

Serial Murder: An Exploration and Evaluation of Theories and Perspectives

Ju-Lak Lee

Kyonggi University
Iui-dong
Yeongtong-gu, Suwon,
Gyeonggi, Korea, 443-760

Kwan Choi

Hansei University
Dangjung-dong
Gunpo
Gyeonggi, Korea, 435-742

Abstract

The phenomenon of serial murder has always received substantial attention from both the public and the media. Despite the high level of interest, very little is known about the serial killers and few theoretical explanations have been offered by academia. Especially, definition of the crime, its analysis, and the valid explanations for offenders' behaviours must be explored at a deeper level. The present study has sought to offer various theories of violent and aggressive behaviour, and apply such concepts to the explanation and evaluation of serial murder. Perhaps it is inappropriate to single out a theory or a perspective as the sole answer and suggest that it is superior compared to the alternatives. In fact, a better way to explain serial murder would be through some sort of an integrated approach, with elements from all three key academic stances; biological, psychological, and sociological approaches to analyse and explain both behaviour and personality of serial killers. This is a bid to apply the existing theories of violence, hostility, aggression, and criminality in general, to the incidents of serial murder. In an attempt to evaluate the related theories, similarities among and treatments and solutions for the murderers are drawn upon. The paper is written with a basis upon existing literature, combined with web sources and secondary documents.

Key Words: Serial Murder, Exploration, Evaluation of Theories, Perspectives, Solution and Treatment

1. Introduction

The present paper shall enquire into serial murder. It shall evaluate and explore the theories behind the phenomena, and consequently offer solutions. The reason behind this choice of topic is not just personal interest, although this plays a large part, but it is the issue of "true crime trade books, which looked at the individual murderers and offered, 'pop' explanations for the causative factors of serial murders ... but there was no scientific examination of the serial murder epidemic" (Heydari et al., 2008, p.152). It shall try to give a more academic slant, on a subject that is often represented in a distorted and sensationalised manner through 'mainstream' literature.

An attempt shall be made to try and define serial murder. There is no singular definition due to it being such a broad subject area. This is made apparent when looking at existing literature, as different authors tend to approach serial murder from slightly different angles. Definitions tend to vary in terms of the sex of the murderer, the number of people killed, the motivational factors behind the murder and so forth.

The definition is yet again rather restricted. It specifies an age range and yet again focuses upon gender, with the murderers being male and victims female. For the purpose of this paper, a broad definition developed by Keppel and Birnes (2003) shall be used; the definition includes any offenders, male or female, who kill over time. Most scholars agree that serial murderers have a minimum of three to four victims. Generally, there is a pattern in their killing that can be associated with the types of victims selected or the method of motives for the killing.

This includes murders who, on a repeated basis, kill within the confines of their own home, such as a woman who poisons husbands, children or elderly people in order to collect their insurance. The definition goes on to say that it includes murderers, who are both geographically stable and transient, as well as there being an existing relationship between the victim and murderer, but also no previous relationship is possible (stranger to stranger). Lastly, the definition notes how the motivation can be for both pleasure and material gain.

The reason for choosing such a broad classification is due to the examples of serial murderers used throughout this research, corresponding well with such a definition. Also, perhaps it should be pointed out that using a definition which sees the serial murderer as male, his motivations as sexual, and so forth, as being rather restrictive upon this paper. It would be more beneficial to have a broad definition, thus having a wider scope for discussion. Note that biology, psychology, and sociology do not offer direct explanations of serial murder as such; instead theories of aggression and violence shall be drawn upon, and in turn applied to serial murder.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Biological Approaches

There are various biological explanations for serial murder. Firstly, it shall first look into chromosomal abnormalities, specifically the condition of having an extra Y chromosome (XYY), and trying to link this with criminal behaviour. Secondly, head trauma is discussed in terms of whether it can result in aggressive and violent actions. Third, biochemical explanations are explored, considering whether an imbalance in hormones, blood sugar or serotonin can have an effect upon our aggressive and violent tendencies (Heydari et al., 2008). However, this sub-section takes into consideration the foundations of this perspective lie within the work of Cesare Lombroso. For instance, in what is perhaps considered to be Lombroso's most talked about work, he argues, criminals represent a physical type distinct from non-criminals. Said to represent a form of degeneracy apparent in physical characteristics suggestive of earlier forms of evolutionary life, they are atavistic, throwbacks to earlier forms of evolutionary life. Heydari et al. (2008) notes what Lombroso sees as distinctive criminal features: (a) Asymmetry of the face; (b) Unusual sized ears, sometimes standing out/small in size; (c) Unusual nose shape e.g. twisted / flattened. Murderers are noted to have a beak like nose (d) Protruding lips.

There are a number of criticisms that have been directed at Lombroso's work. To Lombroso, women are virtually invisible within the criminal world. He views only abortion and prostitution as criminal, believing sexual nature to be the reason as to why women engage in prostitution, ignoring the fact that much of the time, it is for financial gain. At the present day, most view Lombroso's work to be simple and lack in complexity. Nonetheless, Lombroso made numerous valuable contributions to criminology, such as guiding the study towards a more scientific approach (Keppel & Birnes, 2003).

Silvio et al. in 2006 wrote how Lombroso's systematic study of criminal physiognomy sought to aid society by identifying criminals. It could be argued that Lombroso's work influenced many other scientists and captured the popular imagination; although today largely discredited as a science, the ideas Lombroso wrote about retain a hold on popular culture.

To sum up this sub-section, we are now aware that there are various biological explanations for violence and serial murder. Sub-section also demonstrates a shift from rather simplified theories and explanations, to those which are more complex. Saying this, Lombroso's work should be put into context, taking into consideration the methods of research available at the time of study. The more recent theories do present a valuable insight into the biological explanations of violent / criminal behaviour, with some of the concepts offering successful explanations for such behaviours among small groups of offenders.

2.2. Psychological Approaches

There are various psychological explanations for serial murder. Firstly, the instinct and impulse theory asks the question of whether human beings has an instinctual or innate quality that leads us to commit violent and aggressive behaviour. The attachment theory then looks at our early life experiences, focusing upon the bond between mother and child. It argues that a break in this bond will ultimately direct the child to a life of crime and delinquency (Myers et al., 2008). The theory is epitomised by serial murderer Aileen Wuornos. Following this is social learning theory and the influence of the media upon violent and aggressive behaviour, asking the question of to what extent does violent television, books, and movies contribute to a person's violent behaviour? The theory shall be demonstrated by Charles Ng, a serial murderer influenced by John Fowles' book 'The Collector'.

Discourse about the causes of crime and the link with human nature has existed for centuries, but it is only during the latter half of this century that the discipline of criminological psychology can be said to have emerged in its own right indeed (Bowles, 2000). An early attempt to draw these two disciplines together is evident within the work of Zagury (2001). Zagury urged lawyer to consider psychological findings and incorporate them into their work. However, many of the lawyers wrote off such a notion, claiming psychology to be inaccurate and obscure (Silvio et al., 2006; Keppel & Birnes, 2003).

However, the 1960's saw a transformation in terms of the need for psychological input within the criminological field. Keppel and Birnes (2003) combined these two approaches, noting 'that neurotic extraverts were more likely to become offenders because they are less condition able. i.e. they do not learn well and will therefore be less likely to learn social control via the process of socialisation'. This concept provoked huge curiosity and in turn furthered research in this area, as well as others (Lundrigan & Canter, 2001).

It could be argued that we have learnt that psychological theories are concerned with the individual, as well as that individual in terms of their relationships with others (Blackburn, 1993). Over the years, psychology has witnessed much disagreement between its theorists as to whether violence and aggression are natural/instinctive to us, or if we in fact learn through external influences, such as the media and so forth (Schechter & Everitt, 1997). In addition, the causes are dysfunctional, abnormal emotional adjustment or deviant personality traits formed I nearly socialisation and childhood development. The individual as a result of these factors is destined to become criminal.

2.3. Sociological Approaches

The discipline of Sociology attempts to explain human behaviour through analysis of the society in which we live. It usually concerns itself with the social rules and processes that bind and separate people not only as individuals but as members of associations, groups, and institutions. Sociology is interested in our behaviour as social beings; thus the sociological field of interest ranges from the analysis of short contacts between anonymous individuals on the street, to the study of global social processes (Silvio et al., 2006).

In terms of being able to elucidate deviant and criminal behaviour, and consequently apply this to serial murder, sociology, like most perspectives, fails to offer a single, clear-cut, explanation. Instead there are several key theories that have developed (Lundrigan & Canter, 2001). Some of the earliest explanations of deviance, such as social pathology and social disorganisation are now either being reworked, or simply no longer have a substantial following from within the field of sociology (Myers et al., 2008). Nevertheless, these two perspectives have not lost their weight within the sociological discipline; they have in fact paved the way for the development of many contemporary theories such as labelling and anomie (Bowles, 2000).

The general theories that surround the phenomena of deviance are divided into types, a processual approach and a structural approach. Keppel and Birnes (2003) note how 'structural theories emphasise that deviance is related to certain social structural conditions in society, while processual theories describe the processes by which individuals come to commit deviant acts'. The distinction between these two differing academic slants, is that the structural approach tends to ask the question why, within the lower classes, is deviance is more established? While the processual viewpoint examines why particular people are more inclined to commit deviant acts (Gibson, 2006; Promish & Lester, 1999).

In terms of offering a sociological explanation for serial murder, three key theories of deviance and criminal / violent behaviour shall be explored and applied to the phenomena. First to be examined is the anomie / strain theory (Whitman & Akutagawa, 2004). It argues that the strains within our society, and the pressures placed upon us to succeed, ultimately force a person to become deviant (Myers et al., 2008). The theory is demonstrated by murderer Richard Kuklinski. The second theory to be looked at is the labelling theory. The theory believes that if a person is labeled deviant, and this label is reinforced, the individual will accept that label, thus affecting the person's self-concept, leading them to see themselves as deviant and engage in such behaviour (Holmes & Holmes, 1998). The theory is then illustrated by both Aileen Wuornos and Richard Kuklinski. The last theory to be examined is control theory, which believes a lack of control is a causal factor for deviant behaviour (Norris, 1988). Aileen Wuornos is once again drawn upon to illustrate the concepts of the theory.

It could be argued that each approach within this sub-section offers a valuable and insightful explanation of both serial murder and deviance in general.

Anomie and strain theory focuses upon a serial murders struggle within society, and how this can push a person so far into desperation, they see murder as their only release. Labelling theory looks at a serial murderer's interaction with agencies of social control, as well as the effects of societal reaction, noting some sort of recognition by these (i.e. arrest and negative reactions from society) to fuel deviant behaviour and in turn develop into acts of murder. Control theory believes everybody can become deviant, and those who do, thrive off the immediate buzz the act induces, much like a serial murderer who has a lack of self-control and tends to give in to their impulsive homicidal feelings.

However, the sociological perspective is not flawless, for instance many of its theories seem to assume that the working classes are to blame for the majority of deviant and criminal behaviour (Whitman & Akutagawa, 2004). Nonetheless, the recognition that social factors external to the human being place constraints on that persons choice of action, has been particularly influential and, indeed, would be considered by many today to be an almost common sense, if partial, explanation of criminal behaviour.

3. A Comparison of Theories of Serial Murder

Earlier sections examined serial murder from three differing perspectives; biology, psychology and sociology. While all of the perspectives are explaining the same phenomena, they each have differing approaches, explaining behaviour from different academic standpoints. Biological explanations argue; 'criminal behaviour is the outcome of factors internal to the physical body of the individual human being that predisposes that person to criminality' (Heydari et al., 2008). In other words it is our biological processes that this viewpoint is concerned with, and the extent to which they have an influence upon our behaviour. Consequently, offenders do not have control over their violent and aggressive behaviours as they are of a nature that acts in such a way. For example, individuals with biochemical imbalances cannot control this, nor the effect these imbalances have upon their behaviour.

Psychology on the other hand explains criminal and violent behaviour in terms of the interactions between our thought processes and our behaviours (Blackburn, 1993). As with biology, it is primarily concerned with the individual. However, where it differs to the biological approach, is that at times, psychology looks at the individual in terms of their relationships with others. This is demonstrated in the attachment theory, whereby the successful development of a child is based upon its early relationships with its primary caregiver (Keppel & Birnes, 2003). Consequently, this is illustrated by the academic field of biological psychology. Within this, both disciplines are combined to examine the organs, chemical alterations and so forth, which are associated with both our mental and behavioural processes.

Psychological disorders such as depression, stress, and mental health problems in general, can sometimes result in violent behaviour (Whitman & Akutagawa, 2004). There are all treated through biological methods, for example; antidepressants, mood stabilising drugs and so forth. In other words, there is an overlap between the two disciplines; perhaps it could be said that one would not be able to exist without the other. If psychology did not exist, how would we go about identifying mental disorders and their causes? And vice versa, if biology did not exist, how would we know how to treat such disorders? (Keppel & Birnes, 2003; Hare, 1991).

Sociology tackles the explanation of violent and criminal behaviour from a very different angle in comparison to biology and psychology. The sociological version essentially rejects these individualist explanations and proposes that those behaviours defined as criminal behaviour are simply those that deviate from the norms acceptable to the consensus of opinion in society (Whitman & Akutagawa, 2004). In other words, this discipline is only interested in our actions as social beings, as part of a society and how we interact with that society.

A particular way in which sociology differs from biology and psychology is that within this field, is the structure and agency debate. Some sociologists favour the agency way of thinking, which sees people as self-governing 'creative beings who construct the social world' (Silvio et al., 2006). While structuralists believe it 'is the social world (structure) that constructs individuals in so far as actors forms of thought and actions are to a large extent structurally predetermined by micro-phenomena such as culture and political institutions' (Keppel & Birnes, 2003). In sum, do people shape society? Or does it shape us? For example, a structural perspective of criminal behaviour would be the anomie and strain theory, as it argues it is specific structural strains that place pressure upon the individual to become deviant thus, society creates the deviant.

If we are to look at the given perspectives more specifically, there are numerous similarities.

For instance, in biological explanations, experts note that having an extra Y chromosome can result in an emotionless and unremorseful individual. This is also true of the sociopathic personality, which stems from psychological explanations. Sociopaths are also emotionless, and show no remorse, often insisting they are innocent.

In addition, control theory (sociological perspective) and low serotonin levels (biological perspective) are in some way similar. This is due to the fact that they both are primarily concerned with self-control, specifically the lack of it. The control theory notes 'crimes are committed by persons who value immediate gratification and take only a short terms view of their life and their goals'. Silvio et al., (2006) state that those individuals with low serotonin levels have a tendency to lose control, thus exhibiting impulsive and aggressive behaviour as result.

In a further similarity with the control theory, and the notion of low self-control, is that of drugs and alcohol, which the biological perspective notes to have some sort of link with criminal behaviour. Control theorists state that persons with low self-control are not only likely to commit crimes, they also tend to be associated with related activities, such as accidents, smoking and alcohol use.

It could be argued that this is not an extensive list of all the similarities between the given theories. However, it is worth noting that similarities between biology and psychology seem to be dominant. Perhaps this is due to that fact that these two disciplines are already so similar. This section shall now go on to examine various solutions are treatments suggested by the various perspectives.

4. Solutions and Treatment for the Issues of Serial Murder

The previous sections have focused upon differing perspectives, and what they see as the principal causes and explanations of violence, hostility and serial murder. Bowles (2000) insists that little is known about the treatment of serial murderers. With such a statement in mind, this section shall address the elements that contribute to serial murder, as discussed formerly, and try to offer some form of solution or treatment.

Not how solutions and treatment of aggression in general shall be touched upon. If a person's aggressive and violent tendencies can be curbed, this consequently may help reduce the likelihood of them going on to commit serious violent offences, such as serial murder and the like. Keppel and Birnes (2003) write how 'although many would believe a serial murderer may not be treatable once he or she has begun to kill, one wonders whether, if they had been identified early enough, treatment might have succeeded in preventing them from actually starting their stream of killing'. Mr X, an 'up-and-coming' serial murderer who was hospitalised before he could act on his homicidal fantasies, shall be referred to throughout.

Biological solutions include treatment using various drugs. In terms of this approach, anti-psychotics are used in the case of aggressive behaviour which is continual; with such drugs having an effect upon neurotransmitters and their functioning (Myers et al., 2008). One example is quetiapine. Quetiapine blocks the actions of dopamine and serotonin. It is usually used to treat those with schizophrenia, as it is thought this disorder is partly due to imbalances in serotonin and dopamine (Hickey, 1997; Keppel, 1989).

Further support for the drug comes from of studies testing the effectiveness of quetiapine (Lundrigan & Canter, 2001). Findings showed that those who had been treated with Quetiapine showed great improvement in terms of reducing aggressive behaviour, when compared with a placebo group (Promish & Lester, 1999; Jenkins, 1988). However, an evaluation of the drug, by the Keppel and Birnes (2003), notes 'the manufacturers claims that quetiapine improves both positive and negative symptoms are currently unproven ... comparative trials with chlorpromazine and haloperidol have not shown quetiapine to be more effective'.

Focusing upon a more specific aspect of biological solutions is that of genetic screening, there are numerous types, but parental in particular (Whitman & Akutagawa, 2004). Parental screening discerns whether a foetus is at risk for various identifiable genetic diseases or traits. In other words this allows any abnormalities to be detected within early pregnancy. This could be useful in the case of XYY 'syndrome', whereby parents would be able to request genetic screening of their un-born child to see if there are any abnormalities such as an extra Y chromosome (Keppel, 1989; Jenkins, 1988).

Benefits of genetic screening include disease reduction. Note that many genetic disorders entail suffering and early death, thus a primary goal of genetic selection and manipulation is to increase the capacity to diagnose, treat and eliminate disorders which are genetically caused.

In addition, the ability to detect genetic abnormalities early on is hugely beneficial to the parents in terms of preparation for the child's birth.

It goes without saying that this is a hugely controversial method in terms of a solution to violent and criminal behaviour. Experts see the genetic screening of XYY 'syndrome' to be inappropriate, noting that for many years, an extra Y chromosome was thought to be a contributing factor in criminal behaviour in young males, but ultimately it was decided that the connection between XYY and criminal behaviour was not strong enough to be used as a defence case in a court of law, thus discouraging the genetic screening of an extra Y chromosome among young males (Bowles, 2000).

Additionally, note how the biological perspective drew upon drugs and alcohol as having some sort of causal relationship with criminal and violent behaviour, either through committing crime to pay for drugs, or, committing the crime directly as a result of consuming being intoxicated (Lundrigan & Canter, 2001). This can be exemplified by various serial murderers who use drugs/alcohol to gain the confidence to kill. Perhaps one way to aid a reduction in aggressive behaviour is to encourage the treatment of substance abusers (Gibson, 2006). Obviously this is not going to have a massive effect upon violent crime rates but it may help. Mr X was treated through both individual and group therapy for his drug and alcohol related problems.

There are also numerous psychological efforts to reduce violent and aggressive behaviour, such as cognitive-behavioural methods. This approach is based upon Bandura, referred to previously, who argued that aggression is learned through observation (Promish & Lester, 1999). Cognitive methods focus upon distortion in the patient's way of thinking; it ensures 'work is carried out to change the distortions'. Offenders are taught to confront their behaviour and its consequences, to understand their motives, and to develop ways of controlling their behaviour.

An example of such therapy is anger management, which aims to help individuals control and deal with their aggression (Whitman & Akutagawa, 2004). Mr X was subject to both cognitive therapy and psychotherapy. Cognitive therapy helped him to reevaluate the likelihood that had actually been abandoned and rejected by others and also helped him reconsider the implications to his self-worth if, indeed he had been abandoned (Canter et al., 2004). Therefore, just how effective are such types of therapy? Much research indicates that anger management can be an effective in reducing anger and so forth, but only in the short term. Thus questions remain considering the long term effectiveness of anger management (Giannangelo, 1996).

Aileen Wuornos was used to demonstrate the sociopathic personality. Some attempts have been named to treat the disorder. However, many experts are skeptical when it comes to treating such individuals, arguing most methods to be incompetent (Norris, 1988). Shock treatment does not work; drugs have not proven successful in treatment; and psychotherapy, which involves trust and a relationship with the therapist, is out of the question, because psychopaths are incapable of opening up to others. They do not want to change (National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, 2005). Despite this, HM Prison Service highlights the development of the Chromis Programme, in which those violent offenders considered to be psychopathic can receive valuable treatment. HM Prison Service note how such a scheme is among the first in the world to be launched (Canter et al., 2004).

Sociology differs in terms of treatments, instead tends to offer solutions to the problems it sees within society through some sort of reform. Theories of anomie and strain state that achievement within our society is based upon how much money we have, the standard of our education, and our status (Lundrigan & Canter, 2001). Certain groups within society are unable to access money, education and so forth, such as the poor and working class (Gibson, 2006). Consequently, this encourages criminal behaviour, with serial murderer Richard Kuklinski as an example. With this in mind, perhaps if poverty was in some way to be tackled, this could help reduce criminality (Norris, 1988). For instance, in 2007, Gordon Brown delivered a speech concerning a reform of the welfare state in order to try and combat poverty. In the case of Richard Kuklinski, this is exactly what he needed. Kuklinski was unskilled; he was unable to provide a substantial income for his young family, hence becoming a hit man for the mob, and consequently killing hundreds of people.

However, what is rather contradictory here is the fact that many people see the welfare state as something that actually encourages and contributes to crime. In a review of James Bartholomew's book "The Welfare State We're In", Milton Friedman notes the 'attempts to achieve good intentions have led to horrible results ... increasing crime and violence, worsened conditions of the very poor'. For instance, to children in families living on welfare support, this is the only lifestyle they know.

A child whose parents draw a welfare check without going to work does not understand that in this society at least one parent is expected to rise five days of each week to go to some type of job (Canter et al., 2004). It could be argued that this child grows up seeing no need for a job, but is satisfied with living off the state. Additionally, experts believe welfare state encourages the single mother. In turn, the child may grow up searching for a male role model, which they will most often find in the form of gangs and various other troublesome companies.

5. Conclusions

The present paper has sought to offer various theories of violent and aggressive behaviour, and apply such concepts to the explanation and evaluation of serial murder. Perhaps it is inappropriate to single out one theory or perspective as a whole, and note that to be dominant. In fact, a better way to explain serial murder would be through some sort of integrated approach, with elements from all three perspectives.

The paper is to try and offer an explanation for any given serial murderer. Just using biological explanations, we may only be able to establish such causes as biochemical imbalances or brain injury. We would miss out on other crucial contributory factors. Psychological explanations may note, separation from a primary care giver or an obsession with violent movies to be a causal factor. At the same time, sociology may highlight that the murderer was labeled or was blocked from reaching high levels of success within contemporary societies. It is evident that by combing all three perspectives, it offers a more powerful and comprehensive explanation of serial murder. The very fact that each discipline is looking at violence and aggression from different angles is what makes it perfect for integration, if they all came from the same academic stance there would be little use in combining them.

Solutions and treatments have also been touched upon, noting what the differing perspectives note as appropriate forms of treatment, and thus ways of preventing serial murder. However, instead of looking at how biology deals with such offenders, what should also be considered is how the system such as criminal justice system reacts to serial murder. It is argued that within the first part of the twentieth century, such systems struggled when dealing with serial murderers. Perhaps this is due to police lacking in sufficient knowledge of such murderers, combined with poor enquiry methods. While today, police methods all over the world have greatly improved, it should be ensured that those leading serial murder investigations have an excellent knowledge in terms of serial murder, and be aware of those variables that are exclusive to this phenomenon.

Canter et al. (2004, p.312) further argued when they note “we have had serial murderers with us for a long time, and there is no reason to believe that there is an easy or realistic solution to this problem. We do not understand the aetiology of the serial murderer, but clearly there is a unique combination of biogenic, psychogenic, and sociogenic sources.”

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