald Stano likened the killing of his victims to 'no different than stepping on a cockroach' (Holmes and DeBurger, 1998). Such a statement keenly demonstrates the extent to which serial killers embrace and reproduce the wider cultural codings that have devalued, stigmatised and marginalised specific groups. Through a distorted mirror, serial killers reflect back, and act upon, modernity's distinctive valuations.

Recognising the dynamics of victim marginalisation is particularly germane to the study of serial killers, for the denigration of particular social groups is connected to specific opportunity structures for murder. Criminologists have emphasised the importance of 'opportunity structures' as a means of ascertaining the increased likelihood of criminal behaviour in certain contexts – noting that crime is more likely to occur when there is a combination of a possible victim accessible to predation, a motivated offender, and a lack of competent guardians. That the victims of serial killers tend to be