

ABOUT SERIAL KILLERS

INTRODUCTION

Let's play a quick game of catchphrase - guess the word. My phrase is two words, and describes a person. Charles Manson. Ted Bundy. Jack the Ripper. Serial killer - serial meaning "arranged in a straight line or succession" ⁽¹⁾ and killer meaning "one who kills, or any agent used to neutralize the active property of anything."

We tend to have a morbid interest in people who commit murder. Today, I'd like to explain what distinguishes serial killing from mass murders, how long serial killing has been around, and highlight some of the psychological traits common to serial killers.

BODY

I. Serial killing vs mass murders

Now at a glance serial killing and mass murder seems basically the same: one person kills many other people. The distinction between the two is notable: mass murder happens when one person murders multiple people at one specific place and one specific time. When we look at the perpetrators of the Aurora, Colorado and Sandy Hook, Connecticut shootings, we have two perfect examples of mass murderers. They went to one place (a movie theater, a school) and killed several people within a very short amount of time.

Serial killing, on the other hand, can happen in one place, but generally occurs over a period of time. The standard distinction between serial killing and multiple murders is that serial killers murder three or more people within the time frame of one month ⁽³⁾. A serial killer will murder 12 people over the course of 4 months or so; a mass murderer will do so in the matter of moments.

II. Serial killing history

Looking back in history we can easily see mass murderers - from Hitler to Genghis

Khan, the most notorious criminal murderers were generally warmongers. However, serial killers before the 1900s are much less publicized. One of the earliest known serial killers was Gilles de Rais, who terrorized his community in the 15th century. The man "raped, mutilated, and murdered an estimated 150 children (though some estimates put that number over 800)" over the course of about 20 years ⁽⁴⁾. He was executed in 1440 as perhaps one of the world's earliest serial killers.

I mentioned Jack the Ripper earlier as perhaps one of the most famous historical serial killers. His exploits in 19th century London were the basis for a surge in public interest into serial killing. In the 1920s there were two films based on stories of serial killing. In the 2000s, more than 300 of the released films were based on serial killers, fictional and historical alike. ⁽⁵⁾

III. The psychology of serial killers

"But she or he was a kind, sympathetic person!" is a common cry after ruling that someone is guilty of serial murder, because serial killers are normal people. There are lots of other problems with trying to profile serial killers - for example, Finnish serial killers tend to be alcoholics. German serial killers tend to have lower-than-average intelligence. That being said, here are some commonalities:

Serial killers tend to be people of average intelligence from troubled homes. They have been subject to psychiatric evaluation, but only 20% received psychiatric treatment. Many of them are employed in stable jobs. One thing that is not consistent is motive. The most common motives are theft, revenge, and sex, but the range within those motives is vast.

CONCLUSION

Serial killing is surprisingly common, and unsurprisingly disturbing. Popular media has sensationalized and glorified the killers themselves, giving them yet another motive: fame. One of the reasons I didn't go into depth or detail about all of the various serial killers is for this reason - to keep your eyes on how horrible and tragic it is. We shouldn't romanticize serial killers, or their victims. It might be better if we forgot the name of

Gilles de Rais or Adam Lanza. Thank you for your attention.

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