

■ REVIEW ARTICLE

## Understanding the Psychology of Paraphilic & Violent Offenders

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### ABSTRACT

Paraphilic and violent offenses have been committed for a very long time and have just gotten increasingly dangerous over time. Although the occurrences of such offenses have come down with the progression of the society, the need to study the underlying factors of these offenses is of vital importance. Acts of necrophilia have been reported from as early as the 15th century. Pedophilia, serial killing, and homicides, both catathymic and compulsive, are also discussed and reviewed. The role and use of psychology has proved extremely important in understanding, predicting, and potentially preventing such heinous acts from being committed. Criminal as well as forensic psychology are key to understanding the exact intricacies of the various crimes. The main aim of this review is to understand the underlying reason behind such heinous acts.

**KEYWORDS** | paraphilia, necrophilia, psychology, criminal psychology

paedophilia, psychiatry, catathym

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### INTRODUCTION

**C**RIMINAL PSYCHOLOGY IS A STUDY of the will, thoughts, intentions and acts of the criminals, and all that partakes in the behavior of criminals. This study goes deeply into what makes someone commit a crime. It also studies the reactions after the crime. Paraphilia is a psychiatric condition characterized by abnormal and often dangerous and deviant sexual desires and fantasies.<sup>1</sup> Conditions such as paedophilia, necrophilia, bestiality, voyeurism and sexual sadism and masochism among many others, are a few examples of

paraphilia. This study is primarily focused on two paraphilia: paedophilia and necrophilia. Along with these, catathymic and compulsive homicides have also been taken up in the study.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this study is to understand the rationale behind such offenses and preventing their occurrence. Two main questions arise in such cases, which generally hold the key to delve deep into the mind of the offender – ‘why did the offender commit the crime’ and ‘why did he do that in that particular way’. The work and literature



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on the psychology behind these offenses is rather sparse. This, along with a profound interest in the subject, has served as a driving force behind this study.

The fact that the psychology of each and every person does differ and there is no method to exactly pinpoint the characteristics of an offender. Which makes the task of giving conclusive pointers about the characteristics of an offender even more challenging. A few behavioral attributes may be found to be overlapping in some of the offenses, but these only make up for the potential general characteristics of an offender and understanding or determining individual traits is a truly daunting task.

### **Necrophilia**

A closed case file review of 211 sexual homicide cases revealed 16 cases of necrophilia.<sup>3</sup> The method used for the classification and characterization of these cases was simply just grouping and analyzing. Basically, all the offenders and victims in the cases were classified under various categories such as age, race/ethnicity, living conditions, marital status and childhood/background, and were characterized accordingly. Although inconclusive, there were certain points of interest that should be taken into consideration. All 16 offenders were male, with an average age of 26 (age range 14-38). Link between the crime and ethnicity of the offenders could not be established conclusively. Interestingly, 56% of the offenders suffered from anti-social personality disorder and more than 60% of the offenders were single. Almost 90% of the victims were Caucasian and fifteen victims out of sixteen were females.

The above mentioned review as well as the works of psychiatrist Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing<sup>4</sup> and Rosman<sup>5</sup> suggested that necrophilia was rarely the main motive or driving force behind killing of a person. Rather, it was the fact that either the act of murder in itself wasn't satisfactory enough that an urge to further maim the victim arose, or the offender finally gained the ability to assert dominance over the deceased.

In a review of 122 cases that displayed acts of necrophilia conducted by Rosman and Resnick,<sup>5</sup> the cases were analyzed according to a number of

variables. The data was accumulated from different decades, countries and ethnicities, to ensure a larger pool of data was taken into account as well as maintaining variance. The cases were divided into two broad classifications, genuine necrophilia (54 out of 122) and pseudo-necrophilia (33 out of 122) [data was insufficient to classify the remaining 35 cases]. Genuine necrophilia is the persistent sexual attraction to corpses<sup>6</sup>, whereas pseudo-necrophilia is a transient attraction towards corpses, while still preferring live partners for engaging in sexual activities. Contrary to belief, people who suffer from necrophilia do not have a subpar intelligence, as only 11 percent of the true necrophilia sample proved to be psychotic. Occupation was also an important factor as 57 percent of the perpetrators chose jobs that would allow frequent access to corpses.

### **Pedophilia**

A pedophile, in clinical terms, is a person who exhibits a primary or exclusive sexual attraction or interest towards pre-pubescent children.<sup>7</sup> Seto conducted a study on pedophiles which aimed at the diagnosis, risk assessment and treatments of pedophilia offenders.<sup>8</sup> Being a pedophile is not a crime, but it certainly increases the risk that a pedophilic act might be committed. The diagnostic schemes used in this particular study for establishing pedophilia were DSM-IV-TR and ICD-109. Assessment methods used for the study were fairly simple to execute and understand. Self-report was the easiest assessment method which could be achieved by a simple clinical questionnaire or interview.

Albeit being the most direct method of assessing a pedophile's sexual urges and fantasies it had its advantages, while it also ran the risk of the subject concealing his pedophilic interests. Although a non-judgmental tone of the interviewer coupled with a well-structured and gradual line of questioning may have yielded better results. Since there were apparent loopholes in self-report method, researchers turned towards analyzing the sexual behavior history of the subjects. The Screening Scale for pedophilic Interests (SSPI) was developed by Seto and Lalumiere<sup>10</sup> to categorize and summarize an offender's potential pedophilic history, and also to serve as a proxy for psycho-

-physiological assessments of sexual arousal. The SSPI scores range from 0 to 5 that are positively unvarying and related to pedophilic responding in the laboratory.

Viewing child pornography is another major behavioral indicator. A large majority of pedophiles admitted to viewing child pornography on a regular basis. 61 out of a group of 100 pedophiles showed greater penile response to porn involving children than to adults. However, it should be noted that pornography was a clearer indicator of sexual interest rather than sexual contact or activity. 84% of the 43 child porn offenders admitted to masturbating while fantasizing sex with children.<sup>11</sup> Viewing time was also used as an indicator of degree of sexual arousal;<sup>12</sup> the more time he spent looking at kid porn, the more likely he was sexually aroused towards children and showing paedophilic behavior. The most important aspect of this method was that it must be carried out in an inconspicuous manner and the viewing time must be noted for each image the participant views. Since almost every paedophilic offender ever identified is male, phallometry was also used as method of assessment.<sup>13</sup> By measuring the penile response, sexual preferences were determined according to the stimuli. It was also used to establish the sexual orientation of the offenders.<sup>14</sup>

Generally, all the assessment methods were reported as relative sexual response of the offender towards a child and an adult. In cases of pedophilia, an accurate diagnosis and risk assessment is essential as the associated variables are very important for predicting a pattern as well as for preventing further recurrences. Furthermore, offenders with previous criminal record who view child pornography, were found more likely to commit a sexual act, or an offence of any kind.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Catathymic and Compulsive Homicide**

Sinnamon and Petherick in 2017 did a study on catathymic and compulsive homicides from a psychological perspective<sup>16</sup> which laid a foundation that the underlying reasons may range from episodic to pervasive characteristics that may give rise to antisocial or narcissistic behavior. When a catathymic reaction occurs, the control over impulses is compromised, which results in an

outburst of uncontrollably excessive violence. General trend suggested that after committing the act, the offender felt a temporary relief from inner conflict and also a sense of normalcy.

Catathymic crisis may take either chronic or acute form. In chronic catathymic crisis (CCC), there were three stages, the incubation period, followed by the committing of violence, and finally the attainment of relief.<sup>17</sup> The incubation period may be as short as a few days or as long as several years. An offender may be fixated on a particular victim type and then, when they finally commit the act, the fixation helped them select a specific victim. In contrast to the gradual build-up of violence in the chronic case, there is a sudden outburst triggered often by an ordinary interaction between a casual acquaintance or a total stranger to the perpetrator in the case of acute catathymic crisis (ACC).<sup>18</sup> The reason for this sudden, explosive outburst was postulated to be a result of a comment or an incidence that triggered the underlying aggressive behavior. In most cases of acute catathymic violence, it was observed that the perpetrator had partial or no recollection of the aggressive event.

Compulsive homicide<sup>19</sup> is often confused with catathymic homicide but the difference lies in the fact that it is an act instigated by a deep-rooted, long-standing compulsion to kill.<sup>20</sup> The reason behind committing a homicide was not to achieve a feeling of inner relief from a prevalent turmoil, but to fulfill a deep rooted inherent fantasy. An act of unplanned compulsive homicide<sup>21</sup> (UCH) is different from acute catathymic homicide as there is no internal conflict acting as a driving force in the motivation of the homicidal act. Such an offender's desire to kill was found to be synergized with a combination of violence and sexual fantasies. There was only one similarity found between a planned compulsive homicide (PCH) and chronic catathymic crisis, and that was the obsession to kill over an extended time period.

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#### **DISCUSSION**

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The occurrences of the paraphilic and violent offenses mentioned above have certainly decreased in the last decade. With that being said, there has always been an omnipresent need to understand the thought process and psychology leading to

such crimes. The basic psychology of it remained more or less similar in all the offenses, but a few nuances were found in the background leading to various crimes. Childhood abuse and antisocial behavior (sometimes mixed with narcissism) was found in most offenders. The literature linking psychology and homicides due to necrophilia are sparse, and there are no scientific assessment methods as of yet to understand the intricate psychology of the offenders. The most common reason for necrophilia was found to be the presence of a dead victim.

Phallometric method in pedophilia assessment among men was found to be the most reliable indicator of a pedophilic preference. Using this method enabled the successful and consistent discrimination between pedophilic and non-paedophilic men and could also help in identifying sexual recidivism among offenders.

Cases of catathymia and compulsive homicide both produced very unique offender profiles. They fall in an unexplored category of seriously deviant behaviors, that involve a psychology so intricate that makes it very difficult to understand and hence prevent the crime.

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#### DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

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The above review concludes that although there may be a few nuances when it comes to the underlying factors of the offences committed and the psychology of the offenders, but a majority of the factors remained similar to a certain extent. It was also found that in certain cases, two or more factors led to a much more violent outcome. The most common explanation for necrophilia was found to be the need to assert sexual domination which would've been otherwise impossible, if the victim were alive.

According to Deriver, the motivation for committing necrophilia was to further destroy and degrade the already dead victim. In case of paedophilic offences, it was found that self-report analysis was less reliable than sexual behaviour history and phallometric analysis. SSPI proved a proper indicator of presence of pedophilia (phallometric response) and also for the prevention of repetition of the offence (for people with sexual behaviour history). The main

driving factor that led to paedophilic offences was the fact that most of the offenders had been sexually violated in their own childhood. Also, the usually complying nature of children also acts a motivator for such offences. The motivation and psychological characteristics of homicides can vary, and since both catathymic and compulsive homicides are deviant behaviors, they are difficult to understand and predict and hence prevent.

The psychology of each crime varies from offender to offender and there needs to be varied strategy while trying to understand the psychology of every offender. Conducting interviews with a specifically constructed questionnaire for each type of crime is arguably the most efficient way of understanding the underlying factor of the crime. Since there are several ways to construct a 'productive' questionnaire, but the following points should be kept in mind:

- First of all, try to develop a relationship of empathy with the subject.
- More often than not, their reason for committing the offence is justified in their mind, so they will not crack down under conditions such as threats.
- People committing such heinous offenses generally possess a higher-than-usual threshold of emotional stimulation and a high ability to manipulate the opposite party (for example, Edmund Kemper).
- While framing the questions, it should be considered that such offenders do not get swayed by appeals of sympathy, remorse, regret or social obligation.
- They are highly egoistic and their confessions will be received only because their ego was satisfied and they finally get the spotlight (for example, Dennis Rader).
- The format of the questionnaire should be as much non-emotional as possible, with the interviewer being well-versed with the facts of the case(s).
- The interviewer, at any point during the interview, must not let the subject lead the conversation.
- Also there should be no diversion or deviation from the topic. **IJFMP**

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