

12-3-2025

An Examination of Psychosocial Factors Related to Male Serial Killers

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Rachael Tubbs

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

An Examination of Psychosocial Factors Related to Male Serial Killers

by

Rachael Tubbs

MS, Walden University, 2020

BS, Mount St. Mary's University, 2018

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

February 2026

Abstract

Historically, studies on serial murderers have not concentrated in depth on analyzing what psychosocial factors are or how they could influence a man to become a serial killer. The focus of this qualitative study was on the psychosocial characteristics of male serial killers that are from, and based in, the United States. Using a case study analysis approach, the life course of serial killers in the FGCU Radford Database was analyzed to identify themes of adverse childhood experiences such as physical, emotional, or psychological abuse; abandonment by parent or guardian; limited or no social bonds; witnessing abuse; and signs of antisocial and criminal behavior, such as violence towards animals or a criminal record. The goal was to identify which psychosocial factors influenced U.S. based male serial killers and how psychosocial factors can differ amongst a group of five male serial killers from the United States. The results of this study show the impact that psychosocial characteristics have in the development of a serial killer. This study found that when examined through the lens of general strain theory, it is evident that early life adversity and developmental trauma, psychological and social isolation, and maladaptive behavioral and functional patterns have a profound impact in the development of a male serial killer in the United States. Ultimately, it is evident through these themes that the development of a serial killer cannot rest on one aspect but rather stems from complex yet common life experiences. As a result, this study has confirmed previous findings, and contribute to positive social change by assisting in furthering research, or assisting with the identification and capture of violent, serial offenders.

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Dedication

To Supervisory Special Agent (also known as Uncle) Thomas Mohnal, for your unwavering guidance, dedication, and support throughout my years in higher education in my pursuit of understanding the criminal mind. The years of advice, stories, and wisdom are the reason this study exists. Your years of unwavering guidance, dedication, and support for other 9/11 victims are the reason the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund still exists. Thank you for your years of service and love for your nation and your family.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my dissertation committee, Dr. Wayne Wallace and Dr. Jessica Hart for their continuous guidance and advice throughout the complex process that is producing a successful dissertation. I would like to thank Dr. Michael Aamodt for granting access to the Radford/FGCU Serial Killer Database. Access to this database was essential for my study, and his dedication to spreading the information in the database is the reason studies like mine exist.

Finally, I would like to thank my mother, for always reminding me that I have brains in my head, and feet in my shoes.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Serial killers are a type of violent offender that have likely existed since the beginning of time itself. The 1970s-1980s are considered the peak of serial murder in the United States, with an estimated 4,787 victims in 1987 alone (Aamodt et al, 2020). Despite making up less than 5% of the world's overall population, the United States has produced approximately 84% of all known serial killers since 1980, with the majority being male (Newton, 2000). Eight-nine point five percent of serial killers in the United States appeared between 1950-1999 (Vronsky, 2021). Of that 89.5%, 88% appeared between the years of 1970-1999 (Vronsky, 2021). The number of serial killers have decreased since then, as have the number of victims per serial killer.

While the number of victims has decreased substantially since 1987, this type of offender still puzzles law enforcement agencies, is studied by scholarly communities, and captures the attention of media outlets throughout the globe. Serial killers quickly caught the attention of mass media outlets because of their violent and macabre stories. It was within the timeframe of the 1970s-1990s that serial killers captured the news outlets, but it is considered to be the novel and movie known as *The Silence of the Lambs* that can be credited as putting serial killers into mainstream media (Vronsky, 2021). Around this same time, *murderabilia* became popular. Murderabilia is a term that refers to the memorabilia of murderers or serial killers. These collectibles became popular after serial killers such as Ted Bundy and Richard Ramirez became household names (Vronsky, 2021).

It is accepted within the scholarly community that men are more often serial killers than women, purely based on statistical evidence of convicted serial killers (Hickey, 2015). That being said, female serial killers are not nonexistent. An estimated 17% of all serial killers are female (Hickey, 2015). Women are often perceived as being less dangerous than men, so many female serial killers have been acquitted of their crimes or given lesser sentences (Hickey, 2015; Kelleher & Kelleher, 1988). Female serial killers should be taken just as seriously as male serial killers, as they are still taking innocent lives.

Female serial killers have different methods for killing compared to their male counterparts. Their methods and victimology also differ from male serial killers, with women often targeting latent victims and killing someone they knew or had a romantic relationship with (Hale & Bolin, 1988). Female serial killers also start killing later than male serial killers, and typically have longer killing periods than men do (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). Women also have different motivations for killing compared to male serial killers. Female serial killers are often more motivated by financial gains than any other factor (Hale & Bolin, 1988, Hickey, 2015). Female serial killers are also not excused from excessive exaggeration and inaccurate portrayal in the media. Convicted female serial killers such as Aileen Wuornos have had numerous films and made for television style movies made about her life and crimes. These movies do not accurately portray killers like Wuornos, who brutally murdered seven men in Florida from 1989 to 1990 (Newton, 2000). Instead, these movies show her as a crazy woman who was wronged by men and determined to seek revenge on any man who crossed her path. In

reality, Wuornos and other female serial killers are much more complicated than this, and cannot be forced to fit into a specific mold created by the media.

The historic data and subsequent media often frames the U.S. based male serial killer as a middle aged, single, straight, white man, when this is often-times not the case (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2005). Despite there being an increase in access to media within the last 10 years that may make it seem that serial killers are more common than they really are, the peak occurrence of serial killings have passed. The FBI estimates that less than 1% of all killings in the United States are the result of a serial killer (FBI, n.d.). However, data from within the last several years should not be taken as the final say. It is extremely difficult to tie a victim to a serial killer case, as these cases are often open for decades after, with victims being discovered or connected to the case long after death (Aamodt et al, 2020).

While the concept of serial murder and the killers behind these violent acts are well studied, analyzing the psychosocial characteristics seen in the lives of male serial killers should be explored further. They could help inform the scholarly community as to why previous experiences in one's life-course influence their behavior. The psychosocial factors this study sought to assess was supported by various theories. Criminological theories are used in the scholarly and law enforcement communities to attempt to understand concepts such as the motivations, rationales, and backgrounds of criminals (Siegel, 2009). These types of theories can help in the desire to learn about how characteristics of low self-control, weak relationships, and more can play a role in the

development of perverse behavior often seen in offenders with the psychosocial characteristics analyzed in this study (Chan, 2021).

Similarly, psychological theories can be used in the law enforcement communities. These theories analyze mental health disorders and delve deeper into trauma, abuse, and psychosis. Literature has discovered a positive association between various personality disorders and criminal offending (Lowenstein et al., 2016, Nestor, 2002). The motivation of a killer with a diagnosable and/or treatable mental health disorder caused by abuse in childhood may be different when compared to the motivation of someone who is killing out of spite, anger, or rage. In Chapter 1, there will be context for the entire study on psychosocial theories, including the problem statement, purpose of study, the nature of the study, the theoretical framework, the research question, definitions, and any assumptions or delineations that will be used or made during the study.

Background

Male serial killers vary in age, sexuality, socioeconomic status, mental health, and physical health (Hickey, 2002). Their victims also range in age, sexuality, gender, and socioeconomic status, among other things (Hickey, 2002). There have been attempts to classify, label, and categorize serial killers over the years, but rarely can these labels be molded to killers of varying backgrounds (Choo & Choi, 2020; Hegheş & Şchiopu, 2021). Because much of the historical information about serial killers is based on myth, misinformation, or exaggeration of the truth, getting to the real facts of a case has become

difficult. Mainstream media often takes over and exaggerates claims of serial murder cases, and this makes it easy for researchers to relay misinformation.

Serial murder has been studied around the world since early civilization. In the United States, the team behind the Behavioral Science Unit (BSU) with the FBI is viewed as the catalyst for major research on male serial killers. Organized by the FBI in 1972 (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995), Ressler and Douglas became public facing figures for the unit, and their story has disseminated through books, television shows, and other forms of media entertainment to share the horrors of working with deranged and violent individuals such as Kemper and Manson, among others. By the 1980s, the FBI was at the forefront of serial killer investigations. During this time, they made a nationwide call, identifying the 1980s as having a serial killer epidemic on its hands.

Today, the BSU does not solely focus on serial murder (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995). They prioritize crimes against children, terrorism, and other important, high profile crimes. It could be argued that to them, serial killers are a thing of the past. Since the creation of the BSU, more researchers from various organizations and institutions have worked both together and alone to contribute to the effort in learning about the backgrounds and motivations of serial killers and other violent offenders (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995). While the BSU no longer solely focuses on serial killers, it still serves as the backbone for major research on violent offenders in the United States. (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995).

Yourstone et al. (2008) identified a common theme of psychosocial characteristics amongst convicted murderers. Researchers found that male participants experienced more

aggressive childhoods compared to female participants. Ultimately, researchers discovered that psychosocial characteristics were hindered the childhood experience of the killers. These offenders did not have holistic psychosocial growth in their youth. In focusing on psychosocial characteristics, the researchers were able to learn about potential risk factors and common characteristics seen in the lives of convicted male killers.

Psychosocial factors can be used to describe the impact of social elements on the behavior and psychological well-being of a person (Vizzoto et al., 2013). These characteristics can include both social and environmental elements that the person is exposed to during their life-course (Reid et al., 2023). They can also include mental health illnesses, and innate characteristics unique to that person and their lived experience (Hatch, 2005; Nurius et al., 2015; Oliveira & Beaver, 2021; Savolainen et al., 2018). While psychosocial factors can be shared, there may be differences depending on the person's social and environmental experiences (Reid et al., 2023). These killers may also have varying psychological disorders that impacted their behavior (Savolainen et al., 2018).

Problem Statement

Serial murder has been studied repeatedly throughout the years, but rarely are psychosocial factors isolated and focused on in the research and compared across multiple serial killers. Psychosocial factors can be used to describe the impact of social elements on an individual's psychological well-being and their behavior (Reid et al., 2023; Vizzoto et al., 2013). By excluding psychosocial factors, researchers lack

awareness on the various psychosocial and sociological factors that lead to the development of a serial killer. Studies show that one must look at both childhood and adulthood to attempt a better understanding (Culhane et al., 2019; Ishiwaka et.al., 2001; LaBrode, 2007; Marono et al., 2020; Reid et al., 2019; Schlesinger, 2000; Schug et al., 2010). While numerous psychosocial factors have already been identified, we have not seen clear connections made across multiple serial killers in a way that shows just how relevant many of these characteristics are, such as trauma, abuse, peer victimization, interpersonal relationships, and more (Allely et. al, 2014; Söderberg & Björkqvist, 2020). Through examining the FGCU/Radford Database to evaluate the life course of male serial killers, it may be possible to learn about the common psychosocial characteristics seen in an emerging serial killer by pointing to significant criminological theories, such as general strain theory.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the phenomenon of the psychosocial factors that are commonly associated with male serial killers. As a result of the limited research, there is a lack of awareness surrounding the shared psychosocial factors that impact a murderer or serial killer (Marono, et al., 2020). These factors can include, but are not limited to, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and adulthood experiences, including trauma, mental illnesses, relationships, or social pressure (Vizzoto et al., 2013). It is important to analyze the FGCU/Radford Database to learn of shared, common psychosocial characteristics so that the scholarly community, law enforcement

agencies, and other professional organizations may learn about potential risk factors seen in this type of violent offender.

Research Questions

The questions for this study are:

RQ1. What psychosocial factors are associated with male serial killers?

RQ2. How do the psychosocial factors differ among male serial killers?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for my study was general strain theory (GST). GST is a well-studied theory that is an appropriate fit due to how well it can explain psychosocial roots. GST provides a lens through which a researcher can focus on psychosocial characteristics, as this theory emphasizes the role that adverse experiences, trauma, and negative social relationships can have in the evolution of deviant behavior in an individual. In using this theory with a collective case study analysis approach, I sought to explore the presence of various strains across individual cases and learn how the strains may have manifested differently in the life course of different serial killers. This approach allowed for the possible increased awareness of how strain may contribute to varying psychosocial characteristics observed amongst male serial killers in the United States.

Leibman (1989) used a case study analysis approach to examine the psychological profiles of four serial killers; Ted Bundy, Albert De Salvo, Edmund Kemper, and Jerry Brudos. Leibman analyzed similar psychological and sociological characteristics in an attempt to understand their violent behaviors. The study looked at aspects such as age,

victimology, abuse and neglect, and unusual sexual behaviors (Leibman, 1989). Because case study analysis approach is highly applicable to the lived experiences of an individual as well as to the contexts of the modern world, it allows researchers the opportunity to delve further into the exploration of the relationship between the person and the role society has in shaping their development (Creswell, 2014). According to Yin (2014), there can be poor documentation of case study research procedures. This can result in readers being skeptical of the reliability of the method, and the study. It is important to ensure that there is an audit process and reliability checks, which is reviewed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Nature of Study

My study was qualitative and was designed to examine psychosocial theories. Despite debates on the legal and scholarly definition of serial murder, the present study focused on convicted serial killers who have killed three or more victims at different times, with a period of inactivity between each kill (Douglas et al., 1992). Using a collective case study analysis approach, I analyzed U.S. based male serial killers. I focused on their lives from early childhood through conviction, incarceration, and/or death. In looking at the entire life course, I was able to look at various events that could have impacted how their psychosocial characteristics developed. This study was done through an archival method.

The majority of analysis was conducted through secondary data analysis. Specifically, data was gathered through an archival method including interviews, public records, film, scholarly written books and other publications, and biographical and

autobiographical data. The information was examined to identify common characteristics amongst the killers included in the study. Through manual coding, patterns and themes emerge and become apparent. This study had an estimated sample size of five serial murder cases. Collective case study analysis includes multiple cases, depending on the purpose and research questions of the study (Priya, 2020). Since the goal of this research was to explore what psychosocial characteristics exist amongst serial killers, as well as how they differ amongst serial killers, multiple cases were evaluated.

Definitions

The terms in this study can be defined as follows:

Abuse: “Interactions in which one person behaves in a cruel, violent, demeaning, or invasive manner toward another person or an animal. The term most commonly implies physical mistreatment but also encompasses sexual and psychological (emotional) mistreatment (American Psychological Association [APA], n.d., para. 1)”.

Criminology: “The scientific approach to the study of criminal behavior and society’s reaction to law violations and violators” (Siegel, 2006).

High risk victim: “A person who generally has a high probability of criminal victimization” (FBI, 2017).

Identity crisis: “A period of serious personal questioning people undertake in an effort to determine their own values and sense of direction: (Siegel, 2006).

Inferiority complex: “An experience by those who have feelings of inferiority and compensate for them with a drive for superiority” (Siegel, 2006).

Latent delinquency: “A mental state found in adolescents whose personality requires them to seek immediate gratification (to act impulsively), consider satisfying their personal needs more important than relating to others, and satisfy instinctive urges without considering right and wrong (that is, they lack guilt)” (Siegel, 2006).

Low risk victim: “A person who generally has a minimal probability of criminal victimization” (FBI, 2017).

Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI): “A test with subscales designed to measure many different personality traits, including psychopathic deviation, schizophrenia, and hypomania” (Siegel, 2006).

Moderate risk victim: “A person who generally has a minimal probability of criminal victimization but due to behavior, atypical or otherwise, the risk was situationally elevated at the time of victimization” (FBI, 2017).

Psychopathy: “A neuropsychiatric disorder marked by deficient emotional responses, lack of empathy, and poor behavioral controls, commonly resulting in persistent antisocial deviance and criminal behavior” (Anderson, & Kiehl, 2014).

Psychosocial: The intersection and interaction of social, cultural, and environmental influences on the mind and behavior (APA, n.d.)

Serial murder: The unlawful killing of three or more victims in separate events by the same offender (Reid, 2017).

Assumptions

My primary assumption of this study was that there are psychosocial factors that influence male serial killers, and that those factors are shared. This assumption was

essential, as it provided the foundation for the research in this study. Additionally, there was the assumption that the factors contribute to the development of serial killers, with the understanding that these factors can exist in individuals that are not serial killers. A final assumption in the study was that the data being used was accurate. All data was fact checked across the FGCU Radford Database, and various scholarly sources.

Scope and Delimitations

The goal of this study was to analyze the psychosocial factors that could influence a U.S. based male to become a serial killer. Participants in this study were chosen from the FGCU Radford Database. Participant selection was narrowed to only include those that are a biological male who was born in the United States. Once data was collected from the database, the data was fact checked against peer-reviewed scholarly journals, biographies, and news reports. An explanation of the data gathering process will take place in Chapter 3.

A major delimitation of this study was the exclusion of convicted male serial killers outside of the United States. I only focused on U.S. based male serial killers so that international customs, traditions, and culture were not factors that could differ from customs, traditions, and cultures commonly found in the United States. This could result in the data of this study not being transferrable to other countries. This could also result in the data of this study not being transferrable to men who immigrated to the United States and then became serial killers.

Another delimitation of this study was the exclusion of biological factors that can play a role in the development of serial killers. Biosocial theories of crime do exist,

including biochemical theories, neurological theories, genetic theories, and evolutionary theories (Siegel, 2006). Due to the ethical dilemmas of accessing private medical records, this study only focused on reported psychological and sociological diagnoses and experiences. Some research in this area has taken place, but is not inclusive specifically to serial killers. Denno (1985) suggested that instead of people being born criminals or noncriminals, some individuals carry the potential to be violent or antisocial, and that the environmental conditions they are exposed to throughout their lives could sometimes trigger antisocial responses. Research on the role that biological factors play in the progression of a serial killer needs to be expanded to better understand if and how biology and neurobiology can assist the scholarly community and law enforcement in the future when attempting to assess these violent offenders. An additional area of study related to biosocial theories could be the study of head trauma in the life of serial killers and what impact that traumatic brain injuries (TBI) have in the development of a serial killer (Kiehl, 2015). According to research by Kiehl (2015), damage to a part of the paralimbic system can cause the individual to develop a psychopathic personality. Research showed that patients with paralimbic brain damage had problems with emotions such as aggression. They lacked motivation, empathy, and planning and organizational skills. They were impulsive, irresponsible, had poor insight, and had a lack of behavioral controls” (Kiehl, 2015).

John Wayne Gacy, also known as the Killer Clown, suffered a TBI from being hit in the head by a swing at 11 and was rendered unconscious. As a result of this head trauma, throughout his childhood Gacy experienced serious periodic blackouts that at

times resulted in hospitalization (Sullivan & Maiken, 1983). Richard Ramirez, the Night Stalker, also experienced several TBIs throughout his life, including at just 2 years old, when a dresser fell on his head. Additionally, The Night Stalker also experienced a severe TBI at the young age of five by also being hit in the head with a swing. Eventually, Ramirez was diagnosed with frontal lobe epilepsy (Allely et al., 2014). It is unknown if any of these serial killers also experienced trauma or damage to the paralimbic system.

Finally, a third delimitation of this study is the exclusion of convicted female serial killers in the United States. There are substantial differences between men and women from biological, psychological, and sociological perspectives. This can make it impossible and improper to generalize findings across both genders. That being said, the population of convicted female serial killers in the United States is smaller than the population of convicted male serial killers. Therefore, the pool of participants is limited, and may alter the results of the data.

Limitations

One limitation to this study was the lack of accuracy around self-reported data from serial killers. All information that originated from a serial killer must be considered as potentially untrue. Serial killers are historically not truthful with investigators (Marono et al., 2020). They will often exaggerate or skew information in their favor to attempt an insanity defense, to gain sympathy from juries or the media, or to toy with investigators. It is difficult to prove what is and is not true in the life of a serial killer if it has not been corroborated by trusted sources.

Another limitation in this study was the inability to meet with live participants. Because incarcerated serial killers are a protected class, gaining access to killers within the prison system is complex and has the possibility for unethical interactions and implications. Instead, I relied on archival data, specifically primary and secondary sources. It is important to note that access to primary sources can be limited. Additionally, relying solely on primary and secondary peer reviewed works, public records, and news reports is a limitation, as there is the possibility that it could impact the results of the study.

Significance

While serial murder is a rare phenomenon in the United States, it is important to conduct research on the psychosocial factors that may contribute to a man becoming a serial killer. Serial killers are often invisible to public view. They can kill over many years without being suspected. Gaining an increased understanding of psychosocial factors and how they may be common across multiple serial killers might assist both the scholarly and law enforcement communities in the future in their attempts to understand these violent offenders. Additionally, it could continue to help reduce the overall number of serial killers, and number of victims.

The cause of serial killers in the United States has been theorized many times. A common theory has been the impact of World War 1, World War 2, and the Vietnam War on the young boys whose fathers and grandfathers fought in those wars, then came home and brought their traumas and undiagnosed (and untreated) posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with them (Vronsky, 2021). Many of these men were still on the battlefield, and

took out their stressors on their wives and children. It should be considered that the United States and other countries could be at risk again for a new wave of serial killers after a major war or other international crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Vronsky, 2021). While research on this specific topic is not yet possible due to the recency of the pandemic, it is something that could be evaluated someday. With the current study having evaluated the impact of psychosocial characteristics in the development of male serial killers in the United States, results could positively impact future researchers attempting to learn about the impact major historical and global events have on the psychosocial development of a serial killer or similar violent offender.

Serial murder is a realm of crime that is dominated by men (Hickey, 2002). Although the perceived peak or epidemic of serial murder has passed in the United States, there is still a general lack of understanding surrounding the ways in which psychosocial factors influence a man to become a serial killer. According to Vizzoto et al. (2013), psychosocial characteristics can be used to describe the influences that social elements can have on a person's behavior and psychological health. By gaining an increased awareness around what psychosocial characteristics are and the impact they can have in a violent offender, patterns across serial killers that point to similar lived experiences may be identified. By being able to categorize psychosocial factors that have influenced a suspect's past, researchers and the law enforcement community could learn why someone kills, and the role in which society has impacted their choices.

Summary

Serial murder is not a new phenomenon, nor will it cease to exist. While serial killers may not be as common as they once were, there should not be a reluctance among the scholarly and law enforcement communities in the continuation of studying and applying new methods in the investigation and apprehension of this type of violent offender. Although research has advanced substantially since the 1970s, there is still a general lack of understand surrounding the impact various psychological and sociological factors can have in the development of a serial killer. In learning more about how psychological factors and an individual's environment can impact them, a deeper understanding in to why someone may become a violent offender can be gained.

In this study, I analyzed solved cases of convicted male serial killers in the United States. I focused on five cases of serial killers who killed a minimum of three individuals. I analyzed their lives from early childhood or birth through incarceration and/or death. From a review of the case studies, patterns and themes that emerge show common psychological and sociological factors that were present in the life of that killer, as well as differences. In Chapter 2 of this study is a thorough review of relevant literature. The relevant literature covers topics that include, but are not limited to, the use of case study applications, a brief history of serial murder in the United States, psychological theories of serial murder, sociological theories of serial murder, methodology, and motivations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Most research regarding serial murderers and their victims focuses primarily on male serial killers. Serial killers have a cult-like fascination around them in the United States, with mass media outlets such as Amazon Prime Video and Netflix or Hulu creating multiple shows, documentaries, and movies about these men, and often sharing inaccurate information about the killers and their victims (Fox & Levin, 2003). Despite years of attempts to gather as much information as possible on these vicious killers, there is still little research that focuses on the role that psychosocial factors play across killers (Reid et al., 2023).

Even though a large amount of research on male serial killers exists, there is minimal information on the psychosocial characteristics that possibly contributed to these men becoming killers. Psychosocial factors can be used to describe the influences of social elements on a person's psychological health and their behavior (Reid et al., 2023; Vizzoto et al., 2013). Psychosocial factors include ACEs (i.e., mental or physical abuse, trauma, etc.), relationships with parents or guardians, peers, and romantic relationships; socioeconomic status,; and exposure to crime (Reid et al., 2023). All of these aspects on one's environment can influence a person's thoughts and actions (Vizzoto et al., 2013). The purpose of my study was to explore the psychosocial factors of male serial killers, specifically focusing on analyzing abuse/neglect, trauma, rejection, bullying, loneliness, relationship status, and the work environments of U.S. based male serial killers from the 1800s to present. These psychosocial factors could provide researchers with information

on why these men became serial murderers, resulting in the possibility of data on potential risk factors.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search strategy of the present study included reading biographical books about the killers, using online databases, and gaining access to and reviewing published journal articles through Google Scholar and the Walden University Library. The most commonly used databases were Elsevier, ProQuest, Taylor & Francis Online, APA PsycNet, APA PsycINFO, EBSCO, JSTOR SAGE Journals, and The Radford Database through Florida Gulf Coast University. Through Google Scholar and the Walden University Library search engines, the following keyword searches were used: *serial killer, serial murder, serial homicide, psychopathy, male serial killers, psychosocial theories, psychosocial characteristics, psychosocial factors, psychopathic killers, and general strain theory*. Sources published after 2018 were the primary focus for data, and anything prior to 2001 was used as foundational or historical references to be cited when additional information was not available.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework that will be used in this study was GST. GST was developed by Agnew (1985). Agnew stated that a person commits a crime because they are unable to cope with a stressor in their life. Strains are most likely to result in crime when they are seen by the offender as being unjust, as being high in magnitude, are associated with low social control, and create some pressure or incentive for criminal

coping (Agnew, 1985). The activity is goal-seeking, meaning the individual has the goal of relieving the stressor (Agnew, 1985).

GST is a revision of strain theory by Agnew (1985), who states that an individual engages in crime because they are experiencing strains or stressors in their life. As they become upset, they begin to experience a range of negative emotions, and the crime serves to alleviate the negative emotions that are the result of the strain. While strain theory focuses on the goal-seeking aspect, Agnew (1985) expanded GST to also include the concept of pain-blocking behavior, which is something that occurs when a person is attempting to leave a negative situation and their path is blocked, resulting in them acting in a violent manner because of the sudden stress the blocker caused.

Agnew (1985) stated that crime is especially likely when individuals experience two or more strains close together. This is not unlikely, as one strain frequently leads to or causes other strains for a person. For a serial killer, they may have experienced a type of psychosocial strain, such as being rejected by their peers or a romantic interest. As a result, they feel isolated and lonely, which can put additional strain on their ability to live a healthy lifestyle, and they may act out in a manner that is not legal. According to Agnew, criminal coping is more likely when one lacks the ability to cope in a legal manner. Chronic or repeated strains may reduce the ability of one being able to cope in a legal manner.

GST is a theory that focuses explicitly on negative relationships with others. According to Agnew (1985), there are three major type of negative relations with others. Those include; relations where others prevent or threaten the achievement of positively

valued goals (such as popularity with peers), relations where others remove or threaten to remove positively valued stimuli (such as the loss of a romantic partner), and relations where others present or threaten to present negative stimuli (such as insults or physical assault). Strains may reduce one's emotional bond to conventional others. This causes individuals to retreat from conventional others, such as parents or guardians, teachers, or other trusted figures in a person's life (Agnew, 1985).

GST is not without critique. A major challenge to this theory is the idea that not all people engage in violent or criminal behavior every time that they are faced with a specific major stressor in life (Cullen & Wilcox, 2010). Agnew (2013) defended GST by stating that there are going to be different aspects influencing the impact that stressor has on an individual. There are also additional factors to take into consideration, such as the support of friends or family, the person having healthy or unhealthy coping skills, or exposure to negative influences. Despite any challenges to this theory, GST has been found to be empirically sound (Cullen & Wilcox, 2010).

GST can be used to explain why certain types of ACEs increase the likelihood of violence towards others (Castellvi et al., 2017; Malvaso et al., 2018; Van Wyk, 2023). In a study by Van Wyk (2023), results showed that within each category of ACEs, there was a greater risk of violence against others for those who are angry, depressed, or have low self-control. Van Wyk also found that GST accurately predicts that the probability of violence against others is at its highest immediately following the offender experiencing strain. This data on violence against others after experiencing a strain was consistent with

the results of Agnew (2005). This study also furthered the argument of GST be empirically sound (Van Wyk, 2023).

GST can be applied to not just violence against others, but specifically serial murder when looking through the lens of ACEs (Agnew, 1992). Many male serial killers experience ACEs that they claim contributed to their criminal behavior throughout life (Hickey, 2015). Those ACEs could include a variety of strains that are not limited to early life stressors. There could have been physical, emotional, or psychological abuse, abandonment by parent or guardian, limited or no social bonds, witnessing abuse, and signs of antisocial and criminal behavior, such as violence towards animals (Hickey, 2015). Psychologists and researchers have long linked criminality to mental issues caused by early childhood trauma (Siegel, 2009).

Children from lower-class homes are more likely to experience ACEs compared to children from higher income families (Kennedy, 2021; Van Wyk, 2023). The more ACEs that a child experiences, the higher their chance of issues later in life (Kennedy, 2021). In a study by Dutton and Hart (1992) on the impact of childhood abuse and neglect on violent behavior of adults who became serial killers, results showed that adults who had been more abused as children were three times more likely to act violently as an adult compared to those who were not emotionally, physically, or sexually abused in childhood. According to Cleary and Luxenburg (1993), researchers showed that in a study of more than 60 serial killers, ACEs were a pervasive characteristic of a serial killers' childhood. These results have been replicated in multiple other studies (De Becker, 1997; Inguito et al., 2000; LaBrode, 2007; Mitchell & Aamodt, 2005; Mouzos &

West, 2007; Myers et al., 2005; Norris, 1988). It is important to note that there is significant variation in the prevalence of childhood ACEs, such as abuse, across multiple studies. In a study by Hickey (1997) that included 62 male serial killers, 48% of the participants had been rejected in childhood by an important adult figure. As mentioned by Vizzoto et. al (2013), rejection is a significant ACE. There is also research to support that neglect and abandonment, even in adoption, might account for violent crime, including serial murder, later in life (Claus & Lidberg, 1999, Whitman & Akutagawa, 2004). It was theorized that infants who are not held or interacted with enough in institutional settings developed early-onset psychopathy as a defense response to their infantile separation from their biological mother (Vronsky, 2021). This theory would require extensive exploration to be proven true.

David Berkowitz is a serial killer who was adopted, though he is not the only one (Vronsky, 2021). Berkowitz felt abandoned by his biological mother, and then again when his adopted mother passed away when he was 14 years old. This feeling of abandonment or rejection likely was stretched to cover his feelings towards all women in general, and may have led to him having a feeling of hatred towards women, though he has denied that (Vronsky, 2021). While it cannot be proven that these feelings of neglect and abandonment by the maternal figures in his life led him to kill, experts suggest that the rage and violence he expressed towards women was likely a response to these feelings (Harmening, 2014). The relationship between adoption and serial murder could be explored further in future studies.

Nature of Study

My study is qualitative as it was designed to examine psychosocial theories and behaviors in male serial killers. Using a collective case study analysis approach, I analyzed U.S. based male serial killers to learn their history from early childhood through conviction, incarceration, and/or death. This was done through an archival method. Despite debates on the legal and scholarly definition of serial murder, the present study focused on convicted serial killers who have killed three or more victims at different times, with a period of inactivity between each kill (Douglas et al., 1992). The majority of analysis was conducted through secondary data analysis. Specifically, data was gathered through an archival method including interviews, newspaper archives, film, scholarly written books and other publications, and biographical and autobiographical data. The information was examined to identify common characteristics amongst the killers included in the study. Through manual coding, patterns and themes emerged and become apparent. This study had a sample size of five serial murder cases. Case study analysis can include multiple cases, depending on the purpose and research questions of the study (Priya, 2020). Since the goal of this research was to explore what psychosocial characteristics exist amongst serial killers, as well as how they differ amongst serial killers, multiple cases needed to be evaluated. Therefore, collective case study analysis was an appropriate fit.

Historical Review of Serial Murder in the United States

The U.S. based male serial killer has had the long-standing stereotype of being a middle aged, middle class, White male who could be classified as a loner type (Hickey,

2002). This stereotype has been challenged and proven as inaccurate and grossly exaggerated by the mass media (Hickey, 2015). Male serial killers in the United States are different races and ethnicities, social classes, ages, live in various states, hold different levels of education, and even have variations in sociability. When thinking about serial murder in the United States, the general population often views the seventies and eighties as being the height of serial murder. Despite it receiving the most attention in modern media, serial murder began in the United States far before.

Serial murder can be traced in the United States to the 1800s, with H.H. Holmes being considered the first known serial killer, operating out of Chicago, Illinois. Herman Webster Mudgett, also known as Dr. Henry Howard Holmes, murdered an estimated 27 women during the 1893 World's Fair (Borowski, 2016). Documented cases immediately following Holmes include the likes of Albert Fish, who was the most notorious cannibal prior to Jeffrey Dahmer in the 1970s (Newton, 2000). Fish was linked to at least 100 sexual assaults of minors in 23 states, but claimed the number was closer to 400 (Newton, 2000). Fish is suspected of approximately 15 murders, with the first taking place in 1910 in Delaware (Newton, 2000). Harvey Louis Carignan followed not long after in 1949, claiming at least five victims and was not sentenced until the 1970s (Rule, 1983).

Beginning in the 1960s, the United States saw a rapid increase of violent crimes (Jenkins, 1992; Leyton, 1986). Cases such as that of the Zodiac Killer were shocking the nation with the brutality in which the victims were being killed. As a result, the research on violent offenses also increased, with Cormier (1973) heavily researching the pathology of violent offenders. Cormier found that in order for the psychology and

treatment of criminals to be better understood, these killers need to be separated into subgroups instead of being grouped together. Specifically, there needed to be different categories of murder, so that researchers could better understand the etiology, motivation, and psychological cause that leads these murderers to kill. Through this research, Cormier invented the term *multicide*, which eventually transformed into the modern term of serial killer, and branched into mass murderers.

Defining Serial Murder

Despite Holmes being active in the 1800s and many other killers following him, it was not until the 1970s that the term *multicide* was introduced. *Multicide* eventually became the term *serial killer*, with the term being created during the Son of Sam case in New York state by Ressler (Terry, 2021). In the creation of this term, it became defined by the FBI (1998) as “

A series of three or more killings, not less than one of which was committed within the United States, having common characteristics such as to suggest the reasonable possibility that the crimes were committed by the same actor or actors (para. 2).

In 2005, the FBI refined the definition by stating that a serial killer could be defined as someone who has two victims, whereas the previous definition listed three victims (Reid, 2017). Despite the term having a written definition, Reid (2017) noted that there needs to be a standardization of the definition of serial murder, as there are clear inconsistencies in various levels of law enforcement, academia, and clinical settings. In identifying the lack of consistency across all possible organizations, Reid created the term *compulsive*

criminal homicide (CCH), which eliminates the serial killer stereotype of the single, White male, and instead broadens the definition to account for all genders, victim count, and other essential yet specific criterion that is excluded in the current FBI definition.

The confusion around the definition of serial murder is a longstanding issue. Fridel and Fox (2018) conducted a multinomial logistic regression through quantitative analysis on the impact that the FBI's 2005 definition had on serial killer victim count, focusing specifically on the alteration of the victim count from three down to two. It was discovered that in having a three-victim minimum definition, it guarantees a more homogeneous population. Essentially, researchers should focus on the three-victim count, despite law enforcement defining serial murder with a two-victim count. The FBI recognized that while a victim count of three is more accurate, having a formal definition that states two victims can assist law enforcement in obtaining and allocating resources during an investigation of serial murder (FBIgation, 2005).

Choo and Choi (2020) also identified a major issue with the inconsistency surrounding a universal definition for serial murder. Classifying serial murderers into mutually exclusive categories is complex where there is a blend of objective definitions. The researchers pointed out that factors such as evidence left at the crime scene, background characteristics, and subjective factors should be taken into consideration when looking to define a serial killer in a way that allows for categorization for the typology of that serial killer. Grounded on the arguments presented by the aforementioned researchers, the present study based its findings on male serial killers that

have killed three or more victims at different times, with a cooling off period between the murders (Douglas & Munn, 1992).

Psychosocial Characteristics

Psychosocial factors are characteristics that influence a person both psychologically and socially (Thomas et al., 2020). These factors could be important aspects to consider when attempting to understand a person's behaviors. The present study assessed abuse/neglect, trauma, rejection, bullying, loneliness, relationship status, and the work environments of U.S. based male serial killers from the 1900s to present. These factors were selected as they are commonly referenced in information about serial killers but seemingly are not compared across cases. In reviewing these characteristics, it is important to further understand each factor and how they could contribute to the life of a male serial killer.

Abuse/Neglect

The most common characteristics in the childhoods of serial killers are trauma and family instability (Vronksy, 2018). Specifically, abuse and neglect at the hands of a parent or guardian is commonly reported in the lives of serial killers (Ressler et. al, 1985). It has been argued that the experience of some type of trauma combined with instinctual sexual impulses around the age of four or five could be when the male serial killer is "made" (Purcell & Arrigo, 2006). Further put, it is argued that the children who experience trauma and abuse, in combination with psychopathy and other biochemical factors, remain in an evolutionary crisis-survival state, similar to that with which all humans are born with (Vronksy, 2018).

There are many ideas around the types of abuse or neglect in childhood that can shape the psychopathology of a serial killer. These include experiences of physical or sexual abuse, rejection, abandonment, loneliness, lack of familial stability, lack of bonding after birth or even overprotective mothers, psychological disorders, head trauma, or even exposure to violent media (Vronsky, 2018). Research shows an association between childhood abuse and cognitive processing problems later in life that could lead to an aggressive thought pattern (Dodge et. al, 1995). In a study of 233 serial killers with known childhood abuse, researchers found that childhood abuse is a risk factor for serial killers' behaviors. Harvey Louis Carignan self-reported sexual abuse at the hands of both a babysitter and female relatives (Rule, 1983). Ed Kemper also cited abuse from his mother and claimed that was the catalyst for his violent tendencies (Newton, 2000). A study by Marono et al (2020) found that abuse in childhood is linked to serial killers' behaviors later in life, with the majority (n=88) experiencing psychological and physical abuse.

Dysfunctional families or households is frequently reported in the lives of serial killers (Vronksy, 2018). This dynamic can result in feelings of abandonment, experiences of bullying by peers as a result of them distancing themselves from others, and the desire to escape into a fantasy space, which is explored in the section on relationships later in Chapter 2. Dahmer was raised in a dysfunctional household, with an alcoholic and distant mother. His parents often fought, and upon their divorce, Dahmer ended up living alone (Davis, 1991). Albert DeSalvo, also known as the Boston Strangler, self-reported instances of abuse in his childhood home. His alcoholic father was physically abusive

towards his mother, beating her and his children, and would even have intercourse with prostitutes in front of his children (Frank, 1966). It is essential to evaluate these aspects of abuse and neglect, because they are taking place at key developmental stages in a person's life.

Rejection

Rejection and bullying in some ways are synonymous. Rejection by peers or romantic interests is a common life experience for all people, but it may be triggering for someone such as a serial killer. In a study by Hickey (1997), research showed that in a group of 62 male serial killers, 48% of participants had experienced some type of rejection by either a parent or other important person in their life. Some researchers argue that rejection was the catalyst for Ted Bundy beginning his killing. Bundy had proposed to Diane Edwards, a woman of a higher class than Ted. She rejected him, and Bundy moved on to Elizabeth Kendall. A few years later when Ted was in law school, he reconnected with Edwards. She displayed an interest in him, but his goal was to gain the upper hand, and he rejected her in the same way she had previously rejected him (Kendall, 2020).

Rejection does not only take place at the hands of peers or romantic interests. Parental rejection at a young age can also have an impact on development. Parental rejection can be shown through a lack of affection, neglect, or aggressive behavior (Rohner & Britner, 2002). Rohner & Britner (2002) also found that parental rejection significantly predicts various behavioral issues, such as delinquency and conduct disorders. When the needs of a child are not met, they respond to their parents in a similar

way, and the reaction is contingent upon the timing, duration, intensity, or regularly perceived parental rejection (Rohner et al., 2005). Additionally, these children also make themselves emotionally unavailable and closed off (Rohner et al., 2005). This can lead to feelings of loneliness and moments of rejection from their peers or romantic interests.

Ted Kaczynski, also known as the UNABOMBER, felt alienated by his family growing up, and thought his parents were strict and held him to a high academic standard. In addition to feeling like an outsider at home, he was alienated by his peers throughout school because of his high performance in classes. He was often bullied because of it and even reported being shoved in a locker by classmates (Graysmith, 1997). Kaczynski would later report that he felt a lot of rejection, both at school but at home, too. This resulted in him having very little social self-confidence (Graysmith, 1997). Kaczynski resented both of his parents during his school age years and felt that his mother was verbally and psychologically abusive (Chase, 2003; Graysmith, 1997). Kaczynski felt that his fear of rejection, which was based on negative experiences both at home and at school, had ruined his life (Chase, 2003). Unlike most serial killers, Kaczynski would take these internalized feelings and become a serial bomber. Kaczynski ultimately sent 16 bombs over the course of almost 18 years, primarily targeting universities and airlines (Mohnal, 2014). He would go on to injure 23 and kill three, misleading the F.B.I. the entire way with false clues, such as the stamping of the bomb parts with the initials F.C., which supposedly stood for Freedom Club (Mohnal, 2014). Ultimately, it was his younger brother that turned the UNABOMBER in to law enforcement, gaining that

moniker because his early victims came from universities or worked for airlines (Mohnal, 2014).

Studies show that a lack of parental attention or affection prompts hostility, aggression, or passive aggressive behavior, and that these reactions can become ingrained and cause a child to become resistant to change (Cummings et al., 1989; Olweus, 1979; Kazdin, 1995). Dahmer experienced rejection from his family. He grew up in a home where the parents often fought, and his mother was generally disconnected from her children with some level of a substance abuse problem (Davis, 1991). As a teenager, his parents went through a messy divorce, leading his mother to move away with Jeff's younger brother, and his father to move and get remarried soon after the divorce. Dahmer ended up completely alone, without any parental figure, and no friends at 18 years old. His father eventually learned that Dahmer was living alone, so Lionel and his new wife moved back into the Dahmer family home (Davis, 1991). This level of rejection by parental figures could have led Dahmer to engage in aggressive behavior.

Albert Fish was put up for adoption at the age of five (Newton, 2000). This could have been interpreted by Fish as a form of rejection by his mother. Fish went on to kill an estimated 15 people before being captured and sent to the electric chair (Newton, 2000). Adoption as a form of rejection is also theorized in the case of David Berkowitz, also known as the .44 Caliber Killer and the Son of Sam killer. Berkowitz was put up for adoption immediately following birth and was adopted into a loving home. However, at 23 he met and felt rejected by his biological mother, and it was not long after that he began killing people in New York (Vronsky, 2018).

Bullying

People have been bullied since the beginning of time, but not all victims of bullying resort to violence later in life. Research showed that bullying has a negative impact on a person's physical and psychological health (Arseneault et al., 2006). In a study by Zhang et al. (2019) on the association between bullying and murder-related psychological behaviors, researchers found that students who had experienced two or more types of bullying (i.e. physical or verbal) were more likely to have murder-related psychological behaviors compared to students who had not been bullied.

Reports of bullying in the lives of male serial killers were mixed, but many were bullied or experienced some level of social isolation, which can cause irreversible changes in the structure of the brain during developmental year (Simon, 2015). H.H. Holmes reported being bullied as a child, with children even hiding a real skeleton in a confined space and trapping him inside (Larson, 2003). Dahmer also experienced bullying at a young age, and went as far to replicate his personal experiences in the way he attacked victims (James, 2022). According to Rule (2004), Gary Ridgway was bullied as a child in school, and as an adult at work. He repeatedly felt rejected and claimed that paying prostitutes gave him someone to talk to (Prothero & Smith, 2006). Ultimately, there is no firm evidence to show how childhood bullying impact the development of a serial killer, but it does seem to appear frequently in serial killer cases.

Loneliness

Loneliness is a universal experience that is proven to cause a variety of somatic, psychosomatic, and psychiatric diseases (McGraw, 2000). Tales of loneliness in the lives

of male serial killers are not uncommon, and studies on the topic are extremely limited (Martens & Palermo, 2005). In a study by Martens and Palermo (2005), researchers theorized that loneliness impacts the development and continuation of violent and antisocial behaviors and attitudes. Results in a study by Milsom et al. (2003) found that sexual murderers reported feeling substantially more peer group loneliness in adolescence. Researchers also found that sexual murderers had higher levels of grievances towards females in childhood and two thirds reported perceptions of themselves as victims in adulthood. 89% of the sexual murderers in the study had high-level fear of social intimacy. Ultimately, researchers felt that it appeared that views of oneself as the victim, grievance, and loneliness may be correlated. Loneliness at any age may increase the likelihood of sexual offending, and loneliness should be treated as a treatment target for sexual murderers (Milsom et al., 2003). In the case of sexual serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer, Dahmer had been essentially abandoned by his parents, had no friends in school, and had no romantic relationships (Davis, 1991). Loneliness may have played a pivotal part in the development of Dahmer as a serial killer.

In an examination of the lives of serial killers Dennis Nilsen and Jeffrey Dahmer, researchers concluded that loneliness could be particularly harmful for those at risk for antisocial behaviors when combined with other risk factors (Milsom et al., 2003). Factors such as substance abuse, lack of self-esteem, lack of social support, a negative environment, depression, and social-emotional incapacities all play a role in the development of extreme antisocial behaviors. It was evident that loneliness was a clear and significant trigger for Dahmer and Nielsen's severe antisocial behaviors. The extreme

levels of loneliness experienced by both men likely led to their feelings of hostility, anger, indifference, as well as a general sense of numbness and internal rigidity. Had loneliness been prevented in their lives, they may have been at a lower risk for developing antisocial behavior.

Most serial killers are not able to maintain relationships with family, peers, colleagues, or otherwise. This could be due to undiagnosed mental health disorders such as Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD). Research shows that there is a correlation and association between loneliness and ASPD (Martens & Palermo, 2005). Therefore, it is not surprising that loneliness is a reported experience in the lives of male serial killers such as Dennis Nielsen or Jeffrey Dahmer. Experiencing extreme bouts of loneliness could put individuals at risk for antisocial behaviors that are often seen in the lives of serial killers.

Relationship Status

Many serial killers have had what appear to be stable relationships (Miller, 2014). Some serial killers such as Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and Dennis Rader were able to maintain stable relationships before and while they were actively killing. Dennis Rader had a wife and two children, who remained in his life up until his arrest. His wife eventually was granted an emergency divorce by the courts, but she never had any idea that her husband was killing people when he was not home (Rawson, 2019). The Golden State Killer, Joseph DeAngelo, was also married for much of the time in which he was raping, robbing, and murdering people throughout the state of California. He had three children (McNamra, 2018)

According to Garrison (1996), children who become serial killers do not develop a rational understanding of right and wrong because of parental neglect, abuse, or violence in the home. To escape their reality, they enter a fantasy space (Carlisle, 1993; Sears, 1991). According to Sears (1991), this fantasy space will consume the person's life and cross from a child's desire to play and alleviate loneliness into a part of his day-to-day existence, causing a disorder in thought and emotional growth. As they grow up, the thinking disorder will continue to develop, and with it, a perverse concept of sexuality. Because they never developed the skills to develop normal relationships, they are unable to develop normal sexual relationships. They remain in their fantasy space for all types of relationships in their life, including sexual, and this person is able to satisfy sexual gratification in their fantasy space (Sears, 1991). As those fantasies begin to be unfulfilled, he will cross into reality to achieve what he cannot in his fantasy space, and achieving this will likely resemble similar, violent acts that the adult experienced in childhood (Garrison, 1996).

Others were considered loners, and were unable to maintain long term relationships, such as Ed Kemper or Jeffrey Dahmer. Dahmer never had a committed romantic relationship in his life (Davis, 1991). Each person he was with was likely for the purposes of killing, and not an attempt to begin a relationship with that person. Kemper also never experienced a romantic relationship. This could have been for a variety of reasons, including the well-advertised hatred of his mother (Newton, 2000).

Work Environment

Some serial killers were able to maintain steady jobs throughout their killings, while others were often unemployed or moved from job to job (Chan & Heide, 2009; Fox & Levin, 2003; Hazelwood, Dietz, & Warren, 1992; Holmes & De Burger, 1985; Palermo & Kocsis, 2005; Rappaport, 1988). One FBI study found that 48% of serial killers experienced employment problems (Vronsky, 2004). For example, Ted Bundy never maintained steady employment throughout his adult life. He briefly held a job at the Seattle Yacht Club. He was also suspected by his colleagues for stealing high end clothes from the guests. Bundy even borrowed fine china, linen, and sterling silver to host his own private party, would frequently borrow the car belonging to the pastry chef, and would take money from the pastry chef and never pay her back. The pastry chef even called Bundy's mother to attempt to get her to intervene but was unsuccessful. Unsurprisingly, he was "let go", supposedly for stealing food that employees weren't supposed to eat (Fraser, 2025). He then went to the Olympic Hotel in Seattle but was fired after one month for stealing waiters' clothes out of their lockers. Two months later, he was working at the Queen Anne Safeway. He stopped showing up to his shifts within three months. Ted Bundy would clearly fit into the classification of having employment problems.

Some serial killers would even use their job to assist them in finding victims, such as John Wayne Gacy or Dennis Radar. Gacy had multiple jobs throughout his life but settled down when he started his own construction business. He would interview and employ young men that were chosen to become his victims. When a boy would go

missing, Gacy was able to claim that the victim never started on the job, or never showed up for work, to redirect the blame from himself. Gacy's name and company were tied to multiple investigations of disappearances in his area well before he was captured (Philbin & Philbin, 2009).

Dennis Radar was employed by ADT Security and at one point was an installation manager. This allowed him the opportunity to enter people's homes, which he would familiarize himself with before choosing his victim. He would identify a victim, later breaking into their homes, disabling phone lines and ransacking the houses, all without being caught (Philbin & Philbin, 2009). While not all of his victims were chosen in this manner, it is theorized by some psychologists that the only reason he stopped killing was because his employment changed (Philbin & Philbin, 2009). In 1994 he became employed by the city as a compliance officer and he would dole out citations to single mothers or target men that seemed to not have high incomes. It was petty work that allowed him to feel a sense of power and control over others (Kissel et al., 2020).

Psychosocial Theories of Serial Murder

There are numerous theories that seek to explain why serial killers are motivated to commit such violent acts against another human being. Theories that are criminological, psychological, and sociological in nature can help guide researchers in their attempt to gain an understanding of the mind of the male serial killer.

Criminological and sociological theories are used to explain the causes of a crime, as well as why someone commits a crime, and assist in identifying the risk factors for committing a crime (Cullen & Agnew, 2006). As stated by Sutherland (1934),

criminology is the scientific study of breaking and making the law, and society's reaction to law breakers. Outside of attempting to understand what we observe around us, these theories also look to assist the scholarly community and law enforcement in making predictions about crime and criminals.

Historically, the primary perspective on crimes argued that crime was the result of supernatural forces, and that the criminals had succumbed to or were possessed by evil forces (Cullen & Agnew, 2006). This theory was challenged during the Age of Enlightenment, and from there classical theory was born. di Beccaria (1764) argued that crime is caused by natural forces, rather than supernatural forces. Specifically, di Beccaria (1764) explained that individuals are rational beings who pursue their own interests to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Unless that person is deterred by a fitting punishment, they might commit crimes in the pursuit of their own self-interest (Cullen & Agnew, 2006).

Psychological theories of serial murder attempt to explain whether personality characteristics or psychological factors such as mental illnesses, played a role, if any, in the development of a serial killer (Hickey, 2015). Psychological theories are important not only because they influence criminological theories, but also because they help researchers understand the role that a person's psychological well-being, or lack thereof, has contributed to a crime. When looking at psychological and criminological theories and comparing them against the life course of a serial killer, one could begin to identify the foundation of potential psychosocial causal factors.

Head Trauma

While technically within the realm of biopsychology, head trauma can have a negative impact on a person that could impact their ability to make decisions in addition to their general psychological makeup (Allely, 2018). Studies showed that experiencing a traumatic brain injury (TBI) during developmental years have been linked to decreases in decision-making abilities, impulsivity and self-control, and noticeable cognitive impairments (Byrne & Coetzer, 2016; Fullerton et al., 2019). According to Lundström et al. (2013), there is a relationship between neurodevelopmental disorders and violent criminality. These neurodevelopmental or neuropsychiatric disorders are found to be common among different types of criminals, not just killers (Gansler et.al. 2009; Grafman et. al, 1996; Anckarsäter, 2005). There is significant research focused specifically on head trauma and serial murder (Allely et.al, 2014; Freedman and Hemenway, 2000, Grafman et al., 1996, Langevin et al., 1988, Pallone and Hennessy, 1998, Sarapata et al., 1998), but the scholarly community needs more recent research in this field, as the majority of it was conducted in the 90s. In a study by Allely et. al (2014), researchers found that of the 239 serial and mass murderers included in the study, over 20% suffered definite or suspected head injuries in childhood, and sometimes more than one injury.

In the same study by Allely et. al (2014), researchers also found that out of 106 killers with either Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and/or head trauma, 58 of them had experienced psychosocial stressors. It was concluded that likely more than 10% of serial killers have had a head injury, and that the majority had experienced psychosocial risk

factors at some point during their childhood. Allely et. al (2014) establish in their research that there is a complex interplay between neurodevelopmental and environmental factors, namely psychosocial adversity, that could possibly result in an individual being susceptible to develop into a serial killer.

Katzin et al. (2020) conducted a study on TBI and ASPD. These are factors that have been repeatedly seen in incarcerated men, and specifically male serial killers. Researchers discovered a positive relationship between TBI and young male prisoners, and a relationship between TBI and deviant or other antisocial behaviors. This research demonstrated the clear connection between offenders' behavior being impacted by head trauma. However, it is important to note that the study did not specify the cause of the head trauma, the severity, or only focused on serial killers.

Mental Illnesses

Mental illness in male serial killers is expected. However, it is also anticipated that the mental illness or illnesses has gone undiagnosed or untreated. Mental illnesses are a health condition that involve changes in thought, behavior, and/or emotion, and can cause distress or issues functioning in social settings, work settings, or within the family unit (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Mental health disorders or illnesses are identified and diagnosed by medical health professionals with the current and fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). Mental illnesses often associated with male serial killers are ASPD, Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), and Schizophrenia.

Research shows that psychosocial factors play an important role in the genesis of psychiatric disorders, and that the investigation of key life events could be insightful regarding the psychosocial developments whereby sociocultural factors negatively impact one's mental health and personality (Dohrenwend, 1975). According to Dohrenwend (1975), there are consistent associations between a variety of sociocultural factors and psychopathology, such as geographic location, sex, and social class. The author argued that the stressful circumstances experienced by those exposed to negative sociocultural factors could have led to psychiatric disorders. Additionally, the author stated that instances of both war and even more ordinary life events could cause stressful experiences that could lead to psychological disorders.

Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD)

ASPD is arguably the most commonly associated mental illness with serial killers in the media, whether it be accurate to that killer or not. According to Fox et. al (2019), "while most serial killers are psychopathic by nature, their formal clinical diagnosis is antisocial personality disorder (p. 48)". Not all serial killers are psychopaths, and not all psychopaths are serial killers. It is important to note that having this disorder does not automatically make someone become a violent offender. ASPD is a psychological disorder that is vastly misunderstood and will continue to require additional research, not just with violent offenders.

The American Psychiatric Association (2013), stated that ASPD is a cluster-B personality disorder that is often characterized by a "pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others, occurring since age 15 years, as indicated by three

(or more) of the following... (p. 659)” which includes a failure to conform to social norms, deceitfulness, impulsivity, irritability, disregard for others and the law, and a lack of remorse. To be diagnosed with ASPD, the patient must be at least 18 years of age and have a history of symptoms correlated with conduct disorder, prior to the age of 15. This disorder is more common in men than in women and appears to be more commonly associated with low economic status and metropolitan settings.

A person with ASPD is typically going to lack empathy, and will tend to be an arrogant individual, who displays a superficial charm (Reising et. al, 2019). These traits are also often associated with psychopathy and can be predictive of recidivism in a criminal context. These individuals may also have a history of numerous sexual partners, and may be oftentimes irresponsible and exploitative with their partners. Monogamous relationships will be less common with an individual with ASPD, and they may be irresponsible parents (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Those with ASPD have reported various types of ACEs or adversities, including neglect, sexual and physical abuse, lack of affection or intense discipline, conduct and behavioral problems, exposure to criminality, and minimal educational achievements (Armstrong & Kelly, 2008; Berenz et. al, 2013; Coid et.al, 2006; Horowitz et. al, 2001; Roberts et. al, 2008). Harsh punishment in childhood may indirectly impact adult antisocial behavior via intermediary factors such as symptoms of conduct disorder and callous-unemotional traits (Goulter et al., 2020). Additional studies showed that paternal antisocial personality, absence in the child’s life, and emotional rejection are highly correlated to externalizing problems in

male children, meaning that they could have a chance of antisocial behavior (Cowan, et. al, 1996; Phares & Compas, 1993).

Although serial murder, psychopathy, and ASPD are often viewed as synonymous with each other, someone having a diagnosis of ASPD does not make that person a serial killer, or mean that they are at risk for becoming one (Raine & Sanmartin, 2012). While Roberts and Coid (2010) found that ASPD was significantly related to most offenses, Reising et. al (2019) argued that relationships between ASPD and offending may be superfluous, because the symptoms of ASPD often include offending. Additionally, it is important to note that while all serial killers seem to exhibit antisocial qualities, these features are different for each killer, and are not experienced in the same way (Hickey, 2015). Research showed that violent offenders with ASPD may be explained by their lack of empathy, impulsivity, and incapacity to observe societal norms (Cunha & Gonçalves, 2013; James & Seager, 2006). In a study by Buss (2005), the author found that there are a host of personality variables in which men score high on that correlate with criminality. These include variables such as impulsivity, sensation seeking, childhood aggressiveness, lack of empathy, and deficient moral reasoning. These variables are often also associated with the aforementioned ASPD diagnostic criteria. Yu et. al (2012) found that a diagnosis of ASPD was specifically related to violent crimes, and that those diagnosed with a personality disorder were three times more likely to commit a violent act. For those with ASPD, this violence is proactive, as opposed to reactive (Reising et. al, 2019).

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)

BPD is outlined in the DSM-V (2013) as being a cluster B personality disorder that includes displaying a prevalent pattern of signs beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of situations. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of childhood trauma is possible, as childhood trauma is more common in the histories of individuals diagnosed with BPD (McLean & Gallop, 2003; Roberts et. al, 2008). There is research to support the idea that individuals who experience childhood maltreatment or adverse experiences have higher levels of distrust, perceived interpersonal threat, and negatively shifted emotions. These cognitive alterations are hypothesized to be critical to the development and maintenance of PTSD (McLean & Gallop, 2003; Roberts et. al, 2008).

Physical and sexual abuse, neglect, loss of a parent early in life, and exposure to fighting or arguments is not unheard of in childhood experiences. One study rooted in evolutionary psychology found that having a stepparent in the home is the single greatest risk factor for child abuse (Buss, 2000). In addition to childhood trauma being a primary risk factor, it is believed that BPD originates from a mix of factors that include socioenvironmental, as well as genetic (Cattane, Rossi, Lanfredi, & Cattaneo, 2017). Research showed that those diagnosed with BPD have reportedly higher rates of many types of ACEs, including neglect, emotional and sexual abuse, and loss of a parent or guardian (McLean & Gallop, 2003; Roberts et. al, 2008). Research suggested that the high prevalence of personality disorders such as BPD among violent criminals may be the result of the ACEs experienced early in life (Gibbon et. al, 2009; McLean & Gallop, 2003; Roberts et. al, 2008; Spataro et. al, 2004).

Violence in the context of BPD is theorized to be a means of relieving tensions in the person's life (Coid et. al, 2006; Duggan & Howard, 2009). The violence seems to be emotionally driven for individuals with BPD (de Barros & de Pádua Serafim, 2008), and is more reactive rather than proactive (Reising et. al, 2019). In studies of violent offenders, the most reported comorbidity is between ASPD and BPD, disorders that are both significantly associated with violence that is driven by high levels of both anger and hostility (Coid et. al, 2006; Duggan & Howard, 2009; Freestone, et. al, 2013; Howard et. al, 2014, Kolla et. al, 2017). Additional research shows that specifically with sexual homicide offenders, ASPD, BPD, and NPD were the most common personality disorders (Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Hill et. al, 2006; Langevin et. al, 1998). For the homicide offenders that could be identified as sexual sadists, these killers showed higher rates of BPD, ASPD, and NPD, among others (Hill et. al, 2006). Overall, killers that have sexual components to their murders are more likely to present with BPD (Beauregard & DeLisi, 2018). In a study by Beauregard and DeLisi (2018), researchers found that in homicides conducted by individuals with BPD, the killers showed the impulsive features, uncontrollable emotions, and distorted identity and self-image that is present in offenders who preselect victims. The study also showed that BPD likely influences the fantasy life of sexual killers, especially focusing on the distorted self-image and unregulated emotions. Finally, this study showed that the impulsive features, such as intense drug and alcohol abuse before or during the crimes, is likely an attempt by the offender to manage their emotions in the context of a sexual homicide. Serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer was known for abusing alcohol before and during his sexual homicides. Diagnoses for

Dahmer have been disputed, but he displayed symptoms and signs of ASPD, BPD, schizoid, and schizotypal disorders (Dahmer, 1992).

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD)

Another cluster-B personality disorder, NPD is characterized by a grandiose sense of self (Reising et. al, 2019). In addition to the diagnostic criteria of NPD, this person will often be extremely sensitive to criticism, although it may not be externally visible. This defeat will leave the individual feeling humiliated, resulting in them reacting with rage or a defiant counterattack towards the person that made them feel that way (Reising et. al, 2019). Numerous mental illnesses are comorbid with NPD, such as substance use disorders, and eating disorders like anorexia nervosa. Other personality disorders could be associated with NPD, including histrionic, borderline, antisocial, and paranoid (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). According to Singleton et. al., (1998), ASPD is the most frequently reported diagnosis in prison studies, followed by borderline and narcissistic. Johnson et. al (2000) demonstrated that those diagnosed with a cluster B disorder (i.e. narcissistic) were three times more likely to engage in violence compared to those without any symptoms. Research demonstrates that NPD is associated with increased crimes against a person, including homicide and arson (Blackburn & Coid, 1998; Keeney et. al, 1997). Individuals with NPD have been more likely to report ACEs such as neglect, lack of attention or affection, and exposure to criminality (Roberts et. al, 2008).

Ted Bundy is a common example of a known serial killer that was also a narcissist. While in prison, Bundy was diagnosed with malignant narcissism (Griffith,

2021). Bundy had a grandiose sense of self, and required constant admiration from his social and professional peers, girlfriends, and family. Bundy often took advantage of those around them, whether it be from constantly borrowing money and cars from his girlfriends and friends, or using his girlfriend to avoid being painted in the media as a bad person (Kendall, 2020).

Jeffrey Dahmer is another serial killer that has been identified as a narcissist (Griffith, 2021). Like Bundy, Dahmer has also been classified as having malignant NPD. Dahmer was notorious for lying and using deceptive tactics to lure victims to his apartment (Kendall, 2020). Once there, he would complete sadistic and violent acts against them and their corpse. Dahmer was also constantly seeking the approval of his peers. He required admiration for his behavior, and would go out of his way to get a laugh from those around him. Malignant NPD is considered a severe form of the disorder. It is unsurprising that extreme offender such as Bundy or Dahmer would fit the diagnostic criteria for this disorder.

Psychopathy

The modern media often uses the terms psychopath and sociopath interchangeably when discussing serial murder, and they are often incorrect in their usage of the terms. Although not in the current fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), psychopathy is viewed as either a neuropsychiatric disorder or similar to a personality disorder (Anderson & Kiehl, 2014; Blair, 2013). Psychopathy is a personality type that is characterized by both high levels of emotional dysfunction and deviance that negatively affects the community through harmful behaviors (American

Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is important to note that there is a major problem with labeling someone as a psychopath, as scholarly researchers and the medical community have yet to reach a consensus for a proper definition for the term (Hickey, 2002).

Typically, the psychopath does not have a criminal record. This is not because they have never committed a crime or were never arrested. Rather, it is because they are meticulous, and are careful to avoid arrest (Hickey, 2002). Multiple studies in the United States show that psychopathy is a strong predictor for career criminality (Driessen et al., 2018; Hawes et al., 2018). These studies also show that the more psychopathic features and the earlier in development those traits appear, the more serious the criminal behavior (Driessen et al., 2018; Hawes et al., 2018).

Fox, and DeLisi (2018) conducted a quantitative analysis of 2,603 killers in an effort to identify a relationship between psychopathy and homicide. Data showed that with an effect size ($r=.74$) for serial murder and the overall effect size ($r=.68$), the effect size is large and therefore revealing of moderate psychopathy in a murderer, and even more so in a serial killer. In a review of multiple subtypes of homicide offenders, researchers discovered a clear connection between psychopathy and murderous behavior. Essentially, the authors were able to determine that an individual having psychopathic traits is a substantial risk factor for multiple forms of murder. Utilizing the PCL-R to assess the murderers that partook in the study allowed a strict measurement for researchers to measure and compare the participants (Norris, 2011). Ultimately, the researchers found that there is a high probability that the majority of male serial killers have psychological or mental health issues that correlate with psychopathy.

While psychopathy and crime have its clear connections, being a psychopath does not automatically mean someone is or will become a criminal. As previously mentioned, the psychopath likes to have the feeling of being in control or being in positions of power. Therefore, a psychopath is often going to seek high powered jobs, and it is theorized that it is more probable to meet a psychopath in a boardroom than it is to cross their path in a prison (Hickey, 2015).

Researchers have also identified different types of psychopaths, such as the sexual psychopath, which is arguably the most common. These types of killers are often referred to as “lust killers”. According to a study by Mitchell & Aamodt (2005), researchers found that aside from neglect, all types of abuse were substantially higher in the lust typology serial killer population than in a controlled sample. For the lust killer, erotophonophilia and fantasy play a key part in the motivation of committing homicide (Hickey, 2002). Erotophonophilia is a paraphilic term that is used to describe a lust killer who is sexually aroused or gratified at the result of murdering another person. For the lust killer, fantasy is an essential part of the arousal that becomes the focal behavior in their process (Hickey, 2002). In a study by Prentky et al. (1989), researchers found that 86% of serial killers had vivid and recurrent homicidal fantasies that preceded committing the murder.

Both Kemper and Dahmer reported fantasizing heavily about murder prior to killing anyone. Kemper had repeated fantasies of death and mutilation or dismemberment (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995). For Kemper, dismemberment was more fetishistic than anything else (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995). Dismemberment fulfilled his recurring fantasy of possessing his victims (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995). Kemper’s fascination with

execution starting at a young age also likely played into the fantasies he would have about dismemberment. Fantasies became a critical part of the murder process for Kemper, as they would for Dahmer.

Fantasies of death and control dominated Dahmer's thoughts from a young age. According to Dahmer, he was around 14 years old when he began having fantasies of a body that he could control and use for his own needs and desires (James, 2022). He also reported that the Exorcist movie fueled his fantasies. He would even show victims the Exorcist as part of his killing ritual to fulfill his fantasies (James, 2022). Like Kemper, Dahmer was fully aware of the importance that fantasies played in the killing process.

Types of Psychopaths

Analyzing psychosocial characteristics can assist researchers in further understanding paraphilic interests (Chan, 2021). According to Chan (2021), men in his study reported substantially higher levels of paraphilic interests. Results showed that the male participants had low levels of self-control and social bonds, and high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, risky sexual behavior, and negative temperament. Multivariate analyses indicated that these levels were important factors associated with the participants' likelihood of having some type of paraphilic interest, whether it be generic or a subtype. The research suggested that the findings provide support for various criminological theories that explain paraphilic interests. Additionally, the research also proposed that the approaches to identify the influence of low self-control, general strain theory is useful in explaining general paraphilic interests. Because paraphilic interests are

often seen in serial killers, this research can guide future conversations on the relationship between the influence of psychosocial factors and paraphilic interests.

Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas (1988) identified that for sexual murderers, fantasy is more than just an experience, it is a process. The killer may identify fantasies early on in life, and those fantasies may intensify over time, leading these men from an early age to understand the dynamic power of life and death and realizing the decision that they get to make over whether to control, injure, or kill another person. In addition to this study, researchers also argued that the thought process of a serial lust killer is influenced by their experiences, and those unique situations can impact or influence the different types of fantasies that are created (Hickey, 2002). Essentially, negative experiences can lead to negative thoughts and fantasies, and positive experiences can lead to positive thoughts and fantasies. In arguing that the psychological motives for a lust killer lies in the thought processes of the killer and not in the roots of trauma or abuse, researchers instead can look to further evaluate the thought processes of these killers, which are influenced by unique life experiences (Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988).

For someone like convicted serial murderer Edmund Emil Kemper (The Coed Killer), fantasy played a major role in his life, and he reported often fantasizing about committing his next murder. Kemper was heavily motivated by the rage he felt from his life experiences with his family, and fantasizing, or rehearsing the murder in his mind, became the focal part of the activity (Hickey, 2002). Kemper was abused by his mother, who would often lock him in their basement as a child when she felt he was not living up to her standards. His mother became a key part of his murderous rampage, even though

she was not his first victim (Newton, 2000). Violent fantasies of death, mutilation, and dismemberment were present for Kemper starting at a young age, and his fantasies were an active part of committing the murder (Newton, 2000). Kemper began engaging in animal cruelty before the age of 10, and even beheaded and murdered the two family cats.

Sociopathy

Opposite of the psychopath, the sociopath is an anti-social individual. The sociopath is usually more familiar with prison and have a history of criminal behavior. They have specific attributes, such as callousness, anger, indifference, and revenge fantasies, as well as average to below average intelligence, which are all traits often associated with criminal behavior (Hickey, 2002). The sociopath is also identifiable by characteristics such as being prone to fits of rage, having a general disregard for rules, a disregard for the rights of other people, an inability to experience remorse or guilt, and are capable of displaying violent behavior (Bonn, 2014). Crimes committed by sociopaths are often viewed as being chaotic and disorganized when compared to crimes committed by psychopaths. They act spontaneously and off of feeling, instead of a methodical plan. The sociopath is also more likely to leave evidence behind at the crime scene, and they typically do not take any effort to hide or conceal the corpse (Bonn, 2014). The causes of psychopathy and sociopathy are still being determined in the scholarly community, but there is a general assumption that sociopathy appears to be the result of the person experiencing childhood trauma, such as physical or emotional abuse.

On the other hand, it seems that psychopathy is more strongly correlated with the brain and underdevelopment (Bouchard et.al, 1990).

Demographics of Male Serial Killers

Age, Race and Ethnicity

A general profile of a male serial killer from the United States shows that they range in age from 25-34 (Holmes, 1985). The average male serial killer begins killing around 28 (Aamodt, 2020). However, there are cases such as Dahmer or Kemper, where the killer began murdering during their teenage years (Newton, 2000). In a study by Capedelli and D'Orsogna (2024), data showed that serial killers who began killing prior to age 20 had longer careers compared to those that started later in life. Researchers found that the median career duration of serial killers in the United States is three years, with male serial killers having slightly longer careers, and that those that began killing in the 1960s and 1970s had longer careers compared to those that began killing later. However, those in the 1980s and 1990s had on average more homicides per year. Ultimately, the study showed that male serial killers both started and ended their killing careers at younger ages.

The race and ethnicity of serial murderers need to be researched further. While the majority have been white males, historically white males make up much of the U.S. population, so it is important to keep that in mind when considering these types of statistics (Hickey, 2015). Ethnic and racial minorities are starting to see further representation in serial killer research in recent years, with an increasing percentage of African American male serial killers being identified (Aamodt et at, 2020; Hickey, 2015).

In the annual Radford/FGCU Serial Killer Database report, Aamodt et al. (2020) stated that “the majority of serial killers were African Americans (50.8%) followed by Whites (36.5%), Hispanics (10.5%), Asians (1.8%), and Native Americans (.4%) (p. 34)”. This data directly shows that serial killers cannot be classified to one race in the United States. Despite the above data, there is still an overrepresentation of the white serial killer archetype in the media, which leads people to believe that Black serial killers are nonexistent (Wallenbor, 2024).

Location

Male serial killers have killed throughout the United States (Vronsky, 2004). In some instances, killers have even crossed state lines to have a wider pool of potential victims (Larson, 2003; Michaud & Aynesworth, 1983). According to Ted Bundy, serial killers are capable of traveling long distances, upwards of 300 miles, in order to capture and eventually dispose of a victim (Keppel, 1985). Bundy crossed state lines to not only source new victims, but also to hide from investigators. Bundy ended up going from the West Coast all the way to Florida to not only hide from law enforcement after escaping from prison, but to continue his violent spree (Rule, 1980). Despite serial murder happening across both coasts, male serial killers seem to be more likely to kill in the Pacific Northwest (Hickey, 2015). This would include states such as Washington, Oregon, and northern California, but major cities throughout the United States such as, Chicago, Milwaukee, New York City and Wichita aren't without their serial murder histories. While New York and California have had the most known serial killers and victims (Sheth, 2020), there has been a serial killer in all 50 states (Sheth, 2020).

Spatial mobility is important to take into account when examining serial killers. The geographically stable serial killer is one who kills in the general vicinity in which he resides. Examples of this include Albert Fish, John Wayne Gacy, and Wayne Williams, all of whom never killed outside of their immediate areas (Holmes, 1985). Opposite to the geographically stable serial killer is the geographically transient serial killer. This offender travels continuously throughout his killing career. Serial killers such as Ted Bundy and Henry Lee Lucas traveled across state lines to reach their self-proclaimed hundreds of victims (Holmes, 1985).

Compared to the rest of the world, the United States is responsible for the world's largest source of serial killers. The United States is home to three times more serial killers per capita compared to any other country in the world (Sheth, 2020). The United States has produced 67.58% of known serial killers in the world, both male and female (Sheth, 2020). It should be noted that this data may not be entirely accurate, as the United States is known for having advanced record keeping systems, policing, and having powerful media outlets that widely cover violent cases. Other countries may not have as advanced reporting methods or may not disclose serial murder cases to the public.

Occupations

It seems hard to believe that an active serial killer could maintain a career outside of killing. According to Hickey (2015), male serial killers are more likely to engage in blue-collar type work. For example, John Wayne Gacy was a businessman who ran his own construction company, and even volunteered his free time as a Democratic Precinct Captain in his community (Newton, 2000). While multiple serial killers are known for

having been employed as handymen, others functioned as members of society in more traditional 9-5 roles, such as The Son of Sam working for the United States Postal Service, or Dennis Rader working for the security company ADT as a home installation representative (Newton, 2000). This shows that despite their nefarious personal lives, many serial killers have held stable jobs, some for many years, until killing takes over all aspects of their life, and they end up getting caught.

Methodology and Motivations of Serial Killers

When analyzing serial murder, assessment of the known or perceived motivations and methods used is critical. According to Hickey (2015), there are five clear motives for male serial killers. These are: “sex sometimes (47%), control sometimes (31%), money sometimes (18%), enjoyment sometimes (15%), and sex only (8%) p. 275.” This disbands the common misconception that male serial killers are driven by their desire and need to fulfill masochistic sexual fantasies. However, other studies still stress the importance of fantasy.

Ressler and Douglas (1988) studied the motivations for serial murder in their research conducted with the FBI. This groundbreaking study paved the path for why examining motivations is an important part in the attempt to understand why a serial killer would kill. The study included 36 convicted sexual murderers with the goal of learning their motivations for killing. The study outlined both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data showed that the psychological motivations for murder did not result from trauma or stimulation, but was instead a result of individual thought processes (Ressler & Douglas, 1988).

Thought processes are influenced by life experiences. These life experiences can impact the different types of fantasies that the killers had or have. Therefore, negative life experiences would lead to negative thoughts and fantasies, and then the killer acts on those newfound desires. The fantasizing is a process for the killer, and not just an experience. According to Ressler and Douglas (1988), “the power of life and death and the realization that one decides whether to control, injure, or kill is a very early experience for these men (p.38)”. Researchers also point out that for these men, sexual murder is built on fantasies from within their imagination (Ressler & Douglas, 1988). Fantasy is an essential component in the psychological development of a serial killer. Fantasies are found in most cases of serial murder, not just cases where the crime looks to have been sexually motivated, such as in the case of Ed Kemper (Newton, 2000).

Research showed that there are different aspects that contribute to the motivations of a serial killer to select and ultimately kill their victim, and sexual urges and desires are only one motivator. Choo and Choi (2020) sought to further examine the nature of serial murderers and their causes. Researchers determined that there is a certain level of difficulty in attempting to classify serial killers into mutually exclusive categories because typologies often use a blend of objective definitions. These definitions could include items such as evidence left at the crime scene, background characteristics of the offender, and subjective factors, to name a few. These typologies are important to consider, but they lack empirical testing, which leads to the ultimate issue of reliability and validity. Researchers also pointed out that there needs to be further examination of

the interaction between the person, society, environment, culture, religion, and psychology to better understand the motivations for serial killing (Choo & Choi, 2020).

Motivations may influence the methods a killer chooses to kill their victims, or the activities they engage in while planning or when killing the victim. If the killer is sexually motivated, then they could bring items to the scene of the crime to sexually assault the victim. They may bring items that assist them in becoming aroused, or drugs or other substances to inebriate the victim. Typically, male serial killers are more likely to use a more intimate means of killing, such as guns, knives, and strangling (Hickey, 2015). Motivations also seem to differ across races; Caucasian offenders are more likely to kill while they enjoy it, while African American and other minority offenders are more likely to kill through “Gang or Criminal Enterprise” (Aamodt et al., 2020) activities.

Victimology

Victim studies, and victimology as a whole, is an important aspect in the study of serial murderers. Usually, male serial killers target strangers as their victims (Hickey, 2015). It is relatively uncommon that a male serial killer murders someone they know or that they are related to, but it is not unheard of. For example, Edmund Kemper killed his grandmother, grandfather, a handful of strangers, and then his mother, and mother’s friend (Newton, 2000). Kemper is an outlier in research because of the rare victim pattern that he created.

Victims of male serial killers tend to be the same gender and in the same age range, with it being uncommon for a male serial killer to switch between men and women and large gaps in age, although it is not unheard of (Hickey, 2015). Typically, most

murder victims are in their 20s (Buss, 2005). With Edmund Kemper, his victims ranged from college aged to elderly, and he killed one male (Newton, 2000). Richard Ramirez's victims were as young as nine and as old as 83, but he killed both men and women (Kissel et al, 2020). He sourced his victims in a variety of ways, killing a total of 13 people, and attacking or raping many others (Kissel et al, 2020). Albert Fish targeted children, killing both boys and girls (Newton, 2000). Fish was only convicted of killing three children, but it is assumed that he killed many more, as he confessed to killing and cannibalizing over 200 boys and girls (Holmes, 1985). H.H. Holmes also killed both men and women of varying ages. While he mostly targeted young women, it was the murder of Benjamin Pitzel that led to his execution in 1895 (Fido & Southwell, 2008). Dahmer's victims ranged in age and included two children. Dahmer began killing men in his teenage years and continued until he was caught (James, 2022). In a study founded in evolutionary psychology, data showed that murder increases dramatically as males enter the years of reproductive competition (Buss, 2005). It could be argued that for many of these men, they began killing or having thoughts of killing during puberty.

One common space that victims of serial killers are noticed is in the sex industry (Hickey, 2015). While victim precipitation and victim facilitation are not meant to imply that the victims are at fault for becoming victims, certain people may be more susceptible to being victimized (Hickey, 2015). Victims of male serial killers may facilitate their victimization through their behaviors, especially if they participate in risky behaviors such as sex work. In addition to high-risk jobs, victims may also live in a high-crime area, or be in an abusive relationship (Titus, 1995). Victimology is an important aspect in

the cases of male serial killers, as most serial killers have a tendency to kill strangers. Studying victims and victim types through psychosocial theories could help researchers better understand what influence psychosocial factors have on victim selection.

Summary and Conclusions

Male serial killers in the United States are a relatively rare phenomenon in 2025, but that does not mean that they are going away. Research continues to gain momentum in an effort to learn more about these unusual offenders. Much of what is known about serial killers does not include extensive exploration of the shared psychosocial factors and instead focuses on the gruesome details of their killings. By focusing research further on these characteristics that are often seen in the life course of a convicted serial killer, we have the opportunity to explore how mental health problems and negative interactions with society could influence one's methods and motivations to kill.

Chapter 3 will include a description of this study. The author will examine the role of the researcher. Chapter 3 also reviews the methodology for the study, including an explanation for participation selection, data collection, and the data analysis plan. Finally, Chapter 3 outlines any issues of trustworthiness. This includes credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, intra-coder reliability, and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the psychosocial characteristics that could be associated with male serial killers based in the United States. Psychosocial characteristics are used to describe the influences of social elements on a person's behavior and psychological wellbeing (Vizzoto et al., 2013). These characteristics, or factors, include things such as exposure to crime, ACEs, relationship with caregivers, peers, and romantic relationships, socioeconomic status, and trauma (Reid et al., 2023; Vizzoto et al., 2013). ACEs are extremely common in the lives of serial killers, and it is common that more than once ACE is present. Dong et al. (2004) found that of their participants, 87% of those with one ACE reported at least one additional ACE.

I analyzed a variety of psychosocial factors. These included abuse/neglect, trauma, rejection, loneliness, relationship status, bullying, work environment, and criminal behavior prior to murder. Examining psychosocial factors could help identify why a male serial killer targeted who they did, when they did, and why and how they did (Hatch, 2005; Nurius et al., 2015; Oliveira & Beaver, 2021; Savolainen et al., 2018). The data, when compared across a variety of cases of serial murder, could also provide insight into potential risk factors that led to these men becoming serial killers (Culhane et al., 2019; LaBrode, 2007; Marono et al., 2020; Reid et al., 2019; Schlesinger, 2000). With this data, positive social change that results in a better understanding of and prevention of future violent offenders is possible.

In this chapter, I present the reason for conducting this study. I also outline and review information such as the role and responsibilities of the researcher, the methodology, and concerns of trustworthiness and any potential ethical issues. Explanations of methodology included a justification of the criteria for participant selection and data collection methods, and explanations of ethical concerns. I outline potential limitations that are a result of the methodology, as well as concerns that surrounded the role of the researcher in the study.

Research Design and Rationale

The research questions for this study are as follows:

RQ1: What psychosocial factors are associated with male serial killers?

RQ2. How do the psychosocial factors differ among male serial killers?

The focus of this study was the psychosocial characteristics commonly seen in their life courses through general strain theory. A collective case study analysis approach was used. Specifically, I focused on analyzing abuse/neglect, rejection and loneliness, bullying, relationship status, and the work environments of a limited number of case studies of male serial killers. Killers included lived and were convicted between the 1950s to present. There is a lack of understanding in the scholarly community surrounding the shared psychosocial factors that impact a man, and the role they may play in the development of a serial killer (Harrison, 2023; Marono, et al., 2020). These factors can include ACEs, mental illnesses, relationships, or social pressure (Vizzoto et al., 2013).

In using a collective case study analysis approach, a researcher has the opportunity to conduct in-depth exploration of multiple individuals (Yin, 2017). These cases are connected by time and activity (Creswell, 2014). This approach was an appropriate fit for the present study as opposed to other methods as it has high applicability to individual experiences and modern environments, and offers a deep yet wide-ranging and integrated visualization of multidimensional social units (see Quintão & Andrade, 2020). In a case study analysis approach, the researcher is conducting an in-depth exploration of one or more individuals. The cases are connected by time and activity, and a variety of data collection procedures can be used (Creswell, 2014). Case study is a research strategy, not just a data collection method. Specifically, it is a research strategy that comprises a method that covers certain methodologies related to data collection and analysis (Yin, 2017). The case study analysis approach has high applicability to both human situations, and contemporary contexts of the real world. It offers a deep yet broad and integrated vision of multifaceted social units (Quintão & Andrade, 2020).

Despite being a popular method in qualitative research, case studies are often perceived as offering low reliability and has difficulties being generalizable (Quintão & Andrade et. al, 2020). To ensure reliability in this study, the researcher used multiple sources of evidence. Additionally, there was a process of triangulation of the data. From this, a logical chain of events was defined. Reliability is fundamentally established by the triangulation of data. The process for triangulation of data originates from the application

of numerous data collection instruments, evidence chaining, and meticulous actions in all procedures performed throughout the research process (Fusch et. al, 2018).

According to Yin (2017), there are four types of triangulation. Those include (a) data triangulation through the use of several data sources, (b) researcher triangulation through the participation of different evaluators, (c) theory triangulation through the adoption of various viewpoints on the same data set, and (d) methodological triangulation through the use of different corresponding methods. In the present study, there were not multiple researchers to evaluate the data. Therefore, researcher triangulation may not have been fully achieved. This is a limitation of the present research.

In addition to ensuring reliability and replicability of the study, validity is also essential. In this study, I presented reasons for the case study selection, the context of each case study, and identified emerging patterns that allowed for the subsequent generalization of the final results. As mentioned, case study analysis has become a standard method of qualitative research in recent years in the field of psychology. Despite becoming more commonly used, searches for peer reviewed, case study analysis-based studies on psychosocial factors of male serial murderers showed a large gap in the research, specifically in peer-reviewed sources. I sought to help in closing that gap.

Role of the Researcher

In the present study, the principal role of the researcher focused on the collection, analysis, and interpretation of all data. Convicted serial killers are a dangerous group in society that are imprisoned. Obtaining access to live participants was unlikely, and therefore was not attempted. Not using live participants is uncommon to see in qualitative

research, as the researcher is traditionally conducting data collection through interviews with live participants, and then making observations from the information collected in the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Instead, data for this study was collected from secondary sources, allowing for the opportunity to include convicted serial killers that are both alive and deceased. The Radford/FGCU Serial Killer Database served as the primary source, as well as the tool for qualifying participants of this study.

I have no personal connection to serial murderers that would in any way have negatively impacted the outcome of the study. I did have an uncle, since deceased, who worked on the Unabomber task force. This is the only connection to a multimurder case that I have. As previously mentioned, no live participants were used in the study, which means that there were no ethical concerns in the treatment of participants or a power dynamic. Since no live participants were used in the study, there was no concern of engaging in social conversation with participants outside of the study or of the researcher sharing their own life experiences.

However, there still could be concern for bias since only secondary data sources were used. This data may also reflect subconscious biases I hold about serial killers and serial murder. To combat this, potential biases were managed by tools such as data triangulation. Data triangulation is when a researcher gathers and verifies their data with multiple resources (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I maintained a consistent process for handling the data when analyzing and coding to limit potential biases. I also continuously assessed myself after each case for any potential biases prior to evaluating the cases for codes and themes.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Participants of the present study were selected using purposive sampling, which was appropriate given the specific research questions of the study. All participants of the present study were selected from the Radford/FGCU database. All data used in this study was sourced from the database, and was verified with secondary sources that focused on the life courses of the included U.S. male serial killers. Specifically, this means that they lived in the United States and are biological men. The exclusion of female serial killers was appropriate for the present study as the present research focused solely on the psychosocial characteristics of male serial killers.

This study focused solely on U.S. based killers to diminish the possibilities of external cultures and foreign beliefs impacting or influencing the psychosocial characteristics being analyzed in the study. By narrowing the geographic qualifications for inclusion in the study, there was greater consistency across data from a sociocultural context, investigative and legal practices, and psychological evaluations, when relevant. All cases included in this study were known and confirmed to meet the selection criteria, as each participant was in the Radford/FGCU Serial Killer Database. This study also included serial killers who had killed at least three victims (see Reid, 2017). This allowed for a further narrowing in on potential killers to include in the study.

Based on supporting literature recommendations (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018), I included five serial killers to reach data saturation. However, it is important to note that there are disputes on data saturation recommendations. According to Morse

(1995, 2015), saturation is the most commonly cited justification for an adequate sample size, but details on how saturation is assessed and determined are largely absent in qualitative studies. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), data saturation occurs when, despite the introduction of new data, no new insights occur. Reaching data saturation is a critical component of qualitative research because it helps make data collection robust and valid (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). This sampling strategy is appropriate given the restrictions, limitations, ethical concerns, and potential safety concerns of working with convicted serial killers.

Instrumentation

In a qualitative study, the primary instrument is the researcher, as the researcher is the one who gathers, analyzes, and interprets all the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Another key instrument was an Excel spreadsheet where I tracked the important information about each of the offenders. This sheet outlined important information about each offender, such as childhood experiences, socioeconomic status, mental health history, criminal history, information on relationships (if applicable), victim information, and victim count. It also included the psychosocial factors this study focused on, such as abuse/neglect, rejection, bullying, loneliness, relationship status, and work environment. Using a spreadsheet allowed for ease in identifying themes with the different killers and the psychosocial factors that were shared experiences amongst them.

Another tool I used was a dissertation journal. Both the journal and the spreadsheet held the same types of information that is listed above, but the journal served as a backup log of data, as well as an additional place to store notes and updates on the

data. In documenting all data in a physical journal, I reduced the possibility of data being permanently damaged or lost. The digital data was also regularly backed up to a flash drive to ensure that progress could not be lost or deleted. The dissertation journal also served as a place for the researcher to keep notes and track progress, information across cases, and work through coding.

Data Collection

All data sources for the present study were the secondary sources. Secondary sources are those that synthesize information from primary sources (Jarman, 2010). Secondary sources offer a perspective on the topic and are able to provide an explanation or additional insights from the primary source. The secondary source is created after the primary source was written. It is written by an individual who did not experience or participate in the events in which they are writing about (Jarman, 2010).

The primary source for this study was the Radford/FGCU Serial Killer Database. This database is the only one of its kind in its existence and is considered to be the best resource for information on serial killers (Yaksic, 2016). Otherwise, all resources were secondary sources. Choosing to use these sources instead of interviewing serial killers is a result of the difficulty and low probability of interacting directly with incarcerated male serial killers, of which there are few in the United States who are still alive who also met the criteria for this study. Instead, secondary sources such as interviews, case files, biographies, autobiographies, peer reviewed journals, news articles, and past studies on the subject provided me with extensive information about the lives of these killers so that

the psychosocial characteristics listed in the Radford/FGCU Serial Killer Database could be better assessed for the study.

The Radford/FGCU Serial Killer Database is the only resource of its kind on global serial murder, which is why it was selected as the primary source for this study. This database, originally created in a forensic psychology course and later hosted online, includes data from multiple previously existing databases that were added in 2012 (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2021). In order for a serial killer to qualify being added to this database, all data on the individual is assessed and cross-referenced to determine, with as much accuracy as possible, their eligibility (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2021). As of the time of this writing, there are 5,802 serial killers in the database, with 3,608 being based in the United States (Aamodt, 2023). From that total, 3,352 of the U.S. based serial killers are men (Aamodt, 2023). The database included information on serial killers who are confirmed, awaiting confirmation or accused, ordered others, were part of an organizational or criminal enterprise, cult, drug enterprise, team, or part of a gang. It also included those who are suspected or self-proclaimed, a spree killer, or part of a spree team (Aamodt, 2023). The database is considered to be the best source of its kind for serial killer information (Yaksic, 2016). The database is regularly reviewed and updated by its operators (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2021).

Data Analysis Plan

The data in the present study is utilized in accordance with the research questions, which are as follows:

RQ1: What psychosocial factors are associated with male serial killers? RQ2. How do the psychosocial factors differ among male serial killers?

The data from this study was sourced from the Radford/FGCU Serial Killer Database. The data was verified against biographies and autobiographies, peer-reviewed journals, previous studies, and newspaper archives. Criteria for inclusion in the study was dependent on whether the convicted serial was male, based in the United States, and in the Radford FGCU Serial Killer Database. Data reviewed and included in this study is specific to male, U.S. based serial killers and their psychosocial characteristics, namely abuse/neglect, rejection, bullying, loneliness, relationship status, and work environment. Therefore, there is little, if any, concern surrounding the data not aligning with the research question of this study.

Once access to the Radford Database was granted, serial killers were selected for the study and there was a review of their lives and possible psychosocial characteristics. Then, the data was added to a spreadsheet and journal that was used for data capture of the serial killers and identified psychosocial characteristics. With this, the collected data is manually coded, which allowed for the development and subsequent identification of categories and themes. This data was segmented, with each source of data being coded as a single data unit. While there was the potential for error with manual coding, I felt that the potential for error with manual coding was less than the potential for error with coding software, which is often used in qualitative studies that have large amount of data. There are concerns amongst the scholarly community regarding the reliability of coding software. Some concerns with coding software include the potential for researcher bias,

discrepancies in data with no explanation, and reliability issues (Lauer et al., 2018). The likelihood of software to cause errors in data analysis can be a deterrent in using the tool. However, there is data to support the use of coding software in instances where there are large amounts of data that need to be examined (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Since there were only five participants included in the present study, the researcher felt that the sample size was manageable through manual coding. If there were concerns regarding reliability, a coding software would have been used.

Intra-coder reliability was maintained throughout the coding process of the data analysis by utilizing tools such as Microsoft Excel and a dissertation journal. With the smaller dataset that is present in this study, manual coding can be a cost-effective option, in addition to being a faster alternative rather than attempting to navigate the complex and advanced features of high cost software licenses (Isangula et al., 2024). Additionally, automated tools are not able to adapt in the same way that a person can. Manual coding allows the researcher to revise and merge codes as new themes emerge, which ultimately allows codes to evolve organically during the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis benefits from flexibility. Therefore, manual coding supports the reflexive processes that are critical for the development of themes.

In this study, each case was double coded. This took place before I moved on to the next case. The rationale behind this was to avoid double-coding a large amount of data. Double coding a large data pool might have revealed poor reliability caused by easily resolvable issues with the coding frame (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Another reason

each case was double coded before moving to the next case was so that discrepancies could be identified early on. In resolving these at an earlier stage, it allowed for better accuracy and consistency in future coding, and the identification of repetitive or vague codes (MacQueen et al., 1998).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), when a researcher gathers data from multiple sources, it limits biases that could negatively impact the results of how the data is used. For this study, data was primarily sourced from the Radford FGCU Serial Killer Database. All data gathered from the database was cross-referenced against multiple other sources such as newspaper archives, scholarly studies, peer-reviewed journals, and books. This is so that the researcher was able to show that the data obtained was as accurate as possible (Stadtlander, 2018). Ultimately, credibility of the study was established through negative case analysis, cross-referencing or triangulation, saturation, and reflexivity.

Lincoln and Guba (1985), identified multiple methods to establish credibility. These include negative case analysis and triangulation. Negative case analysis involves searching for parts of the data that do not support the patterns and themes that are emerging from the data analysis. The process allows for refining the analysis until it can account for the majority of the included cases. In doing negative case analysis, the researcher may be able to broaden and confirm the emerging patterns (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Triangulation involves using multiple data sources in the research process. Since a single source or method cannot adequately educate on a phenomenon, using multiple methods is preferred. Doing so can help facilitate a more thorough understanding (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). There are four identified types of triangulation; the triangulation of methods, sources, theories, and researchers (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). By utilizing triangulation, a researcher has a better chance of reaching saturation.

A researcher has reached saturation in their study when they continue to add new data, but the new data is no longer contributing new or different information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The present study included five serial killers. Saturation was reached when no new information about each killer and their psychosocial characteristics was discovered. This number of participants satisfied the suggested number needed for saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It also avoided the potential for a large amount of data, which could have occurred if a larger sample size was included.

Finally, reflexivity is an important part of a study being deemed credible. In qualitative research, reflexivity is the process of the researcher evaluating themselves to determine how they could be impacting the study (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Bias is something that the researcher must constantly be evaluating themselves for. While researcher bias is likely entirely impossible to avoid, the researcher must go through all efforts possible to reduce the bias. By constantly reflecting on one's thoughts and opinions on the data being reviewed, the researcher became more self-aware, resulting in identification and subsequent maintenance of biases.

Transferability

The transferability of a study is important, as it shows how the results of a study are applicable. The bases for transferability are the generalization from one context to another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is established when the methodology and findings of that study are applicable to external groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As with credibility, the transferability of this study was established through processes such as triangulation. Despite best efforts on the part of the researcher to create a study that is transferable in nature to those outside the scholarly community, it ultimately is not up to the researcher if their study is transferable. Rather, it is up to those who read or review it. The person looking to make a judgement on the transferability of the study needs information on all contexts to which someone may wish to transfer hypotheses and research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The degree of transferability of a study is a direct function of the similarity between the two contexts, the context of a current study, and the context to which a future research is attempting to apply it to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

In qualitative research, you want to show the accuracy in the method you used to obtain data (Stadtlander, 2018). Dependability relates to the long-term and unwavering nature of the research finding across time (Haq et al., 2023). Reliability is typically held to be synonymous with dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure dependability, tools such as triangulation and audit trails were used in this study. By using an audit trail, I have created the opportunity for other researchers to reproduce the study. This guarantees the dependability of the results (Eryilmaz, 2022).

According to Stadtlander (2018), using audit trails means that the researcher will be keeping detailed records of everything that is done with this study. It is through methodological documentation and audit trails that the dependability of the study is ensured. In the present study, that included notes or journaling that took place throughout the process on research or key decisions made. I also documented the journey of potential theories that could have emerged from the data analysis. This audit trail also assisted in providing insights into any potential biases on the part of the researcher.

Triangulation is another important tool that assists a researcher in ensuring the dependability of their study. Triangulation of the data was accomplished by collecting data from various sources. Testing for trustworthiness and dependability begins early in the study and is continued throughout (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of an external auditor can assist with establishing levels of dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Due to the limited resources of the researcher, it was not possible for an external audit to take place.

Confirmability

In qualitative research, confirmability is about how other researchers would be able to confirm the findings of your study (Stadtlander, 2018). Confirmability involves several sub-steps (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These include steps such as confirming that the findings are grounded in the data, confirming that the inferences based on the data are logical, confirming that the category structure is sound, and accommodation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A researcher is able to achieve confirmability in their study in a few ways. One way is by ensuring the published findings are reflective of the data, and not of the

writer. Another way is by accurately presenting the data that was collected. The aforementioned audit trail not only assists with dependability, but with confirmability as well. The audit trail served as a record that another person or researcher will be able to review to determine if the information stated in the study can be traced back to their original sources (Stadtlander, 2018). In the present study, confirmability was achieved by remaining impartial, and reporting the data found as accurately as possible.

Intracoder Reliability

In qualitative studies, inter-coder reliability is often used. Inter-coder reliability involves at least two researchers. Each researcher independently codes their data and then come together with their results (Van den Hoonaard, 2008). In this study, intra-coder reliability was used. According to Lacy et. al (2015), intra-coder reliability is used to show a coder's consistency across time. On the other hand, inter-coder reliability is used when showing consistency across codes. Inter-coder reliability is used to reduce bias by having multiple researchers code the data (Stadtlander, 2018).

To achieve reliability, there are several challenges a coder will come across prior to the analytical process. First, it can be difficult to find an appropriate balance between having too few or too many codes. Next, developing codes can be time consuming and put a strain on timelines. It also can be difficult to determine when checks on coding reliability are no longer required, which can lead to causing time constraint problems. Finally, settling on relevant codes can be difficult, because a researcher who is working alone will not have a second researcher that they can evaluate the codes with (Van den Hoonaard, 2008). Because multiple people were not available to code this research, the

researcher coded and recoded multiple times to ensure accurate coding, but also to reduce or eliminate unnecessary codes. By repeating the coding and overall analysis process, this helped resolve any discrepancies in the data, as well as ensure reliability.

Ethical Procedures

In qualitative studies, the ethical procedures that are followed by the researcher are critical. According to Stadtlander (2018), the ethical procedures are surrounding the interaction with live participants. This would include things such as the interviews, protection of identity, or participant exploitation. While interviews are a common data sourcing method in qualitative studies, the present study did not use live participants because the participants would be incarcerated individuals. In the United States, prisoners no longer have the legal right to make decisions. Because of this, they are considered to be a protected class of individuals and are referred to as vulnerable subjects. Since this study sourced its data from secondary sources instead of live participants, there is less of a concern surrounding ethics. This also means that a confidentiality agreement was not needed. There was no concern surrounding unethical communications or relationships between the researcher and participant, because all participants came from a database, are incarcerated and weren't contacted, or deceased.

Since no live participants were used, no confidentiality agreement was needed. Additionally, concerns for coercion are not present. Coercion is when a person is, to some degree, forced or persuaded to do something that they do not really want to do or participate in. When a person is coerced into participating in a study, they lose the ability

to organically make their own decisions. Because live participants were not used in the study, there was no possibility for coercion to take place.

To ensure that the study was ethical, the researcher obtained permission from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) on January 16, 2025. The IRB approval number for this study is 01-16-25-0997814. This occurred prior to any data collection taking place. In order to get access to the Radford/FGCU Serial Killer Database, the researcher applied for access. This database is not accessible to the public, and access must be granted by the operators of the database before data collection and analysis can begin. Once access was granted, the researcher began creating filters in the database spreadsheet to locate serial killers that fit the criteria of the study. Once serial killers were selected based on the participant criteria, research was able to begin.

Summary

The present chapter outlined the methodology for this study. It restated the purpose of this qualitative study and the research question, as well as covered the participant selection process, instrumentation, and the data collection and analysis plan. This chapter discussed issues of trustworthiness; specifically, the credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and intra-coder reliability of the study. It also outlined ethical procedures and the low risk of ethical concern for this study. In the next chapter, the reader will find the methods used for data collection and analysis, along with the results of those findings.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Serial murder is a relatively rare phenomenon, yet law enforcement is still finding these violent offenders year after year, with the most recent serial killer identified being the Long Island serial killer in New York (Mercuri, 2025). Richard Cottingham is currently the lead suspect at the time of this writing and is suspected of murdering an estimated 18 women in different states throughout the United States (Mercuri, 2025). Serial killers are not appearing to be active at the rate that they were in the 1970s and 1980s, as the peak of serial murder in the United States took place in the 1980s (Aamodt et al., 2020). Despite the increase in movies, documentaries, and television shows on the topic, it is currently theorized by the FBI that that serial killers are responsible for less than 1% of all killings in the United States (Aamodt et al., 2020).

Despite many years of research on the topic, serial killers are still not understood. They likely never will be, as killers continue to evolve and change. Scholars can work to assist law enforcement organizations by continuing to close the gap in the literature on serial killers, especially when it comes to possible risk factors. When learning what risk factors are commonly seen in the lives of serial killers, at risk individuals can be assisted in an attempt to remediate possible future acts of violence. Additionally, law enforcement and scholarly organizations can collaborate to create outreach programs and initiatives to better serve and protect the youth in their communities.

Setting

I conducted my study using secondary data analysis. There were no conditions that influenced participants during the data collection process. Participants included in the study were selected from the Radford Database, and initial data was gathered from the database. To verify the information provided in the database, additional data included was collected from published information such as biographies, autobiographies, and peer reviewed journals, and newspaper archives. Therefore, none of the data could be impacted by conditions caused by the setting of the present study.

Case Study Selection

Before access to the database was granted, a draft list of 40 serial killers was created. This list was developed through cursory research about the serial killer to determine if their cases could align with the inclusion criteria of the study; specifically looking at if they were male, had killed three or more individuals, and were based in the United States. Serial killers were selected regardless of familiarity and unfamiliarity to the researcher. This list was documented in the researchers' dissertation journal. A color-coded legend was created to determine what criteria they fit and the number of secondary sources available on the case.

Upon approval of access to the Radford/FGCU Database, data was systematically filtered based on the criteria of the study and the initial filtering narrowed the list from 40 cases to 27 cases. Next, psychosocial characteristics recorded in the database of the 27 selected serial killers were reviewed, and 14 killers who exhibited notable commonalities were identified. Following best practice recommendations for qualitative research, the list

was further refined to five cases (Ahmed, 2025). The final five cases were selected based on the availability of comprehensive life history and criminal records in the database.

The use of the Radford/FGCU database was essential for the present study. Without the database, it would not have been possible to effectively narrow in and select participants for the study who appropriately fit the inclusion criteria. Additionally, the database served as a comprehensive and reliable foundation for understanding the important psychosocial factors of serial killers. Using a well-established and trusted data source not only strengthens the empirical grounding of the present study, but it also enhances the replicability and overall trustworthiness of the study for future researchers to expand on the topic.

Demographics

The sample size of this study consisted of five males who were born in and lived in the United States. All participants were White. Of the included participants, all five were solo killers, meaning that there was no additional involvement on the part of another person in the killing of another. Participants came from various areas of the United States, including California, North Dakota, Oregon, and two from South Dakota.

Ages of first kill varied in the study. The youngest serial killer was 24 at the age of their first kill, and the oldest was 45 at the age of their first kill. The median age of participants was 30.4 years of age when they first killed. There was a difference of 21 years between the youngest and oldest serial killers in this study. Four (90%) of the serial killers in this study were in their 20s when they first killed someone.

Case Study 1: Jerome “Jerry” Henry Brudos

Jerry Brudos was born January 31, 1939 in South Dakota (Aamodt, 2023). Brudos experienced a dysfunctional family dynamic, where he was exposed to constant abuse and rejection by his mother (Aamodt, 2023; Newton, 2000). He was a lonely child, and became close to a neighbor who he would fantasize was his mother (Vronsky, 2004). She passed from diabetes, and her loss was profound on Brudos’ young life (Vronsky, 2004). Brudos only had one friend in childhood, a female who passed away from tuberculosis (Vronsky, 2004). The loss of both of these individuals caused a sense of abandonment in Brudos (Vronsky, 2004). This sense of abandonment, along with his mother’s disdain towards him, would fuel a rage towards women as Brudos got older, and led to strong feelings about needing to control women (Vronsky, 2004).

When Brudos was 5 years old, his mother found him wearing high heels that he had found in a dump (Wilson, 2006). She was so angered by this she set the heels on fire. This intense reaction from his mother is believed to have intensified Brudos’ infatuation with high heels, resulting in the early development of his fetishistic behavior towards that type of shoe, which would intensify as he grew older (Newton, 2000). In his teenage years, Brudos was actively stealing women’s clothes, especially those that made him shame when he was going through puberty (Vronsky, 2004). His behavior and sexual urges led him to juvenile court at 17 after sexually assaulting and beating a neighborhood girl who had rejected his advances (Vronsky, 2004). He was ordered to visit the state hospital as an outpatient for counseling while completing high school (Newton, 2000).

During his time at the state hospital, he was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, as the medical team observed Brudos experiencing hallucinations, disordered perceptions of reality, and delusional thoughts (Newton, 2000). It is important to note that this diagnosis could be different by modern standards with the DSM-5. If Brudos had been evaluated against the DSM-5, he likely would have diagnosed with sexual sadism disorder and fetishism (Ramsland, 2006). He obtained sexual arousal from experiencing dominance and control of his victim. He would engage in necrophilia with his victims, and mutilate their corpses. Additionally, he had a pronounced fetish for women's shoes and undergarments, which started at a young age (Ramsland, 2006).

After high school, Brudos met his wife in 1961. They were married and had two children while Brudos was in his twenties (Newton, 2000). It was around this time in life that Brudos began dressing in women's lingerie and high heels to fulfill his own fantasies. Fantasies were a major factor in Brudos' sexual life, and the inability to successfully fulfill his fantasies likely led to feelings of frustration towards himself and his marriage (Vronsky, 2004). His time in counseling as a teenager uncovered his sexual fantasies for revenge against women, and his desire for kidnapping girls and locking them in freezers so that he could later position their bodies in sexual explicit poses (Hickey, 2002).

His wife eventually became aware of him dressing in women's attire, and their relationship was different as a result (Vronsky, 2004). Later, Brudos would be able to point to two instances where he felt rejected by his wife, which further led to the feelings of rejection by his mother, and abandonment by others in his life when he was young

(Vronsky, 2004). Brudos would react by forcing his wife to perform submissive acts, such as cleaning their home wearing nothing but high heels (Newton, 2000). He would occasionally take photos of her naked, and he would even wear her own undergarments periodically, even though he was still stealing the undergarments of other women (Hickey, 2002).

While married, Brudos worked at a radio station, where he was electrocuted and almost died (Vronsky, 2004). He experienced a loss of consciousness, and it was after this incident that those around him felt that he was a different person (Vronsky, 2004). By the time he was 29, he would kill his first victim (Aamodt, 2023). In all, Brudos killed five women, and engaged in necrophilia (Aamodt, 2023; Vronsky, 2004). His violent actions came to an end after he was captured in 1969. He was sentenced to three consecutive life terms without the possibility of parole and died in prison in 2006 (Aamodt, 2023; Oregon Department of Corrections, 2006).

Case Study 2: Harvey Carignan

Harvey Louis Carignan was born on May 18, 1927 in Fargo, North Dakota (Aamodt, 2023). Little is known about his parents and their relationship (Aamodt, 2023). From a young age, Carignan displayed unusual behavior. He was a chronic bed wetter (Aamodt, 2023). He lived with his aunts, and they moved often as a result of his bed-wetting issue (Rule, 1983). In addition to his chronic bed wetting, thievery was also common (Rule, 1983). Physical, psychological, and sexual abuse was present in his life (Aamodt, 2023).

Carignan went to reform school, and enlisted in the Army at 18 (Rule, 1983). While in the Army, Carignan was stationed in Alaska (Rule, 1983). In 1949, Carignan was arrested for murder and attempted rape and assault (Aamodt, 2023, Rule, 1983). The murder charge was appealed in the Supreme Court under the confession being admitted in error (Rule, 1983). However, he earned a 15-year sentence on the attempted rape and assault of the second victim (Rule, 1983). He was released after 9 years served at 32 years old (Rule, 1983). In 1960 and 1964, he received burglary charges (Rule, 1983). In 1964, he received a 15-year sentence (Rule, 1983). After the Army and prison, he never held consistent employment, although did work as a gas station attendant and as a retail worker (Aamodt, 2023).

Carignan was married twice and was violent and abusive in both marriages (Rule, 1983). By 45 years old, he had killed his first recognized victim (Aamodt, 2023). He killed at least five victims (Aamodt, 2023). Carignan was active in Alaska, Minnesota, and Washington (Aamodt, 2023). Upon capture, he claimed that God told him to kill these victims (Rule, 1983). He attempted to plead not guilty by reason of insanity (NGRI) but was unsuccessful (Rule, 1983). He died at 95 years of age in 2023 (Krauss, 2023).

Case Study 3: Richard Chase

Richard Trenton Chase was born in Sacramento, California on May 23, 1950 to married parents (Aamodt, 2023). His father's employment is unknown, and his mother was a homemaker (Aamodt, 2023). His father was an alcoholic (Aamodt, 2023). Chase would go on to also abuse alcohol, along with drugs (Aamodt, 2023). During his life, he experienced both physical and psychological abuse (Aamodt, 2023). Chase also was a

chronic bed wetter (Aamodt, 2023). He also was bullied by peers in school (Aamodt, 2023).

During his teenage years, Chase began engaging in animal cruelty (FBI, n.d.). He would kill the animals, and drain them of their blood (Aamodt, 2023; FBI, n.d.). He was also known to engage in arson, which is the third variable of the Macdonald triad (Aamodt, 2023). Prior to being captured for murder, Chase did have a criminal record. He was not only previously arrested, but had also spent time in prison (Aamodt, 2023). There is not information available in the Radford/FGCU database on Chase's criminal history prior to being arrested for serial murder.

Chase claimed that at the age of 21, he was involved in a physical fight (FBI, n.d.). As a result of this altercation, he claimed to have experienced head trauma and a weakened heart (FBI, n.d.). Likely due to this, Chase was unemployed (Aamodt, 2023). Chase also was single and had never married (Aamodt, 2023). By 1977 at the age of 27, Chase killed his first victim (Aamodt, 2023). He would be active until his capture 1978 (Aamodt, 2023).

Chase claimed that he was ordered to kill his victims by "death rays" that had been directed at him by UFOs (FBI, n.d.). His interviews with law enforcement officials after his capture led to him being labeled as a paranoid psychotic personality (FBI, n.d.). Ultimately, Chase was a lust killer, a cannibal, and likely a necrophiliac (FBI, n.d.; Hickey, 2002). When he was killing animals, he would experiment and drink their blood. When killing humans, he would also drink their blood, claiming that it was essential for his life, and therefore he was not murdering for no reason (FBI, n.d.). His strong desire

for blood earned him the nickname “The Vampire Killer of Sacramento” by the press (Murderpedia, n.d.). Chase earned the death penalty for his crimes (FBI, n.d.). He died in prison at the age of 30 (Aamodt, 2023).

Case Study 4: Randy Woodfield

Randy Woodfield was born in Salem, Oregon on December 26, 1950 to a married couple (Aamodt, 2023). Both parents had stable jobs during his life (Aamodt, 2023). Woodfield reportedly had problems in school, but those did not include experiences with bullying (Aamodt, 2023). According to the Radford/FGCU Database (Aamodt, 2023), there was reports of Woodfield abusing animals. Woodfield expressed cruelty towards animals starting at a young age, and his mother was aware of this behavior (Rule, 1984). His father also witnessed a disturbing event in which a young Woodfield murdered a cat when he was 10 years old (Rule, 1984). Despite abuse towards animals, there is no data in the Radford/FGCU Database to support that Woodfield was psychologically or sexually abused at any point in life (Aamodt, 2023).

In his adult life, Woodfield was never married, including at the time of his arrest (Aamodt, 2023). He also never held consistent employment, however he was briefly employed by the Green Bay Packers, who drafted him in 1974 as a wide receiver (Rule, 1984). He never stepped foot on the field for a regular season game, as he was cut from the team during training camp for multiple arrests for indecent exposure (Rule, 1984). After leaving the Packers, Woodfield’s crime escalated. He engaged in a variety of violent and sexual crimes, including robbery and sexual assault (Rule, 1984). He would specifically target female victims during these attacks (Rule, 1984).

By the time Woodfield turned 28, he had killed his first victim (Aamodt, 2023). He was active in Oregon, northern California, and Washington during his time as a serial killer (Aamodt, 2023). Woodfield's movement throughout multiple states in the Pacific Northwest earned him the moniker 'The I-5 Killer', because of his use of Interstate 5 as the primary route for committing his murders (Rule, 1984). Between 1979 and 1981, Woodfield killed 10 victims (Aamodt, 2023). He was apprehended in 1981 and received a life sentence plus 165 years (State v. Woodfield, 1983). As of the time of this writing, Randy Woodfield is still alive and is serving his prison sentence (Aamodt, 2023).

Case Study 5: Anthony Allen Shore

Anthony Allen Shore was born on June 25, 1962 in Rapid City, South Dakota (Aamodt, 2023). When Shore was young, his parents were married (Aamodt, 2023). His father maintaining full time work while his mother stayed at home (Aamodt, 2023). His parents eventually separated, and his father was not a consistent figure in his life (Mitchell, 2007). Shore moved regularly, and would eventually land in Texas, where his murders would take place (Aamodt, 2023; Mitchell, 2007).

As a minor, Shore engaged in animal cruelty (Aamodt, 2023). He also was a chronic bedwetter (Aamodt, 2023). Shore claimed to experience physical and sexual assault from his relatives (Mitchell, 2007). It is important to note that abuse is not documented in the Radford/FGCU Database, as these claims were disproven by his family. He experienced bullying from his peers (Aamodt, 2023). As he grew older, his musical talent became evident, and he eventually started a band (Mitchell, 2007). Music was not enough to pay the bills, so he was employed as a telephone repairman (Aamodt,

2023; Mitchell, 2007). Shore began to abuse alcohol and drugs, with cocaine and tequila being his preference (Mitchell, 2007). Later in life, he would blame cocaine for his behavior, including the reason for sexually assaulting his two daughters (Mitchell, 2007). While Shore did admit to molesting both of his children, but did not serve any jail time (Mitchell, 2007). Prior to his arrest for murder, he had not been arrested for any other offenses (Aamodt, 2023). It is theorized that his daughters were not the only children that he had molested (Mitchell, 2007).

Shore was married twice but was divorced at the time of his arrest (Mitchell, 2007). He regularly maintained many relationships in his life with various women, even while married (Mitchell, 2007). He had two daughters with his first wife, the oldest of which was on the autism spectrum (Mitchell, 2007). Having a special needs daughter was challenging for Shore, according to his ex-wife Gina (Mitchell, 2007). He would regularly drug his children, wives, and girlfriends to maintain control over them and be able to sexually assault them (Mitchell, 2007).

Shore was arrested in 2003 for the murders he committed between 1986 to 1994 (Aamodt, 2023; Mitchell, 2007). During the trial, professionals shared that Shore displayed signs of grandiose, manipulative, and narcissistic behavior (Mitchell, 2007). It was shared that he was likely a psychopath (Mitchell, 2007). He was found guilty and received the death penalty, which he requested (Mitchell, 2007). He was killed by lethal injection in 2018 (The Associated Press, 2018). In all, Shore is known to have killed four young women (Aamodt, 2023). As with many serial killers, is entirely possible that Shore had additional murder victims.

Data Collection

Case study information obtained and used in this study originated from the Radford/FGCU Database. This database was selected due to its empirical rigor, and established reliability in data on serial murderers. The database served as the foundational source for both identifying and selecting the five cases for the present study. Following the identification of eligible cases based on the criteria for inclusion and the psychosocial characteristics of interest, secondary sources were identified to verify data. Secondary sources such as peer-reviewed studies, biographies and true crime books, and newspaper articles were also used to support and expand on the psychosocial and case history data from the database. The availability and depth of secondary source material varied significantly across cases, showing that some killers were more prominent in media coverage in comparison to others.

Once participants were selected from the database based on the psychosocial characteristics being analyzed in the present study, triangulation began. For each case, supporting data was collected from various sources and cross-referenced with additional sources and the database for consistency. Data was then synthesized in order to develop a comprehensive history of the life course of the killer, highlighting significant moments in their psychosocial background. Once data collection on each serial killer was complete, all data was reviewed and transcribed. After the initial transcription, data was examined five separate times. By examining the data multiple times, this allowed for transparency in coding decisions and supported the need for a rigorous audit trail in qualitative research (Ahmed, 2024). Coding for the study was done manually and was both written

in a dissertation journal and stored in an Excel spreadsheet. Utilizing these tools facilitated organization of the data and ensured that each case could be reevaluated and analyzed systematically. Codes were generated iteratively, with the psychosocial characteristics being the primary focus of the transcription and coding process.

Data Analysis

The present qualitative study utilized a collective case study design analysis approach. Collective case study analysis is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon while using a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to Stake (1955), a researcher will choose multiple cases when those cases are expected to provide insight into the phenomenon of interest. These cases are not isolated, but rather are analyzed cohesively so data can be aggregated and compared (Stake, 1955). Purposive sampling was used, as was recommended by Stake (1955) because it assists the researcher in maximizing the potential data and understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

By using a collective case study analysis design, the researcher ensured that the issue being investigated by the study is explored through a variety of lenses. This allowed for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The collected data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach in order to identify any recurring psychosocial themes across cases, as well as discover any differences. According to Ahmed et al. (2025), thematic analysis is a flexible yet thorough analytic technique that assists in the identification of analyzing and interpreting patterns or themes in a qualitative study. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to

refine the data so that the themes were consistently observed and so there was no possibility for new patterns to emerge.

Initial codes were developed by examining each case study two times. After review, codes were cross-examined with the codes discovered in other cases. The codes were then grouped into larger themes. Cases varied in the number of codes that were generated. These codes, when combined with the codes of the additional four serial killers, lead to the identification of the following three themes and their subthemes:

1. Early life adversity and developmental trauma
 - a. Presence of abuse/neglect, trauma, and bullying
2. Psychological and social isolation
 - a. Presence of rejection/loneliness and romantic relationships
3. Behavioral and functional patterns
 - a. Presence of employment
 - b. Presence of criminal behavior prior to murder

Evidence of Trustworthiness

A few methods were utilized to ensure trustworthiness during the present study. All data was sourced from peer-reviewed published research, books related to the specific cases, news articles, and other reputable sources. In situations where inconsistent data became known, it was reviewed and compared with other sources until verified. In doing this, credibility was established. Additional methods of establishing credibility included utilizing data triangulation, and consistently evaluating myself for signs of bias.

To ensure the possibility of transferability in the future, the methodology was outlined in earlier chapters. In thoroughly documenting each step taken in the research process, transparency was ensured. It presents the opportunity for others to replicate the study to expand efforts on serial murder, or to similar populations or settings outside of the context of this study. Information on the design of the study and the process for data collection and analysis has been provided. While the present study was focused on a small portion of the population, the findings could be transferrable to future studies that analyze the psychosocial characteristics of male serial killers.

Dependability was achieved in this study through the use of detailed logs. In the present study, the researcher used both an Excel spreadsheet and a dissertation journal to track and analyze the five serial killers and the coding process for each. In the notebook, each serial killer had their own notes section for each case study. Once the case study was complete, a new page was started to outline the psychosocial characteristics and codes that were identified. On the Excel spreadsheet, data from the Radford database was tracked and color coded based on psychosocial characteristics. The spreadsheet data was cross referenced with the notebook data and coding was repeated on a weekly basis to ensure dependability.

Confirmability pertains to the impartiality and objectivity of the findings of the study. It guarantees that the results remain unaffected by any biases on the part of the researcher (Ahmed, 2024). Confirmability was achieved by drawing conclusions that were reflective of the collected data rather than on any information the researcher felt was interesting or important about the serial killer. The audit log which helped show

dependability of the data also assisted in achieving confirmability of the study. Reflexivity was also used to assist in showing confirmability. Reflexivity can help to reduce any biases. In doing this, objectivity was maintained throughout the study. In focusing on the collected data and relying on the audit log and being mindful of any potential biases, these efforts greatly assisted in representing the data in a reliable way that forced the researcher to remain impartial.

Results

The results of this study are based on the research questions.

Research Question 1

RQ1: What psychosocial factors are associated with male serial killers?

Various psychosocial characteristics were identified in this study. From the characteristics, three primary themes emerged with each reflecting the core psychosocial characteristics that were identified. The first theme was early life adversity and developmental trauma with the subtheme of presence of abuse/neglect, trauma, and bullying. The next theme was psychological and social isolation, and included the subtheme of presence of rejection/loneliness and romantic relationships. The third theme, behavioral and functional patterns, was characterized by two subthemes; the presence of employment, and the presence of criminal behavior prior to murder. These themes, when combined, offer a multifaceted understanding of the psychological and sociological aspects that may contribute to serial homicide offenders.

Early Life adversity and developmental trauma

In the present study, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were discovered to be a recurring element in the life course of the serial killers that were included. Specifically, experiences of abuse or neglect, trauma, and bullying were most commonly identified. The abuse or neglect that was reported included emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, with some killers experiencing multiple types of abuse. Several cases, which are outlined below, included neglectful or no consistent caregivers, which could have impeded healthy psychological development, resulting in the individuals not learning ethics, morals, or right from wrong at the appropriate ages. Additionally, exposure to trauma and instances of bullying during formative years likely contributed to long-term psychological distress and the development of maladaptive coping skills. The prevalence of early life adversity and notable psychosocial characteristics in the majority of the cases included in this study could serve as the foundational risk factors in the psychosocial profiles of male serial killers.

Presence of abuse/neglect, trauma, and bullying

Of the five serial killers in this study, three (60%) experienced some type of abuse during childhood. Abuse could include physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse, neglect by parents or caregivers, or parental or caregiver abandonment. It is important to note that just because they did not report this, does not mean it did not happen. Additionally, participants such as Anthony Allen Shore claimed abuse, but it is not noted in the database. The abuse experienced by Shore was not able to be confirmed and was denied by relatives. However, that also does not mean that it did not take place.

All five serial killers (100%) in the present study experienced some form of trauma in childhood. Abuse, parental instability, deviant behavior, and bullying or rejection were noted in the lives of all participants, to varying degrees. Trauma in childhood could cause deviant behavior to begin at a young age. In the present study, deviant behavior likely caused by trauma included animal cruelty, early sexual activity and misconduct, fire setting, and criminal behavior, such as theft. Signs of trauma were also evident in cases where chronic bed wetting or mental illness were present, such as with Anthony Allen Shore and Harvey Carignan.

Of the serial killers included in the present study, two (40%) of the five serial killers experienced bullying as a minor. Bullying could have varied in type and severity. It could have been at the hands of peers, neighbors, or classmates. The Radford/FGCU Database does not report on how frequent, when, why, or by whom a serial killer was bullied. Therefore, it cannot be ascertained as to why Richard Chase and Anthony Allen Shore would have been bullied in their formative years. Secondary sources show that Chase displayed unusual behavior from a young age, and was a paranoid and withdrawn individual, which could have led to torment and social isolation from his peers.

Psychological and social isolation

Psychological and social isolation was prominent in the majority of cases included in the present study. Many serial killers had experienced instances of rejection or loneliness at the hands of their relatives, peers, or romantic interests. While some serial killers were able to date and even marry, others experienced difficulty in both establishing or maintaining a romantic relationship. The psychological impact of repeated

instances of rejection by others or feelings of loneliness early on in life through to adulthood could have contributed to the development of maladaptive emotional patterns, negative interpersonal perceptions, and the inability to establish long term, meaningful relationships with those around them. Continuous occasions of persistent failure to establish or maintain healthy relationships with others could negatively impact a person's ability to form emotional bonds or understand the emotions of those around them (Harmening, 2014). When a child creates a secure attachment in early childhood, they gain the ability to empathize. However, if a child fails in their efforts of securely attaching to a caregiver in early childhood, they will not be able to build healthy relationships later in life, including same-sex and opposite sex friendships or relationships (Harmening, 2014). The child who has failed to securely attach to a parent or guardian in early childhood is later likely to have a deficit in determining appropriate reactions in circumstances that require a moral response. This could result in an escalation of violent behavior, which is seen in the serial killers included in this study. According to Douglas & Olshaker (1995), general strain theory shows that stressors can play a major factor in the dynamic of a serial killer's life. Chronic feelings of loneliness, repeated experienced of rejection, and failure to successfully establish or maintain romantic relationships could be viewed as major stressors in a person's life. If that person has not developed adequate coping skills, this could lead to that individual looking for a release from those negative stressors, resulting in violent behavior or murder.

Presence of rejection/loneliness and romantic relationships

Three (60%) of the five serial killers experienced some level of rejection or loneliness in their lives, either romantically, from their peers, or from their families. Loneliness is not an uncommon life experience for any person, but it can negatively impact people in a variety of ways. Those that experienced loneliness or rejection also had reported feelings of insecurity. These individuals, such as Randy Woodfield, also felt a need to have power and control over their victims, which could be because they did not want their victims to have the ability to reject or leave them. Not all serial killers in the present study had reported instances of overt rejection. It is important to note that the Radford/FGCU does not explicitly measure rejection/loneliness. The psychosocial theme of rejection/loneliness is gathered from the combined data of bullying and relationship status.

Of the five participants, three (60%) were single or separated at the time of arrest. Of the five participants, Randy Woodfield and Richard Chase had never been married. Despite three of the participants having been married at some point in their lives, none were in healthy relationships or able to maintain a relationship with wives or girlfriends. Despite having been married twice, Anthony Allen Shore would date many other women while married. Many of these serial killers were either verbally, physically, or sexually abusive to their spouses, with some, such as Shore, even drugging his wives and girlfriends so that he could sexually assault them.

Behavioral and functional patterns

Behavioral and functional patterns are an outward expression of the internal psychological dysfunction that an individual experiences. In the cases of serial killers,

these patterns develop prior to engaging in violent behavior. These patterns will negatively impact different aspects of their adult lives, such as their ability to maintain steady employment, or their ability to withhold from engaging in illegal activities.

According to Harmening (2014), the majority of adults convicted of criminal offenses had no stable job prior to their convictions. In the present study, this proved inaccurate.

Presence of employment and criminal behavior prior to murder

In the present study, three (60%) participants were actively employed while engaging in serial murder, and two (40%) were unemployed. In the present study, it was evident that some killers could use the skills from their jobs to assist them with their crimes. For example, Jerry Brudos was an electrician. Anthony Allen shore was a telephone repairman. These careers could present opportunities to these offenders to cover evidence, or to even gain access to suitable targets.

Of the serial killers in this study, five (100%) had a history of criminal behavior prior to becoming a serial killer. Criminal history varied for each serial killer in both the type of crime(s) and the age in which they began engaging in criminal activity. Jerry Brudos is likely the youngest documented offender in this study, as he began engaging in fetishistic thievery at an extremely young age. Others, such as Anthony Allen Shore, were engaging in sexual molestation and rape reportedly at a younger age, but it has been confirmed that he engaged in that behavior as an adult. Some had engaged in multiple types of criminal behavior, such as Randy Woodfield, who engaged in animal cruelty in childhood, but also engaged in robbery and rape as an adult.

Drug and alcohol use was not as common amongst serial killers in this study as compared to others. Two (40%) of the five participants had engaged in drug or alcohol usage. Richard Chase and Anthony Allen Shore were both reported to engage in both drug and alcohol usage. Abuse of drugs and alcohol varied between the two participants, according to secondary sources. Shore abused cocaine and tequila. Chase used a variety of drugs, namely marijuana and LSD, which is known for its hallucinogenic properties. The three characteristics identified in the study are in the table as follows: early life adversity and developmental trauma with the subtheme of presence of abuse/neglect, trauma, and bullying (Characteristic 1), psychological and social isolation, and included the subtheme of presence of rejection/loneliness and romantic relationships (Characteristic 2), and behavioral and functional patterns, was characterized by two subthemes; the presence of employment, and the presence of criminal behavior prior to murder (Characteristic 3). See table below.

Table 1

Presence of Psychosocial Characteristics of Male Serial Killers in the United States

Offender name	Characteristic 1	Characteristic 2	Characteristic 3
Brudos	X	X	X
Carignan	X	X	X
Chase	X		X
Shore	X	X	X
Woodfield	X		X

Note. The present table outlines the three characteristics identified and the five serial killers included in this study.

Research Question 2

RQ2: How do the psychosocial factors differ among male serial killers?

When comparing the identified psychosocial characteristics that appeared amongst male serial killers in the present study, there was clear overlap seen amongst themes. The majority of participants in the present study shared similar experiences of abuse, trauma, and more. While all participants eventually became serial killers, their responses to their psychosocial experiences differed amongst instances of early life adversity and developmental trauma, social and psychological isolation, and their behavioral and functional patterns.

Of the five participants, the presence of abuse/neglect and trauma was the most common, with all (100%) of the serial killers in the present study having experienced abuse/neglect, and/or trauma early in life. The results of the present study showed similarly that psychological abuse was the most common form of abuse, with three (60%) having experienced psychological abuse from a parent, caregiver, or trusted adult during childhood. A total of two (20%) participants experienced physical abuse, and one (10%) experienced sexual abuse. Of the five participants, two (40%) experienced bullying. Bullying may have had substantial negative psychological impact in the lives of serial killers such as Richard Chase and Anthony Allen Shore, who reportedly both experienced bullying in their developmental years.

Of the five participants, three (60%) reported experiencing rejection or loneliness in their lives, especially during childhood. Within the sample of five serial killers, three (60%) had been in a romantic relationship with a woman. In the context of this study, a

romantic relationship is either a long-term girlfriend, or married. However, the majority of serial killers in the study were either not in a romantic relationship at the time of their arrest, or had never been in a relationship. It does not appear that any were married upon arrest, but some, such as Anthony Allen Shore, were living with a long-term girlfriend.

Finally, the study assessed behavioral and functional patterns, namely the presence or absence of employment, and the presence of criminal behavior prior to murder. In all, three (60%) were employed. Of those who were not employed, none had ever successfully held a job for an extended period of time. For example, Randy Woodfield was drafted by the Green Bay Packers. However, he never made it past training camp, due to being cut from the team for his sexual criminal activity that had been discovered after the draft.

Of the five participants, all (100%) serial killers had engaged in criminal behavior prior to murder. Criminal activity varied from petty to more serious crimes, such as burglary, voyeurism, drug possession, and sexual assault. Age in which criminal behavior began also varied, with more than half of the individuals engaging in criminal behavior in childhood. This reflects a consistent inability to form healthy behavioral patterns in the majority of participants in this study, especially from a young age. These individuals did not develop healthy emotional regulation, and, as a result, their behavioral and functional patterns were reflective of the internal dysfunction they felt. The three characteristics identified in the study are as follows: early life adversity and developmental trauma with the subtheme of presence of abuse/neglect, trauma, and bullying (Characteristic 1), psychological and social isolation, and included the subtheme of presence of

rejection/loneliness and romantic relationships (Characteristic 2), and behavioral and functional patterns, was characterized by two subthemes; the presence of employment, and the presence of criminal behavior prior to murder (Characteristic 3). See table below.

Table 2

Percentages of Psychosocial Characteristics of Male Serial Killers in the United States

Characteristic	%	Serial killers
Characteristic 1	100%	5
Characteristic 2	60%	3
Characteristic 3*	60%-100%	3-5

Note. The present table outlines the percentage of characteristics present within serial killers included in the present study.

**60% of serial killers were employed, and 100% engaged in criminal behavior prior to murder.*

Summary

This qualitative study involved an examination of the psychosocial characteristics of five male serial killers in the United States. After sourcing data from the Radford/FGCU Database, additional information was sourced from biographies, peer reviewed journals, and other public works, so that triangulation could occur. Case studies were written and analyzed for different codes utilizing a collective case study analysis approach. The codes were then condensed into three themes; early life adversity and developmental trauma, psychological and social isolation, and behavioral and functional problems. Analysis revealed that there were more similarities than differences in the psychosocial themes among the five serial killers in the study. These shared psychosocial characteristics indicate that specific psychosocial factors could meaningfully contribute to an individual becoming a serial killer.

In Chapter 5, a review of the study will take place. The findings of the research will be interpreted. Next, any limitations and implications for future research will be discussed. Chapter 5 will also present potential benefits of the study, including any potential social change. Finally, Chapter 5 will make suggestions on how this research could be applied to similar settings or offenders.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze the psychosocial characteristics of male serial killers in the United States and how they may differ when compared across multiple cases. Psychosocial characteristics are the result of the influences of the environment on an individual's thoughts and behaviors (Vizzoto et al., 2013). These characteristics influence a person both socially and psychologically, and can have a great impact in many stages of life, especially during developmental years (Thomas et al., 2020). These characteristics commonly include the presence or absence of relationships, trauma, mental, physical, or sexual abuse, mental illnesses, bullying, rejection, neglect, and more. Psychosocial characteristics could provide insight on why these men became serial killers, which could provide data on identifiable risk factors. In

learning more about psychosocial factors of these violent offenders, we have the potential to enact positive social change throughout the communities.

I used a collective case study analysis approach. Analysis was completed using secondary sources, including biographies, documentaries, peer-reviewed studies, and newspaper archives, with the Radford/FGCU Database serving as the foundational source for all data. Prior to access being granted to the database, a list of approximately 40 characters was created. Once I gained access to the database, killers were filtered based on the inclusion criteria of the study. Filters were created to identify serial killers who were male, based in the United States, and had killed three or more individuals. From that point, psychosocial characteristics were evaluated, and serial killers were selected from a substantially smaller list. Cases of potential participants were evaluated to determine if information on psychosocial factors was available on each person. The final list of serial killers for the study included five participants to satisfy the suggestion of an appropriate number of participants to achieve data saturation in a qualitative study (see Morse, 1995, 2015). Information was gathered from the Radford/FGCU Database and then varied across various secondary sources in order to identify common characteristics and differences amongst five male serial killers who are from the United States. Analysis of the case studies and manual coding allowed themes and patterns to emerge.

In order to address the previously identified gap in the literature on psychosocial characteristics of serial killers, I selected five serial killers from the Radford/FGCU Database who displayed data on present psychosocial characteristics. This study conducted reviews on the cases of Jerry Brudos, Randy Woodfield, Harvey Carignan,

Richard Chase, and Anthony Allen Shore. These serial killers were active from the 1900s to the 1990s. Each killer varied in the length of time in which they were actively killing, the types of victims they killed, and the ways in which they would source victims. Each killer also varied in the age in which they began killing and were captured.

Analysis of the case studies resulted in varying codes for each serial killer. Each case was reviewed from early childhood or birth if information was available. Case reviews went through arrest and death, when applicable. Once codes were created and reviewed, themes began to emerge. In all, I found three distinct themes. The first theme identified was early life adversity and developmental trauma with the subtheme of presence of abuse/neglect, trauma, and bullying. The next theme discovered was psychological and social isolation, and included the subtheme of presence of rejection/loneliness and romantic relationships. The final theme, behavioral and functional patterns, was characterized by two subthemes; the presence of employment, and the presence of criminal behavior prior to murder. When examined collectively through the lens of general strain theory, the three identified themes provide a multidimensional perspective on the specific psychological and sociological factors that could influence someone to become a serial killer. The identified characteristics provided insights into the complex relationship between early life adversity, psychological and social isolation, and maladaptive behavioral and functional patterns.

The research questions for this study, which were connected to the themes and findings of the study, are as follows:

RQ1: What psychosocial factors are associated with male serial killers?

RQ2: How do the psychosocial factors differ among male serial killers?

Interpretation of the Findings

While the study of serial murder is not new, studies where psychosocial characteristics are the primary focus of the study are uncommon (Reid et al., 2023). Due to the apparent lack of focus in previous studies on psychosocial characteristics, I used a collective case study analysis approach. To address the gap in information available on this subject, I developed a thematic analysis of five male serial killers in the United States based on two research questions. These questions sought to identify psychosocial factors among serial killers, as well as find any potential differences among them. The results showed three distinct themes. Those included; early life adversity and developmental trauma, psychological and social isolation, and behavioral and functional problems.

Overall, the data showed that psychosocial characteristics do not drastically differ amongst serial killers. In fact, I found that the majority of participants had shared life experiences, which contributed to the identification of similar psychosocial characteristics across cases. This suggested that while each of the participants had unique experiences, there were consistent patterns of adverse experiences and dysfunction that could be indicative of broader psychological or sociological risk factors. Commonalities across cases included presence of abuse/neglect, presence of trauma, presence of rejection and loneliness, presence of bullying, the presence of criminal behavior prior to murder and the absence of consistent employment and romantic relationships. This can lead to a conclusion that these shared characteristics are possible risk factors in the development of a serial killer. This data aligned with findings of previous research (e.g.,

Dodge et. al, 1995; Garrison 1996; Hickey, 1997; Marono et al, 2020; Ressler et. al, 1985; Rohner & Britner, 2002; Vronksy, 2018).

The results also showed that there are specific characteristics that seem to appear the most. Abuse, trauma, and rejection played a strong role and have a prominent presence in the life course of many male serial killers. This is especially true in cases where these factors were experienced in childhood. In a study by the FBI, 42% of participants reported physical abuse in childhood, 74% reported psychological abuse in childhood, and 43% reported experiencing sexual abuse in childhood (Vronsky, 2004). However, this does not mean that abuse, trauma, and rejection are not or were never present in their adult lives. Rather, it shows the strong impact having these experiences in childhood can have. Adverse psychosocial experiences in adulthood should not be ignored. Instead, it should be studied further in the lives of serial killers and other violent populations, as there is not enough insight into the role trauma in adulthood has within these populations.

Of the participants in this study, criminal behavior was also prevalent prior to engaging in serial homicide. In a study by the FBI, 56% engaged in stealing in childhood, and 81% in adolescence (Vronsky, 2004). While I included different types of criminal behavior other than just stealing, past research shows that at least one type of criminal behavior (stealing) is seen in the history of the majority of serial killers (see Keatley et al, 2021). In the present study, participants had engaged in a wide variety of criminal behavior prior to murder, including drug possession or drug use, burglary, sexual assault, voyeurism, animal cruelty, arson, and more. The onset of criminal behavior also varied,

with many engaging in criminal activity in childhood. Previous research on criminal activity aligns with the findings of this study, indicating that some psychosocial factors such as the environment in which a child exists and exposure to abuse, could impact instances of criminal behavior prior to engaging in serial murder (Keatley et al, 2021).

In the present study, half of the participants reported being bullied in childhood. This is consistent with the FBI study which found that 54% experiences bullying in childhood, and that experience increased to 64% in adolescence (Vronsky, 2004). Bullying can play a significant role in a young person's life. If a child is not taught adequate coping skills by their caregivers, this could result in feelings of low self-esteem. According to Harmening (2014), low self-esteem plays a critical role in the eventual development of a serial killer, as it can disrupt healthy social attachments in adolescence. This could lead to social isolation and feelings of rejection, inadequacy, and loneliness, and in those with unhealthy or underdeveloped coping mechanisms, this could lead to maladaptive behavioral patterns and psychological distress. Bullying, especially when combined with other adverse childhood experiences, may have a strong negative influence on the psychosocial development on an individual, which could increase their risk of engaging in violent behavior later in life (Hickey, 2015).

Loneliness and isolation from peers is commonly seen in the childhood of serial killers (Vronsky, 2004). In an FBI study (Vronsky, 2004), 71% reported feeling a sense of isolation in childhood. That statistic increased to 77% of participants experiencing loneliness during adolescence. This data is similar to the data of the present study for reported feelings of loneliness. Loneliness can happen at any age in life, and be the result

of psychological or social isolation. Children could experience loneliness after instances of bullying. Adolescents and adults could experience loneliness after failing to successfully secure a romantic partner or being rejected by peers or romantic interests. Research on loneliness in the adult lives of serial killers should be explored further, as this could also be an influential factor in them becoming serial killers.

The majority of serial killers in the present study had not successfully held a job in their adult lives. Those that did utilized their jobs to either increase their access to victims or maintain a social persona. This directly ties to routine activity theory. In routine activity theory, a motivated offender selects their victim based on the availability of their desired target, plus is an individual who is without a capable guardian (Cohen & Felson, 1979). In the present study, some killers would use their job as a means to source victims, as well as to maintain a position of power within their communities to both appear normal and gain trust from capable guardians, but also to gain access to additional victims.

The inability to maintain a job or established career is a critical display of poor psychosocial development in the life of a serial killer, because it is reflective of broader maladaptive behavioral and functional patterns. According to Harmening (2014), establishing a career is a central factor of identity and self-worth. When an individual is incapable of maintaining a job, it could indicate issues in self-discipline, social skills, and emotional regulation (Harmening, 2014). These traits are often shaped by adverse childhood experiences, as instances of abuse, trauma, or neglect can disrupt healthy development. This negatively impacts an individual's relationship with authority figures,

impulse control, and goal-setting in adulthood (Harmening, 2014). This especially ties into general strain theory. Without steady employment and a consistent paycheck, an individual may experience feelings of inadequacy or anger, as well as stress about a lack of money. According to general strain theory, these feelings could contribute to the choice to engage in criminal behavior in order to alleviate the stress they are feeling (Agnew, 1985).

GST provided the framework for interpreting the impact of early life adversity and developmental trauma on the creation of violent offenders such as serial killers. Early life adversity and developmental trauma encompassed aspects of abuse, trauma, neglect, and bullying. Exposure to these negative stimuli, especially early in life and during critical developmental years, can create chronic emotional distress and prevents a child from effectively developing appropriate and healthy responses to stressors. Instances of repeat adverse childhood experiences can increase the likelihood of violent behavior later in life. Abuse, parental instability, bullying, and neglect are all sources of strain for a child. Each unnecessarily exposes a child to environments in which they are deprived of emotional security, healthy relationships and social bonds, and the ability to learn appropriate coping mechanisms. Unsurprisingly, the frequency and severity of exposure to early trauma can increase the likelihood for criminal behavior. According to Agnew (2006), the strains that are likely to lead to criminal coping are those in which an individual perceives as being unjust. Abuse, bullying, or neglect would qualify as unjust stressors that are high in magnitude. When evaluated against GST, it is evident why the

presence of adversity and trauma early in life could cause offenders to develop violent coping mechanisms.

GST shows that psychological and sociological isolation provides sources for substantial strain on an individual (Agnew, 2006). When an individual experiences repeated rejection, loneliness, or are deprived of social bonds, it hinders their ability to feel positive self-worth. It can cause an individual to feel inadequate, alienated, or powerless. It also prevents them from feeling successful or from having a healthy way to self-regulate their emotions. As a result, this can lead to rage, envy, and other intense, negative emotions, and the inability to have appropriate social control.

According to Agnew (2006), GST showed that significant strain can arise from failure to achieve positively valued goals (e.g., maintaining friendships or romantic relationships), and the removal of positive stimuli (e.g., losing a friend or romantic partner, or the death of a loved one). The absence of meaningful social bonds can create an environment in which persistent strain exists. That can lead to a person experiencing a host of negative feelings, which could lead them to acting out violently. Murder is an extreme coping mechanism adopted by serial killers that may allow them to experience sensations of power, control, or importance in response to feelings of alienation and inadequacy. From what is seen in GST, researchers can theorize that increasing the level of social support around a person decreases the effects that psychological or social isolation can have.

GST also can be used to explain the role that the presence of criminal behavior prior to engaging in homicide and the presence of employment play in the development

of a serial killer. According to Agnew (2006), engaging in criminal behavior shows that a person has maladaptive coping mechanisms. Strain alone does not cause a person to engage in criminal activity. Instead, a person chooses to engage in crime in an effort to manage the stress they feel. By engaging in criminal behavior repeatedly, especially escalating criminal activity, it suggests that the individual has low social bonds and does not effectively reduce stress in a socially accepted way, and must engage in different types of illegal activity to feel relief from their strains. In adopting illegal and violent coping skills, it is evident that the individual likely was not taught healthy coping mechanisms, and may have been raised in an unhealthy environment or without a capable parent or guardian.

With employment, strain is common for any individual. Repeatedly losing a job or failing to successfully maintain a career can cause weakened social bonds, financial strain, a lack of routine and feelings of low self-esteem and inadequacy, to name a few. Negative experiences and feelings could fuel psychological pressure that could lead one to engage in violent and illegal coping mechanisms. In this study, some individuals were able to maintain employment, even while engaging in serial murder. These were blue collar roles, and not in a corporate setting. These roles could have allowed these killers the opportunity to source access to future victims, or provide ways for them to limit a victims' ability to escape. Others, like Randy Woodfield, engaged in criminal behavior and it directly impacted their developing career. Woodfield was drafted by the Green Bay Packers, but was cut before the season began due to his criminal behavior being discovered by the team. Soon after, he became a serial killer. Overall, GST showed the

complete process of behavioral and functional patterns in a serial killer; objective strain, negative experiences, and limited coping strategies leads to the eventual adoption of criminal coping methods.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations of the present study. One limitation is the researcher. As the sole researcher, I was responsible for collecting and analyzing all data. Therefore, there could be human error in the data. This could ultimately impact the study's confirmability, reliability, credibility, and dependability. In an effort to manage the potential for human error, codes were transcribed and reviewed three times each before themes were created.

An additional limitation of this study was the lack of access to live participants. This resulted in all data originating from secondary sources. Utilizing live participants in this study would have been extremely unlikely, as any known living serial killer in this study is incarcerated. With prisoners being a protected class of participants, gaining access to interview any serial killers in this study who are still alive would have not likely been approved. To counteract potential bias from the primary data collectors of the sources used in this study, I used multiple sources for each case study and relied on triangulation of data, with the Radford/FGCU Database being the foundational source for the entire study.

A third limitation of this study is accuracy of the data. The majority of data ultimately comes from one source for each serial killer, and that is the serial killer. The

likelihood of total honesty on the part of the serial killer in relaying their life history is unlikely. Therefore, any data that came directly from the serial killer cannot likely be proved as completely accurate. Because of this, a level of skepticism is appropriate in instances where the information was not confirmed by additional people in the life of the serial killer who were related to or knew the serial killer personally. Additionally, there were conflicts with data identified between the Radford/FGCU Database and other secondary sources. For example, literature suggested that Anthony Allen Shore was abused in childhood. On the other hand, the database does not have any data that reflects that point. This study went with the data that was reported in the database, as that is considered to be the best source of truth when dealing with data on serial murder globally.

On that same note of data, the data in the database does not give specifics. This can make it difficult to infer additional insights. A researcher can tell from the data whether a serial killer was bullied, but not why or what for. This could be important information that could help researchers further understand the psychological and sociological implications in the development of a serial killer. At the same time, that is information that could be left up for interpretation and therefore difficult to report on in a database.

A supplementary limitation to this study was the population of the study. This study only analyzed men, which means that this study may not be applicable to female serial killers. Additionally, this study only reviewed male serial killers who were born and resided in the United States of America. Therefore, results may not be applicable to

male serial killers in other countries, as societal customs, traditions, and cultures may have a different impact from country to country. Finally, male serial killers are an extremely small percentage of the general population in the United States. Therefore, the results of this study might not be applicable to the general population, or other types of criminals.

A final limitation of this study was the limited differences in race and ethnicity of the participants. Of the five serial killers in this study, there was no diversity in terms of race. Psychosocial data on U.S. based male serial killers who were African American, Chinese American, or other races was extremely limited and difficult to source. This shows an additional gap in the research for future scholars to focus on. In further studying psychosocial characteristics of male serial killers of different races, future researchers can attempt to explore similarities and differences in their psychological and sociological histories.

Recommendations

The present study focused on the psychosocial characteristics of male serial killers in the United States from the 1900s to 1990s. Future researchers may benefit by expanding this research to include male serial killers from outside of the United States. This will make the sample pool more diverse in terms of culture and various races. Of the five serial killers in the present study, all (100%) were Caucasian. By including various races and cultures, the data on psychosocial characteristics could expand or vary.

An additional way to expand research on this study would be by including women. Researchers could work to identify potential differences between male and

female psychosocial characteristics. This could expand the depth of understanding of the psychosocial characteristics of serial killers as well as explore the opportunity of additional characteristics. Researchers could also focus in on different time periods in a serial killer's life. This could lead to information on whether different stages in a killer's life has more influence compared to others.

Finally, expanding this research to examine the psychosocial characteristics of mass murderers or domestic terrorists could result in identifying risk factors and threats in a commonly seen offender in the United States. Mass media routinely covers any instances of mass shootings or possible acts of domestic terrorism. These tragedies could be committed by individuals with similar psychosocial characteristics of male serial killers. By expanding research to highlight various kinds of violent offenders, scholarly communities are continuing to grow in understanding different type of psychosocial characteristics, and if they differ amongst different offender categories. This could result in furthering education within the law enforcement and scholarly communities, which could lead to prevention or earlier apprehension of these criminals.

Implications

The present study confirms prior research on the psychosocial characteristics of male serial killers, and expands on research by showing the clear relationship of psychosocial characteristics between multiple cases of serial murder. While this study will not have a substantial impact on the general population, it could provide additional information to law enforcement agencies at the local, state, and federal levels who are working cases suspected of involving a serial killer. This study can also provide

additional information to future researchers of this topic. Additionally, research on the topic of psychosocial characteristics could be expanded to include women, as well as different types of violent offenders, such as mass murderers or domestic terrorists. Ultimately, this study assisted in narrowing the gap in the literature on psychosocial characteristics of male serial killers.

This study provided information on a specific set of psychosocial characteristics commonly seen amongst male serial killers through the lens of criminological and psychological theory. By using general strain theory, scholarly communities are able to further awareness on the different stages in the life and development of a serial killer, and how psychosocial factors are influenced by psychology and social environments. In analyzing commonalities, it may help future investigators attempting to find patterns and similarities amongst cases or suspects of serial murder. Additionally, it could inform communities on warning signs often seen in the life course of serial killers, such as bullying, abuse, rejection from peers, or trauma. Intervention programs could be created to reach out to individuals who are experiencing negative interactions with peers, experiencing abuse at home, or having trouble with loneliness. If those programs exist in some areas, they can be strengthened and backed by psychological research.

Conclusion

The study of serial murder is not new, nor should it stop. The purpose of this study was to analyze the psychosocial characteristics of male serial killers in the United States. After conducting a thematic analysis of five carefully selected case studies, results showed that the presence of early life adversity, chronic psychological and social

isolation, and maladaptive behavioral and functional patterns are common among male serial killers in the United States. These three themes cover different aspects and time periods in the life of a serial killer from early childhood through adulthood. These themes also showed how impactful childhood experiences can be in the development of a future violent, serial offender.

In this study, results showed that early life adversity, psychological and sociological isolation, and maladaptive coping skills are recurring and critical aspects that are present in the life course of male serial killers from the United States. This study provided empirical support for GST and shows consistent factors that are present across a variety of cases. This study solidified the ongoing conversation within the scholarly community and law enforcement organizations that serial murder is not solely the product of psychopathy or mental illnesses, but could stem from complex yet relatively common social and developmental processes experienced by many. The present study displayed that the psychosocial development of male serial killers in the United States follows a concerning consistent pattern of early life adversity, chronic psychological and social isolation, and maladaptive behavioral and functional patterns. Serial murder is a violent and extreme form of commonly experienced psychological and developmental strains. In recognizing these patterns, scholarly organizations can create an avenue for communities to potentially identify high-risk individuals beginning at earlier ages. Additionally, researchers create the opportunity for interventional programs to be created or expanded that focus on childhood trauma, establishing social bonds, and teaching adaptive and healthy coping skills for strains commonly experienced in youth

These offenders were an impactful threat to their communities before they were captured. Identifying and capturing these individuals, whether by accident or through detailed linkage and police work, it saved the lives of potentially many men, women, and children throughout the United States. While historical data shows a decline in the frequency of serial murder, this is not a problem that will cease to exist someday. Serial killers will continue to hunt victims and evolve their methodologies for evading capture. Law enforcement officials and scholars can work towards reducing the number of future serial killers, through collaboration, as well as through a continuation in education. In studying the psychosocial characteristics of these serial killers, researchers and law enforcement may further limit the number of future serial killers and, more importantly, their victims.

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