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Serial Killers: Born or Made?

Serial killers have been a long standing fixation of society’s attention. Unbelievably terrible cases of murder have made newspaper headlines for decades, and while we don’t like to admit it, Americans have a serious fixation with infamous killers. The fear that Manson, Bundy, and Gein have invoked provides for more of a thrill than any horror film, because their stories are real. Television channels have made millions off of TV shows based on murder such as *NCIS*, *Dexter*, and *Criminal Minds*. These television shows have been successful because people are so enthralled with the idea of murder, as if it is more of a fantasy than a reality. Unfortunately, for some, the desire to kill is all too real. It is disconcerting to think there are certain individuals with the desire to kill, but what is even more disconcerting is many times these people blend seamlessly into society. The majority of serial killers fall into the psychopath category, meaning these killers easily transform themselves so they are well perceived in society, but under the mask, they lack feelings such as compassion and remorse. While their brains function differently from ours, they manage to deceive almost everyone they come in contact with.

The real question is what makes a killer become a killer? Are these frightening desires created over time as a result of an unhappy atmosphere at home, or are they decided at birth? Are genes and abnormal brains to blame, or years of abuse at home and teasing at school? The study of the minds of serial killers is both frightening and intriguing. Each case is slightly different, and exhibits the extreme complexity of these humans and their desire to kill. While each situation differs slightly, there is one constant, in that these members of society are not like the rest. Whatever the reason may be, it is undeniable that something went very, very wrong within the mind of a serial killer. The question is: what causes this desire to kill?

The mind of a serial killer is extraordinarily difficult to understand and the reason for their actions is debated by many of the world’s top psychologists. Nature vs.Nurture is the center of the debate regarding serial killers. The nature aspect of the debate between nature vs. nurture supports the viewpoint that a child is born with brain differences that separate them from the rest of the population and create that desire to kill. However, many argue nurture is to blame for the desire to kill. Some of the most common arguments are that abuse from parents, teasing in school, or witnessing violence can create this desire. Unfortunately, there are far too many cases that do not coincide with this argument, on both sides of the spectrum. For starters, there are children who were abused and neglected who turned their lives around positively, and grew past their rough upbringings. On the other end of the spectrum, there are serial killers who led perfectly normal lives with nothing but loving parents, yet they became killers. A child’s environment affects them, undoubtedly; however, a bad upbringing can only aggravate an underlying problem, not cause it. The way a child is born, in other words, nature, decides whether a child becomes a killer. In order to fully understand the mind of a killer it is important to take examples into consideration. Herb Mullins is a prime example of a normal childhood and adolescence gone entirely wrong. Herb Mullins grew up in a small town outside of San Francisco in a stable family, in fact it wasn’t until into his early twenties when he began to show signs of paranoid schizophrenia. By Herb’s mid twenties his mental state deteriorated into crazed ranting and strange rituals (Scott). Because the link between psychopaths and serial killers is so strong, many researchers have been conducting research on the brains of psychopaths. Scientists are now able to diagnose psychopathy at an extremely young age because these individuals exhibit signs of extreme fearlessness, aggressiveness, lack of attention to authority, and sensation seeking (Ramsland). All of these signs are linked to a future possibility of becoming a serial killer. Interestingly, there are certain abnormal brains activities that are also linked to psychopaths, and may have something to do with a psychopaths desire to kill. For example, psychopaths have difficulty processing emotional information, and show less activity in a part of he brain linked to emotion, called the amygdala. There are many links that suggest the brains of psychopaths are far different from a normal person, and this abnormal brain mutation is linked to a desire to kill. There are simply far to many examples of normal childhoods that’s end in the formation of a serial killer, the science behind the brain of a killer, as well as evidence from past cases show that a killer is not made, but simply born.

The other side of the debate, nurture, stresses the importance of the environment on our personalities, our social and emotional behaviors, and our intelligence. This theory states that humans enter this world *tabula rasas*: blank slates. Our experiences among family, friends, and society from birth till death shape us into unique individuals. Some of these experiences have such a strong influence; they alter us for the rest of our lives. Witnessing traumatic events, especially violent ones, negatively affects development, often causing irrevocable damage. Among serial killers, subjection to violence is a common aspect of their pasts. Exposure to aggression and hate at a young age often lead these children to accept and act out this behavior. Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory states that “children and adults imitate behavior observed in others, and therefore, aggression is learned” (McCawley). In addition to observing others, direct involvement with aggressive acts create abusers. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, once said “the healthy man does not torture others – generally it is the tortured who become torturers.” In many cases, serial killers are abused by their parents, thus never introduced properly to love. When a child does not trust its primary caretakers, it can not trust others later in life. In turn, this causes feelings of isolation. "Instead of developing positive traits of trust, security, and autonomy, child development becomes dependent on an intense, violent, fantasy life and its dominant themes, rather than on social interaction” (Scott). Rather than empathizing and relating to others, young serial killers see human beings as objects for them to act out their fantasies. John Wayne Gacy, for example, was physically abused by his drunken father for most of his childhood. The helplessness and powerlessness Gacy felt as a child caused him to become violent; he kidnapped, raped, and murdered thirty three teenage boys. Psychologists view Gacy as a prime example of a Power-Control Killer, “a killer who seeks complete control over their victims” (Serial Killers). Because of Gacy’s nurture, the tortured became the torturer.

The debate between whether nature or nurture causes psychopaths involves a fine balance between an emotionally troubled childhood and the right parenting. We believe a child is born with natural psychological issues, but in many cases it is a type of aggravator that acts as the last straw and unleashes the desire to kill in an already mentally unstable individual. There must be the problem the child is born with, and then somehow something will cause them to go over the edge, whether it is an abusive parent, drugs, bullying, or even violent movies. The seed must first be planted, and then eventually something sets them off. However how small, we believe there must be something that flips the switch in a psychopath’s brain that unleashes the monster within. Eric Harris, from the Columbine shooting represents all of the signs of a psychopath, from his lack of emotions, winning “personality”, and crafty lying. Eric was defiantly born with psychopathic qualities, but over time his upbringing pushed him over the edge. Eric was bullied as child; he moved around constantly and was extremely shy. There is a strong correlation between psychopathy and a bad home life; however other things can set off a psychopath as well (Cullen 241). For Eric being bullied and moving around set off the fuse that ended in the Columbine disaster. He was born a psychopath because of differences in his brain, however over time his surroundings aggravated his condition. As Canadian theorist Dr. David Lykken puts it: “psychopaths are set apart and at a greater risk for delinquency, however even a child prone to psychopathy because of pure genetics, can be steered in a positive direction via good parenting” (Ramsland). It is not only nature or nurture, but the two that make a killer.

Spanning over seven hundred years of recorded history on serial killers, a clear correlation between nature, nurture, and the desire to kill is apparent, but there is not clear causation. As science grapples with the nature vs. nurture controversy, it becomes obvious that the two are not mutually exclusive determinants of violent behavior. With so many variables that form a person’s character, it is impossible to pinpoint solely nature or solely nurture as the direct cause of psychopathy. Instead, we must look at both of these components together. Heredity sets limits on the developmental range of characteristics; within this range, characteristics are determined by environmental forces. Individuals are the result of the interaction of nature and nurture. When these two factors intertwine for the worst, they form the deadly combination that is a serial killer.

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