

## UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL SERIAL KILLING

Why do some people engage in serial killing for sexual pleasure? This book considers the phenomenon of sexual serial killing from the perspective of motivation theory, as advanced in psychology and neuroscience. By examining biological, psychological and social determinants, it develops a model of sexual killing that integrates widely dispersed existing literature. The first part of the book reviews scientific data and theories, while the second part presents biographical sketches of 80 sexual killers and links their early development and later killing to current theoretical understanding. The book examines cases of serial killers from the USA, Western Europe, Iran, Australia and South Africa, and it also includes an account of killers from the USSR, made available to non-Russian speakers for the first time. Deliberately written to avoid jargon, *Understanding Sexual Serial Killing* is accessible to students, scholars and professionals across psychology, sociology, forensic science and law.

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**UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL  
SERIAL KILLING**

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*The book is dedicated to our parents, Harry and Jean (Maxim) Toates,  
Simion Coşciug and Aglaia Ilieş and to our son, Stas.*

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## Preface

Why is there yet another book on sexual serial killers? Doesn't the vast existing literature cover the topic adequately? Our reasons for writing this book are as follows.

Sexual serial killing (sometimes called 'serial lust killing', a term that we will also employ) is an example of the expression of *motivation* directed to achieving a goal. The two component parts that give rise to it when considered separately, (1) sexual motivation and (2) the desire for dominance often expressed as aggression, also exemplify motivated activities. Within psychology and neuroscience, there is a vast and impressive literature on these topics. However, in the situation where these motivations merge, as in sexual killing, there is little to be found from a perspective of motivation theory that is rooted in a contemporary understanding of psychology and neuroscience.

Knowledge advances fast in these areas, and yet it is largely unavailable to those trying to understand sexual serial killing. Hence, our study has a limited brief and is in no sense competitive when compared with existing theories and literatures. Rather, we attempt to build upon and reinforce them, while using psychology and neuroscience to integrate disparate bodies of theory and data. Whereas other books give extensive discussion of topics such as the search for the killer and forensic methods, of necessity, we say little about this.

Our focus is how brains work when stretched to beyond their range of normal and adaptive performance in the bizarre situation of sexual serial killing. However, to understand such stretching, it is necessary to look closely at the 'unstretched brain'. Our approach somewhat coincides with the perspective described by the expression 'reverse engineering'.

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In such terms, the product – the lust killer – has tragically already been built. However, as a thought experiment, if for some bizarre reason you wanted to construct one, what would go into this? For example, what would the brain chemistry look like? What role would be allocated to sex hormones? What role would being bullied and taunted as a child play?

Surely, no one is born destined to become a serial killer. So, we assume that there is not something totally unique in the brain of a serial killer-to-be, such as a particular gene that determines this aberrant behaviour. Rather, we assume that the brains of future serial killers contain much the same array of different regions, chemicals, processes and activities as those of the normal population. At the time of writing, there has been a very limited examination of the brains of serial killers. What has been done gives some tentative and challenging pointers but no absolute distinction from control brains. Clearly, by definition there are differences, but these must be subtle variations on a standard pattern of structure and activity (e.g. more excitation and less inhibition). Given the appropriate stimulation, such subtle variations yield the extreme of abnormality in killing.

A striking feature emerges when studying these killers: in many cases, the power of associations formed early in life, such as between (1) a fetish object or event, such as shoes or the sight of blood, and (2) arousal (excitement arising within the brain). Such arousal can take sexual qualities there and then, or these can emerge some years later. This is a theme to which the book returns repeatedly.

Although our focus is on what brains do, of course, we need to take account of the fact that they can only exist within a social context. Any behaviour reflects a kind of tango between the brain and its environment, sadly a point still often misunderstood. Therefore, we situate killers in their society and give consideration to sociological factors.

A further reason for writing this book concerns the tragically large number of sexual serial killers found in the ex-USSR and the former Soviet states. Knowledge of some of these has only emerged with the decline of the Soviet system, and some killers have appeared in the post-Soviet era. A study of them reveals some features very similar to those of Western killers. However, since most of this literature is written in Russian and has never been translated, it is unavailable to almost all

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researchers outside the former Soviet world. One of us (O.C.T.) is fluent in Russian and, in addition to other roles, had the responsibility of analysing the killers described in the Russian literature and writing the corresponding sections of this book.

A caution is in order for anyone venturing into this area: the need to check the reliability of your sources. We read highly plausible and extensive accounts of Polish, Swedish and Russian serial killers, who in truth never existed. We are very grateful to several Open University Polish students who kindly checked this for us in the case of the Polish one.

We also encountered a biography of a well-known serial killer presenting a verbatim transcript of the conversation between him and his last victim. The problem was that these words were never recorded, and the killer committed suicide shortly after the murder and without writing anything down.

Where possible, we have used the peer-reviewed literature. For true crime books, we have checked their accuracy against the Radford University database. We have made links to some YouTube videos containing interviews with the killers themselves, their lawyers, their psychiatrists or the police investigating the case. We have also made use of material on the interrogations of suspects.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I looks at scientific data and theories on sexual serial killing in the context of how normal and abnormal brains generate behaviour. Part II has biographical sketches of some serial killers, which exemplify the points raised in Part I. We have organized the killers in this part into chapters according to properties that they have in common as far as the ‘roots and expression of their desire’ are concerned. For example, Chapter 21 is devoted to fetishes and partialisms (particular attraction to a body part, such as eyes or feet), discussing killers for whom these seem to play a major role in the killing trajectory. Chapter 30 groups killer pairs in which a male recruits a female partner to help find victims. Here the interactions between the partners are revealing.

Sometimes accounts of serial killers are lumped together when all they appear to have in common is that they kill several times. When one takes a perspective of motivation, important differences appear between

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them. For example, often homosexual killers are grouped together with heterosexual killers despite some very different motivations. Also, among homosexual killers, there exist important differences. Such killers include (1) John Wayne Gacy and Randy Kraft and (2) Jeffrey Dahmer. However, a closer look at their behaviour and extrapolation from this to their desires reveal important differences between groups (1) and (2), as described later. Another grouping, reflected in Chapter 28, is of those where erectile dysfunction appears to lie at the basis of their pathological behaviour. Part III gives a summary and offers conclusions.

Perhaps the most important conclusion to emerge from this study concerns what appear to be the most common causes setting someone on this toxic trajectory. In turn, this strongly suggests how many such tragedies might be avoided in future. The answer appears to be as simple as it is profound. In almost all cases, if not every case, the killers feel a deep resentment about things that happened to them, usually in childhood or adolescence. Many people feel this without becoming serial killers, so this is not sufficient to produce a killer. It might well be necessary, and, when combined with other factors, it appears to play a powerful role.

Various things can cause the resentment. It can arise from neglect. However, resentment most commonly seems to arise from (1) sexual, physical or psychological abuse (or any combination), and/or (2) bullying/taunting from family, peers or both. The bullying can be over a range of different things, such as parental disappointment, ethnicity, sexual orientation or dysfunction, physical appearance or poverty. It can be over the perceived immorality of the mother or uncertainty about who really is the biological mother.

Critics sometimes argue to the effect that to look for explanations of killing in terms of the behaviour of the parents or the role of society is to shift the blame and condone the killing. We are reminded of the crowds banging on the sides of vehicles carrying such notorious killers as Ian Brady and Rosemary (Rose) West to court. Crowds gather outside prisons in the USA at the time of executions, carrying celebratory banners proclaiming such things as 'Fry him!' To seek revenge for misdeeds seems to be part of our make-up. It would be beyond our brief

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to go into these moral issues. However, we would simply claim that to try to understand something is not to condone it.

We would like to think that we have made the study accessible to a wide spectrum of readers, such as criminologists, sociologists, lawyers, police and probation services officers, not all of whom will be familiar with psychology and neuroscience. Therefore, we have put some details into footnotes in order to make the main narrative flow better.

Since overwhelmingly most lust killers are male, we use the pronoun ‘he’ in the text. For the most part, it would be misleading to use ‘he or she’.

We owe much to discussions with Philip Corr, Joan Heather, Lee Mellor, Wineke Smid and Jan Willem van den Bergh. We are grateful for the support of Caitlin Rankin McCabe, Jessica Norman, Janka Romero, Ilaria Tassistro and Emily Watton of Cambridge University Press. We would like to acknowledge the enormous help given by those reading one or, more usually, several chapters: Clare Allely, Michael Apter, John Archer, Kent Berridge, Marissa Harrison, Lee Mellor, Abigail Robbins, Marnia Robinson, Mark Safarik, Sandie Taylor, Margo Watt, Lance Workman and the publisher’s anonymous reviewers. We would also like to acknowledge the invaluable help of Florence Bisch, Giles Clark, Carrie Anne Drazewski-Keller, Becky Efthimiou, Jessie Epstein, Nadia Fezzani, Bryony Hall, Charlene Harmon, Franklin Mathews Jebaraj, Becky Loake, James Oleson, Diana L. Witt, and the library staff of The Open University.