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Fred West: Bio-Psycho-Social Investigation of Psychopathic Sexual Serial Killer

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Abstract

This paper looks briefly at the case study of psychopathic sexual serial killer Frederick Walter Stephen West. His criminal behaviour and other behavioural problems are often assumed to be rooted in the home, inadequate discipline, or poor role models. However, based on research arguments presented in this paper, it is obvious that the answer to what significantly contributed to the development of this complex distorted personality and subsequent violent behaviour is far more multifaceted. It seems to be a result of a highly complex interaction of biological, psychological and sociological factors.

Introduction

Serial murder seems to have occupied an interestingly privileged place in the modern forensic psychology. Criminal behavioural science defines serial murder as a minimum of three to four victims with an emotionally “cooling off” period in between homicides (Burgess, Douglas & Ressler, 1988; Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1983). The killer is usually a stranger to the victim; the murders appear unconnected or random. The murder is rarely “for profit” and the motive is psychological, not material. The victim may have a symbolic value for the killer, and the method of killing may reveal this meaning. The killer often chooses victims who are vulnerable (children, adolescents, women, prostitutes). The average serial killer profile is as follows; white, male, of low-to-middle socioeconomic status, in his 20s or 30s, possessing a history of childhood abuse or neglect, is sociopathic/psychopathic, a chameleon to his environment, and appears normal to others (Egger, 1990). Many serial killers are also sexual sadists (motivated primarily by sexual satisfaction obtained through victim suffering) (Groth & Burgess, 1977; Hazelwood & Burgess, 1987) and incorporate their deviant sexual fantasies into their killings (Egger, 1990; Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Pistorius, 1990). One such example of the sexual-sadist serial-killer is Fred West who, between 1967 and 1987, together with wife Rosemary, tortured, raped, and murdered at least twelve young women and girls.

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Fred West

Frederick Walter Stephen West (29 September 1941 – 1 January 1995), was born into a poor family of farm workers in Bickerton Cottage, Much Marcle, Herefordshire, to Walter Stephen West and Daisy Hannah Hill. He was the second of their eight children. West would later claim that his father had incestuous relationships with his daughters (Crimelibrary, 2009). It has also been suggested that incest was an accepted part of the household, and that his father taught him bestiality from an early age. West recounted during police interviewing's that his father had said on many occasions "Do what you want, just don't get caught doing it" (Morris, 2007). It is also alleged that his mother Daisy began sexually abusing Fred from the age of 12.

At school, West showed an aptitude for woodwork and artwork, but did not excel academically. He left school at the age of 15 and began work as a farm labourer. Two years later, in November 1958, he suffered a fractured skull and a broken arm and leg in a motorcycle accident. The accident put him into an eight-day coma. His family reported that after the accident he became prone to sudden fits of rage. Two years later, he was unconscious for 24 hours after hitting his head in a fall from a fire escape (Biography Channel, 2007). At age 20, he was arrested for molesting a 13-year-old girl. He was convicted, but escaped a sentence of imprisonment (Crimelibrary, 2009). His family effectively disowned him thereafter.

In September 1962, the 21-year-old West became re-acquainted with a former girlfriend, Catherine Costello, who was now better known as Rena from her time working as a prostitute. Costello was already pregnant by another man, and she and West married on 17 November before moving to Glasgow. Her daughter, Charmaine Carol, was born on 22 February 1963. Costello and West claim they had adopted Charmaine, whose father was a Pakistani man. In July 1964 Costello bore West a daughter named Anne Marie. During this period in Glasgow, West worked as an ice cream van driver. On 4 November 1965, he accidentally ran over and killed a four-year-old boy with his van (Crimelibrary, 2007).

The family, along with Isa McNeill who looked after the couple's children and Costello's friend Anne McFall, moved into the Lakeside caravan park in Bishop's Cleeve, Gloucestershire at the end of 1965, when West feared for his safety following the vehicular homicide incident. To escape from West's sadistic sexual demands, Costello and McNeill moved to Scotland in 1966 while McFall, who had become infatuated with West, and the two children remained with him. Costello continued to visit the children every few months. In August 1967 McFall, who was eight months pregnant with West's child, vanished. McFall was never reported missing and her remains were found in June 1994.

In September 1967, Costello returned to live with West, but left again the following year, putting the children in West's care. While still married to Costello, 27-year-old West met his next wife, Rosemary Letts, on 29 November 1968, on her 15th birthday. On her 16th birthday she moved in with him and a few months later they moved from the caravan to a two-story house in Midland Road, Gloucester. On 17 October 1970, Rosemary gave birth to their daughter, Heather Anne. Fred West was imprisoned for theft on 4 December 1970, and remained so until his release on 24 June 1971.

Biological Approach

Although past policy implications present a strong reason to stray from biological theory in criminology, findings that support a genetic influence cannot be ignored. Adoption studies have been one of the major areas of focus in research that relates to criminal behaviour and genetic influence. Adoption studies test the hypothesis that parents with a predisposition to antisocial behaviour may pass on these genes to their offspring, and these offspring would then have an increased risk in developing similar antisocial tendencies regardless of social factors (Brennan, Hall, Bor, Najman & Williams, 2003). According to Bartol & Bartol (2008) it is possible that psychopaths are born with biological predispositions to develop the disorder, independent of any genetic factors. In line with the

Eysenckien (1996) view, it could be that psychopaths have a nervous system that interferes with rapid conditioning and associations between transgression and punishment. Because of this defect, the psychopath fails to anticipate punishment and, hence, feels no guilt.

Moreover, research suggests that learning and conditioning of behaviour occur differentially among individuals given their neurological status. For example, psychopaths are relatively unemotional, lacking of empathy, impulsive, immature, thrill-seeking, and unconditionable (Frick & Morris, 2004; Moffitt, 1993; Zuckerman, 1983). They have also been characterized as having low levels of perceptible anxiety and physiological responses during stressful events (Viding, Blair, Moffitt & Plomin, 2005). Theoretically, psychopaths do not sufficiently experience the discomfort of anxiety associated with a proscribed behaviour because they have a hypoaroused automatic nervous system, and thus, they are not easily conditioned or deterred (Hare & Schalling, 1978). They make a rational choice based on the calculation that the benefits of the act (e.g., monetary gain) outweigh the costs (e.g., anxiety and detection). Accordingly, one would expect that psychopaths encountered by the criminal justice system would be resistant to most deterrence programs.

When Fred was seventeen, he was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident which left him in a coma for a week and resulted in having a metal plate put into his head. Some thought that this head injury made him prone to sudden fits of rage and that he seemed to have lost control over his emotions. This was followed by the accident at a local youth club. In the fall, he banged his head and lost consciousness.

The lasting impact on Fred's behaviour suggested that between this incident and the motorcycle accident, he had suffered some brain damage. Several empirical studies have suggested a link between brain injury and both violent and non-violent criminal behaviour (Freedman & Hemenway, 2000; Sarapata, Herrmann & Johnson, 1998; Grafman, Schwab & Warden, 1996). Sarapata et al (1998) reported a 50% prevalence of brain injury in individuals convicted of non-violent felony or misdemeanour crimes, compared to 5-15% in comparison samples. Freedman and Hemenway (2000) found that 12 of 16 death row inmates had a history of brain damage, in many cases due to multiple insults and inflicted by caregivers and family members.

The link between brain injury and crime is thought to be damage to the frontal lobes of the brain. Frontal lobe injury has been associated with loss of control over sub-cortical and limbic structures involved in primitive impulses (Grafman et al, 1996). Lesions in these areas may influence functions such as social perception, self-control and judgement, as well as emotions and mood. Thus, the link between brain injury and crime may reflect the effects of brain injury-related cognitive and emotional impairments on behaviour. An individual may misperceive elements of a situation, make poor social judgements, overreact to provocative stimuli, and lack the communication skills to verbally negotiate conflict or strike out impulsively.

Psycho-Social Approach

Fred West grew up in a family where his father was his primary role model (Sounes, 1995), and this man, according to Fred's own personal accounts, had frequent sexual relationships with his daughters motivated by an attitude of extreme self-entitlement, encapsulated in his belief that, "I made you, so I am entitled to have you". Hirschi's (1969) model of the family, the school, and one's peers as the most important factors has become (and remains) the Justice department's model for considering grant applications. Families are primary agents of socialization, and as such, are tempting to consider as direct causal agents of crime (Agnew, 2001; Canter, 1982; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Loeber, & Henry, 1998; Hirschi, 1969; Jang & Smith, 1997; Sokol-Katz, Dunham, & Zimmerman, 1997; Wells & Rankin, 1991). Pedigree studies have also found significant transmission rates for alcoholism, drug dependence, mental disorder, and sexual deviance (Waldron, O'Reilly, Randall, Shevlin, Dooley, Cotter, Murphy & Carr, 2006).

Incompetent, ineffective, or inconsistent parenting is most strongly related to larcenous delinquency (Rebellon, 2002; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985), but certain studies (e.g. Patterson, 1982) indicate that erratic discipline is also directly related to the development of sociopathic personality

disorder. The significance of this effect is even more alarming when one realizes it holds even if the home is intact and only functionally discordant. Sociopathy, due to inefficient techniques of child-rearing, has been termed - the best predictor of all in criminology (Agnew, 2001; Loeber & Dishion, 1983). Since some sociopathy traits subsume the symptoms of antisocial personality disorder, some have argued that the most important effect overall for broken homes, whether structural or functional, is the inability to relate (Rutter, 1972).

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) *Low Self-Control theory* (LSC) attempts to do this while describing what is right and wrong within the field of criminology. Most tests of LSC theory are essentially tests of Hirschi's social control theory (attachment, commitment, involvement, belief) with some additional personality variables included. It is important to note that LSC theory makes individualistic causal arguments; that is, each and every act of criminal behaviour is the result of unique individual factors such as traits, which are semi-permanent enduring personality characteristics (see Cale, 2006; Center, Jackson & Kemp, 2005; Heaven, Newbury & Wilson, 2004; Kemp and Center, 2003; Levine & Jackson, 2004; van Dam, Janssen & De Bruyn, 2005; Walker & Gudjonsson, 2006). Individuals possess three sets of traits, which are partially present in Fred's personality: (1) traits composing low self-control; (2) traits predicting involvement in crime; and (3) other traits that are the result of socialization. LSC traits appear in the first six or eight years of life, and include only factors affecting calculation of the consequences of one's acts. The second set of traits includes low intelligence, high activity level, physical strength, and adventurousness. These traits reflect Wansell's (1996) description of Fred West's early years, in which he stated that Fred was not a promising student, constantly in trouble, and interested only in physical work. The third set of traits includes impulsivity, insensitivity, and inability to delay gratification which was reflected in Fred's criminal behaviour.

Impulsivity is sometimes defined as acting on impulse without reflecting upon consequences (Chaplin, 1985). Impulsiveness connotes irrationality and an inability to profit from experience. Insensitivity, or lack of guilt, is a trait associated with psychopathy (Dadds & Salmon, 2003) and has been included in scales measuring social control (Wiatrowski, Griswold & Roberts, 1981; Agnew, 1995). Guilt is painful and lack of guilt is pleasurable. This modified hedonism in LSC theory is consistent with control theories in general which assume that pleasures are constant and motivation unproblematic. The authors are concerned, however, with the consequences of a lack of guilt for the individual, not the emotional poverty from an inability to form relationships. They appear to be saying that individuals miscalculate or devalue the pain of guilt, and that this is something one gets from their parents, and in terms of Fred's case, from the father. Immediate gratification is also associated with psychopathy and means self-absorption in one's own needs which vehemently demand satisfaction (Blanchard, Bassett & Koshland, 1977; McCord & McCord, 1983).

Adventurousness or spontaneity is defined as self-initiating behavior occurring without the necessity of external stimulation (Chaplin, 1985). It is the only non-biological factor in this second category of traits in LSC theory. It is a personality trait that loosely differentiates between delinquents and non-delinquents (Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). It is furthermore a valued trait given the societal trend toward greater tolerance for self-expression and assertiveness. While possibly related to extroversion, spontaneity per se is nothing more than a weak predictor because it suggests concern, not insensitivity, for others and also suggests self-esteem, or a concern for a positive image of one's self.

Fred West can be categorized as sadistic rapist and murderer. Sadistic rapists are very similar to their anger-excitation rapist counterparts in that both are sexually aroused by the physical and psychological suffering of their victims (Douglas, Burgess, Burgess & Ressler, 2006). However, whereas anger rapists are viewed as being motivated primarily out of anger, sadistic assailants are motivated primarily by sexual satisfaction obtained through victim suffering (Groth & Burgess, 1977; Hazelwood & Burgess, 1987). These offenders use excessive force, such as bondage, torture, rape with objects, sexual mutilation, and, in extreme cases, murder. In addition, they may perform other acts of degradation, such as cutting hair, burning with cigarettes, and sexual intercourse with a corpse following murder. Research suggests that the attacks of sadistic rapists are carefully planned and preventive against discovery (Groth & Birnbaum, 1979) which was particularly evident in Fred's

criminal behaviour because some of the victims have never been found (Sounes, 1995). Sadistic offenders are likely to engage in multiple paraphilias (Arrigo & Purcell, 2001; Dietz, Hazelwood, & Warren, 1990; Gratzler & Bradford, 1995), with onset typically occurring during adolescence (Bradford, 1999). In addition, these types of rapists engage in elaborate violent fantasies. This imagery plays a significant role in their offenses. According to Deitz et al. (1990), sadistic rapists recognize social constraints and are functional in society, but social norms and morals are overridden by narcissism and egocentric self-interest.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the case study of psychopathic sexual serial killer Frederick Walter Stephen West. His criminal behaviour and other behavioural problems are often assumed to be rooted in the home, inadequate discipline, or poor role models. However, based on research arguments presented in this paper, it is obvious that the answer to what significantly contributed to the development of this complex distorted personality and subsequent violent behaviour is far more multifaceted. It seems to be a result of a highly complex interaction of biological, psychological and sociological factors.

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