

THE MAKING OF A SERIAL KILLER

In June of 1987, 40-year-old Arthur Shawcross was granted his freedom—freedom to kill. He had been convicted in 1972 of murdering two young children in upstate New York. His first victim was 10-year-old Jack Blake, whom he kidnapped while Jack was on his way to a friend’s house to play. Shawcross confessed to having raped and butchered the boy, and then devouring his genitals. Shawcross’s other victim was 8-year-old Karen Ann Hill, whom he raped and murdered. Shawcross served the minimum of a 15-to-25-year sentence before being paroled.

Despite his hideous past, Shawcross blended well into the Rochester community where he settled after his release from custody. It didn’t take him long to pick up where he left off, only this time victimizing prostitutes rather than children. The middle-aged killer appeared, to the hustlers he targeted, like just another “john.” Overweight and balding, he hardly seemed threatening to the women he picked up, even after they had been alerted that a serial killer was on the loose and preying on streetwalkers.

By March of 1988, the police in Rochester had discovered the partially nude bodies of two prostitutes floating in the Genesee River gorge. One woman had been asphyxiated, the other shot. The police saw no clear-cut pattern to link these homicides, other than the victims’ occupation. The homicides drew little attention in part because it is hardly unusual for prostitutes to get killed, because of the sleazy clientele with whom they do business.

Six months later, however, the police found the skeletal remains of a third victim in the same area; shortly thereafter, they uncovered the body of Patricia

Ives, also in the river gorge. By this point, if only because of the high frequency of the killings, the police were forced to confront the frightening probability that a serial killer was on the prowl and targeting women of the night.

By Thanksgiving of 1988, the tenth body, that of 29-year-old June Stott, was discovered. This case was strikingly different from the other nine, however. Not only was the murder particularly grotesque—the woman’s body had been eviscerated from the neck down to her pubic bone—but Stott also was the first victim who was not a prostitute. It is commonplace for serial killers to increase their level of brutality, as they get bored with less-vicious behavior and as they grow more comfortable with murder. It is also commonplace for them to branch out to more respectable victims as they become convinced that they are smarter than the police and will never be apprehended.

Shawcross was no different in this regard. His sense of invincibility and carelessness ultimately led to his demise. Long after dumping the body of his twelfth victim, June Cicero, in Simon Creek, Shawcross returned to mutilate her corpse. Surveying the area by helicopter, the Rochester police spied Shawcross getting into his car, which was parked on a bridge some 15 feet above Cicero’s body.

After Shawcross was arrested for suspicion of murder, his mug shot was placed into a photo lineup. Detectives often compile a sheet of photographs, mixing a suspect’s picture with those of several others, to approximate an actual station-house lineup for field use. The police showed the photo lineup to local prostitute Joanne Van Nostrand. She immediately picked out Shawcross as the perverted “john” who needed her to “play dead” for him to get sexually aroused. As Van Nostrand recalled about her encounter with Shawcross:

He was real nervous. That made me nervous and I carry a knife to protect myself . . . So I just let him know point-blank that I had a weapon and that I was nervous that there was a serial killer. The only time he was really abusive to me is when I asked him why was it taking so long—I had been there, like, 40 minutes. That’s when he really said, “Well, if you just play dead, bitch, we’ll get this over in a few minutes.” Little things kept clicking, and the hairs on the back of my neck started standing up and I said [to myself], “This is the guy. I just know this is the guy.” (Public Broadcasting Service, 1992)

After his arrest, Shawcross began confessing and explained why he had killed 13 women. “I was taking care of business,” he stated. Clearly, Shawcross’s explanation for his crimes begged the question. Why did he kill

these women, and why was he aroused by death and sexual mutilation? Several experts, including New York University psychiatrist Dr. Dorothy Otnow Lewis, who testified on Shawcross's behalf to support his insanity plea, traced the sources of his behavior back to his childhood, particularly to mistreatment at the hands of his sexually provocative mother.

CHILDHOOD SUFFERING

The psychiatric case study of Arthur Shawcross runs true to form. Whenever the background of an infamous serial killer is examined, journalists and behavioral scientists tend to search for clues in the killer's childhood that might explain his seemingly senseless murders. Many writers have emphasized Ted Bundy's concerns over being illegitimate, and biographers of Kenneth Bianchi, the Hillside Strangler of Los Angeles, capitalized on his having been adopted. When it was alleged that Jeffrey Dahmer was abused, Americans felt satisfied that at last they had an answer to his puzzling crimes. "Now we know why he did it—he was abused as a child!"

Ever since Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory revolutionized thinking about childhood development, we have embraced the idea that our first few years largely determine the "script" by which we play out the rest of our lives. As a result, there is a strong tendency in our culture to blame parents—and particularly mothers—for almost everything that goes amiss later in a child's life, including violent behavior. Thus, when the allegations of sexual abuse in Dahmer's background surfaced in the press, the public uncritically accepted childhood trauma as the true cause of his crime. The *Oprah Winfrey* show went so far as to air a program on "future Jeffrey Dahmers," featuring mothers who were concerned that their incorrigible youngsters were destined to develop into cold-blooded criminals. Ironically, the host of the show herself had survived a troubled upbringing, involving severe child abuse, yet had become the most successful talk show host in television history rather than a killer—a talker rather than a stalker.

Even the experts have overstated the role of childhood problems as the primary cause of serial killing. According to Dorothy Lewis, "In the serial killers I've seen, there's almost invariably a history of early and ongoing sexual abuse. The murder victims sometimes represent a symbolic revenge against the abuser, or sometimes the reverse—the killer is identifying with whoever tortured him, and is now the one in power" (quoted in Goleman,

1993, p. B6). Similarly, psychiatrist David Abrahamsen, author of *The Murdering Mind* (1973), speculated that serial killer Ted Bundy may have killed dozens of women as an indirect way to “kill” his mother. “The victim is not really the target; ‘The victim is a substitute, and that is why these crimes seem so random and capricious’” (Abrahamsen, quoted in Nordheimer, 1989, p. 1A). Also, psychologist John Watkins, in probing the mind of Hillside Strangler Kenneth Bianchi, explained: “Consumed by pent-up rage at his mother, Bianchi killed the women” (Public Broadcasting Service, 1984). Defense psychiatrist Donald Lunde went one step further by suggesting that Bianchi would never satiate his compulsion to kill until he could murder his mother (which he never attempted to do).

This mother-hate theory suggests that serial killers get even for the real or perceived abusive treatment they received at the hands of their parents by displacing their aggression onto surrogate victims who resemble the offending parent, usually the mother, in terms of physical appearance or behavior. By this reasoning, a killer who targets prostitutes is acting out his hostile feeling for a mother he saw as a “slut.” Alternatively, a killer who preys upon redheaded victims is conjectured to be avenging mistreatment by his redheaded mother.

There may be isolated examples of serial killers who, motivated by mother-hatred, seek out victims who ignite angry memories of their childhood. For example, serial killer Henry Lee Lucas included his mother among his many victims; when he was young, she dressed him in girls’ clothing and forced him to witness her sexual exploits. In most cases, however, victim selection reflects much more directly issues of opportunity, victim vulnerability, and the character of the killer’s sexual fantasies.

Did Arthur Shawcross target prostitutes because he was angry over the sexual provocativeness of his mother, or did he take the easy and safe route? By selecting streetwalkers as victims, he was able to drive to an area of town where he knew they congregated. He could “shop” for one who most closely fit his sexual urges. He could entice her into his car without making a scene. And he was assured that her disappearance would likely not be considered foul play.

What, then, is the role of childhood in understanding the nature or cause of Shawcross’s serial killing? The early biographies of most people include an array of both positive and negative events. There is a tendency in our culture, however, to focus selectively on those incidents that are consistent with the outcome that we are trying to explain. Thus, in searching for clues to explain how a serial killer has developed, a psychiatrist who subscribes to the troubled childhood view would tend to emphasize the negative experiences. Some have even

utilized hypnosis to aid in their search for evidence of abuse and trauma that might lie deeply hidden beneath the surface of consciousness.

Dr. Lewis, for example, was hired by defense counsel in the Arthur Shawcross case to reveal Shawcross's motivation and to support a plea of insanity in his trial for the murders of prostitutes. Lewis testified that Shawcross suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) brought on in part by experiences of abuse during his childhood. Lewis based this conclusion on sessions of hypnosis in which she age-regressed Shawcross for early memories of mistreatment. At first, he recalled having a normal upbringing and failed to reveal any abusive experiences. After lengthy and persistent probing under hypnosis, however, Shawcross finally "remembered" being sodomized by his mother with a broomstick and being forced to perform oral sex with her.

According to Lewis, "most violent men I see would much rather be considered bad or evil than crazy. So they really don't want to talk about the voices they hear or times they have blacked out. And many of them . . . are still intent on protecting their families, even though their families hideously abused them" (quoted in Bass, 1991, p. 21).

Did Lewis's discovery of suppressed and painful memories of abuse in Shawcross's background reflect an uncompromising effort to uncover the truth about deeply hidden secrets? Or did Shawcross finally give his examiner exactly what he figured she expected to hear? Either way, Shawcross's mother called her son a liar; given his attempt to save himself through the insanity plea, he certainly had very good reason to fabricate or exaggerate bad childhood experiences. We really can't know for certain, however.

TESTIMONY UNDER HYPNOSIS

The therapeutic uses of hypnosis—from treating compulsive behavior to identifying the sources of emotional conflict—are well documented and widely accepted. The forensic applications of hypnosis are, however, much more controversial. Research on hypnosis indicates that the so-called "hypnotic trance" is little more than accepting the suggestions of a highly credible source. According to psychologist Theodore X. Barber, author of *Hypnosis: A Scientific Approach* (1969), almost every extraordinary act or recollection that a subject gives under hypnosis can be obtained without hypnosis. All that is needed is a respected and trusted authority figure to make commands—under

hypnosis or not—such as “you will lose weight,” “you will not smoke,” or even “you will remember being abused as a child.”

The other important finding uncovered by researchers is that hypnosis increases the level of confidence but not accuracy in recalling events. For example, under hypnosis, witnesses to a crime involving a masked gunman have been asked to remove mentally the criminal’s disguise and describe his face. Filling in the details on their own, these hypnotized subjects become convinced about the description they give. It may be a figment of their imagination, perhaps based on stereotypes, but it is one of which they are absolutely sure. In the same way, psychologists studying hypnosis have compared age regression with age progression. After first taking their subjects back several years in life to recall events at that time, they then take them forward into the future and ask them to describe what they are doing. Subjects tend to recollect the future in as much detail and certainty as they recall the past.

The fact that hypnotized subjects can confidently recall, create, or alter their biographies casts doubt on the accuracy of memories. On the one hand, it is quite possible that a hypnotized subject will reveal painful yet accurate memories of childhood. On the other hand, subjects can fabricate events in their past if it suits the occasion, the context, or some ulterior motive.

In forensic work, the hypnotist deals with a subject who may have a stake in faking a hypnotic trance and divulging inaccurate information about himself and his past. According to Tracktir (1966), a psychologist who specializes in hypnosis, someone can be in a trance and still provide false information. The hypnotist can actually create the information through subtle and perhaps not-so-subtle suggestions to the subject. Thus, it is possible for an individual who may indeed have felt intimidated as a child to recall under hypnosis experiences of abuse, particularly if the hypnotist solicits such recollections and the subject has a self-serving interest in providing them.

CHILD ABUSE AND MURDER

The case of serial murderer Kenneth Bianchi provides another revealing example of how hypnosis has been exploited to find support for the child abuse explanation for murderous impulses. In 1977 and 1978, Ken and his cousin Angelo Buono abducted, tortured, raped, and murdered 10 young women, whose bodies they dumped along roadsides in the Los Angeles area.

Kenneth Bianchi's insanity defense was centered on the theory that he suffered from a multiple personality disorder (MPD). This psychiatric illness, characterized by the presence of two or more distinct and separate personalities that share the same body, is generally attributed to child abuse. In this view, an abused child escapes from cruel parental treatment by developing a fantasy world of pleasure and kindness. At the same time, the angry and hateful feelings toward the abusive parent are stored in a reservoir that the child suppresses. In later life, the two perspectives—the loving and the hateful—split into their own personalities, which compete for control. The angry “person” takes turns with various alter egos for dominance over the same body.

If Bianchi were in fact a multiple personality, this could easily explain and reconcile how someone as seemingly nice as Ken could also commit the heinous crimes with which he was charged. Through hypnosis, a second personality surfaced, that of “Steve,” a hostile, crude, impatient, and sadistic character who proudly claimed responsibility for the slayings. “Killing a broad doesn't make any difference to me,” bragged Steve (Public Broadcasting Service, 1984). Everything now made sense to the psychiatrists.

Court-appointed experts on multiple personalities found ample support within Ken's extensive medical history for holding his adoptive mother, Frances Piccione, responsible. For example, Dr. A. W. Sullivan of the DePaul Clinic in Rochester, where Ken was seen at the age of 11, suggested that Frances played a major role in her son's childhood problems: “She has dominated the boy and indulged him in terms of her own needs. Her anxious, protective, clinging control has made him ambivalent but he represses the hostile aggression and is increasingly dependent upon her” (Dr. Sullivan's notes in Bianchi's medical file, unpublished).

Medical records from Ken's childhood characterized Frances as a neurotic and ineffective parent. To account for the emergence of Ken's vicious personality, however, court-appointed psychiatric experts needed to find specific evidence of severe child abuse *per se*.

Bianchi was advised by his hypnotist that his medical history failed to include the kind of documentation of child abuse that would be needed to support his defense based on multiple personality disorder. Hypnotized once more, Bianchi then recalled a dream about a woman putting his hands over a kitchen stove fire while he was young. Finally, the psychiatrists had the evidence of abuse that was lacking!

When later asked about her son's dream, Frances was candid. She admitted having used the stove as a threat, but not with the intent to inflict pain or injury:

When Ken was eight years old, I caught him stealing. He had taken some pieces of coral from a greenhouse we had just visited. We had a small kitchen, six or seven feet wide, with a doorway at one end and the stove at the other. Ken was standing at the door with his father. "See this fire," I said. "If I catch you stealing once more, I'll hold your hand over this stove." (personal interview)

Although harsh and threatening discipline of this sort can be interpreted as abuse, it is usually not considered to be at the level needed to create a dissociative personality state such as MPD. Had Frances done anything more than threaten, surely the many doctors whom Ken had seen for his medical problems would have reported burns or scars on his hand. Had she been a "severely abusive mother," as some labeled her, there would have been many more stories of brutal treatment. At the very worst, Bianchi, through hypnotic age regression, may have interpreted his mother's threatened punishment as if it had really been inflicted upon him.

A number of psychiatrists hold that the roots of "homicidal proneness" reside not only in maternal brutality but also in sexual seduction, which can be played out in anything from incest between mother and child to inappropriate or excessive conversation about sexual matters. The victim of maternal seduction grows up overly anxious about his sexuality. Fueled by this anxiety, the hostility toward mother generalizes later in life to sexual violence against women.

Court-appointed psychiatrists also attempted to weave a picture of Bianchi's mother as a wantonly seductive woman. A physician at the DePaul Clinic in Rochester, where Ken was seen as a child for chronic bed wetting, had years earlier scrawled some cryptic—barely legible—observations about Frances that became part of Ken's medical file. An unexplained reference to "sex magazines" was later interpreted by court-appointed psychiatrists to mean that she "showed him sex magazines." It could just as easily have meant that she had punished him for reading them, but this interpretation would not have fit the psychiatrists' point of view and so was never seriously considered.

Having failed to prove insanity and having been found guilty of murder, Ken Bianchi no longer has a self-serving motive for implicating his mother. Ken later confessed:

There has never been child abuse in my family. I greatly exaggerated certain childhood incidents after they could not find an origin for the alleged multiple personality. I was told that multiples usually begin with child abuse.

I lied. My lies were not supposed to have been released. Originally, they were mentioned in confidence. I am not proud of what I did. (personal interview)

INORDINATE NEED FOR POWER

Whether or not Bianchi's criminal behavior could be traced to parental abuse and seduction, childhood trauma does, in general, play an important role in explaining the development of murderous impulses. Children who are abused, neglected, or abandoned tend to grow into needy adults with difficulty bonding with others, a so-called "attachment disorder" (APA, 1994). Lacking control over their own lives as children, many remain insecure as they mature, continuing to possess an intense need for control over their environment. From an early age, they are unable to trust others, and instead they learn to manipulate people in order to fulfill their needs.

This overpowering need for control can be fulfilled, however, in many different ways—some bad and others good. For example, some victims of abuse become abusive parents themselves, whereas others are driven toward careers devoted to helping victims of abuse. Additionally, some former abuse victims who have excessive needs for power and control are able to satisfy their needs in unscrupulous but nonviolent ways.

For example, some college professors—one hopes there are only a few—achieve a thrill when flunking students; they gain pleasure by hurting their students' chances for successful educations and careers, and they enjoy it all the more when the students beg for another chance or a make-up exam. Similarly, some business tycoons savor the experience of firing employees or destroying the career of a competitor. They profit from the experience not just financially but also in the sense of power they derive as they rule over the fate of others.

Thus, there are important similarities indeed between the ruthless tycoon and the ruthless serial killer. Had Kenneth Bianchi grown up to be a ruthless business executive—unkind but successful—rather than an infamous killer, his biographers would have pointed to the same childhood issues as critical turning points that ultimately strengthened his determination to succeed. Had Theodore Bundy been able to accomplish his goal of becoming an attorney, he might have done his "killing" in the courtroom to satisfy his need for power.

More than a few serial killers—from David Berkowitz to Joel Rifkin—were raised by adoptive parents. The apparent overrepresentation of adoption

in the biographies of serial killers has been exploited by those who are looking for simple explanations for heinous crimes, without a full analysis made of the mechanisms behind or value of the link between adoption and criminal behavior.

The first possible triggering mechanism surrounds the effects of rejection by birth parents. As a consequence of such rejection, some adopted children may develop feelings of abandonment and intense anger that stay with them throughout life. For example, New York's "Son of Sam" killer, David Berkowitz, who shot and killed six strangers while they sat in parked cars, may have been reacting in part to feelings of rejection. After returning from military service in the Korean War, Berkowitz learned of his adoption and was able years later to locate his biological mother and sister in Long Beach, Long Island. He was shocked, however, when he discovered that they wanted nothing to do with him. Shortly thereafter, his killing spree began.

In addition, some adopted children may be deprived of warmth and affection during the first few months of life, either because of a delay in locating a suitable placement or because the adoptive parents hesitate in making a full emotional commitment until the legal process is finalized. As a result, some of these children may fail to bond emotionally and, therefore, never develop a capacity for love and empathy.

Added to these environmental contributors, certain biological deficiencies related to criminality, such as mental retardation and learning disabilities, may be more prevalent among the population of adopted children because of traits common to their biological parents. To whatever extent that criminal propensities are genetically linked, the higher proportions of prostitutes, drug users, and incarcerated women among mothers who give up their children for adoption will translate into a higher involvement of adoptees in criminal behavior. In addition, the poor prenatal care of many of the groups from which adopted children are drawn can similarly predispose these children to the same biological deficiencies that correlate with criminal behavior.

PREDICTING SERIAL MURDER

If any or all of these linkages between adoption and crime are true, then is it fair to say that children of adoption are destined to kill? As a society, should we not intervene in the lives of these "children at risk" before it is too late?

The methodological problems in predicting violence are well known. For a category of violence as rare as serial murder, the consequent dilemma of “false positive” prediction is overwhelming. Simply put, there are millions of adopted or abused Americans, many of whom may suffer from some form of insecurity as a result; but the vast majority of them will never kill anyone, let alone commit serial murder.

To illustrate further the absurdity of attempting to predict such rare characteristics as murder proneness, consider the link between gender and serial murder. Most serial killers are men, but most men are not serial killers—not even close. The same reasoning prevents us from identifying future serial murderers on the basis of such childhood factors as abuse, seduction, or even cruelty to animals that often are found in the backgrounds of serial killers.

Looking retrospectively at the childhood of serial killers, it comes as little surprise that many were long fascinated with death and dying. Some of them, as children, enjoyed torturing animals and experienced a thrill in determining the fate of small, defenseless creatures. This became a proving ground for later experimentation with human beings. For example, California serial killer Edmund Kemper, who was convicted in 1973 of killing six college coeds before murdering his own mother, tortured and dismembered the family cat when he was 13 years old. Other serial killers were fascinated with dead beings rather than with the act of murder itself. For example, as a child, Milwaukee’s Jeffrey Dahmer collected road kill in the same way that his classmates collected baseball cards.

Although practicing on animals, from insects to cats, may be an instructive training ground for people like Kemper and Dahmer, such childhood experimentation hardly guarantees that a youngster will graduate to human subjects. That is, many children maintain a vigorous fascination with dead animals; some even *enjoy* dissecting frogs in high school biology class. Some eventually do graduate into expressing violence against human beings. Such children, however, are far more likely to grow up to become surgeons, pathologists, nurses, or even morticians than they are to become serial killers. At the same time, the significance of animal cruelty as an indicator of an emotionally troubled child who is in need of treatment should not be discounted. In a more limited sense, it is the widely held belief that such activity signals future murderous behavior that is fundamentally flawed.

Caution regarding the vital difference between explanation and prediction applies equally to today’s sensitivity to child abuse. The so-called “cycle of

violence” hypothesis rests on the finding that many abusive parents were themselves abused as children. Basing their therapy on this linkage, many well-meaning therapists help child abuse victims deal more effectively with anger and frustration, in the hope that they themselves will not become abusive parents.

This strategy may indeed be a good thing, but for the wrong reason. It is appropriate to be concerned about the emotional well-being and quality of life of those who have been victimized by their parents, but to target them and thus stigmatize them for the hideous acts that they *may* commit sometime in the future, whether child abuse or serial murder, is to victimize them once again. The problem is deeper than just stigma. By labeling them as the abusers of tomorrow, we may actually create the very outcome that we are trying to prevent.

NEUROLOGICAL IMPAIRMENT

The psychiatric evidence linking serial murder to a variety of childhood problems, such as child abuse, is frequently disputed because of the questionable reliability of the source of data—the killer himself. How can we rely on information from a known liar who has a reason to lie? In contrast, biological, physiological, and neurological approaches do not suffer the same reliability problems. It is harder to con an EEG, for example, although the significance of the results may be as unclear as a killer’s recollections of his childhood.

Some neurologists and a growing number of psychiatrists suggest that many serial killers have incurred severe injury to the limbic region of the brain resulting from profound or repeated head trauma, generally during childhood. Psychiatrist Dorothy Lewis and neurologist Jonathan Pincus, for example, examined 15 murderers on Florida’s death row and found that all showed signs of neurological irregularities (see Lewis, Pincus, Feldman, Jackson, & Bard, 1986). In addition, psychologist Joel Norris (1988) reported excessive spinal fluid found in the brain scan of serial killer Henry Lee Lucas. Norris argued that this abnormality reflected the possible damage caused by an earlier blow or a series of blows to Lucas’s head.

It is incontrovertible that severe head trauma and resulting injury to the brain can have potentially dire effects on behavior, such as inducing violent outbursts, learning disabilities, and epilepsy. It is noteworthy and suggestive that serial killer Henry Lee Lucas reportedly was beaten by his mother with pieces

of lumber and broom handles, and that he later claimed to have experienced frequent dizzy spells and blackouts.

Bobby Joe Long of Florida, who was convicted in 1986 and in 1994 of a total of nine counts of first-degree murder, also appears to have received several severe head injuries. At the age of five, Long was knocked unconscious when he fell off a swing. A year later, he suffered a serious concussion when he fell off his bicycle and crashed into a parked car headfirst. Several months later, Long fell from a horse onto his head.

At the same time, it is critical that we place in some perspective the many case studies that have been used in an attempt to link extreme violence to neurological impairment. Absent from the case study approach is any indication of the prevalence of individuals who did *not* act violently despite a history of trauma. Indeed, if head trauma were as strong a contributor to serial murder as some would suggest, then we would have many times more serial killers than we actually do.

It is also important to recognize that neurological impairment must occur in combination with a host of environmental conditions to place an individual at risk for extreme acts of brutality. Dorothy Lewis cautions, for example, that “the neuropsychiatric problems alone don’t make you violent. Probably the environmental factors in and of themselves don’t make you a violent person. But when you put them together, you create a very dangerous character” (Public Broadcasting Service, 1992). Similarly, former FBI special agent Robert Ressler asserts that no single childhood problem indicates future criminality. According to Ressler, “there are a whole pot of conditions that have to be met” for violence to be predictable (quoted in Meddis, 1987, p. 5A). Head trauma and abuse, therefore, may be important risk factors, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient to make someone a serial killer. Rather, they are part of a very long list of circumstances—including adoption, shyness, disfigurement, speech impediments, learning and physical disabilities, abandonment, death of a parent, and academic and athletic inadequacies—that may make a child *feel* frustrated and rejected enough to predispose, but not predestine, him or her toward extreme violence.

Thus, we must approach with caution and skepticism any attempt to use neurological assessments in a predictive way. The distinction between explanation and prediction is once again crucial. Let us say that some abnormality—be it neurological, genetic, or environmental—is found more often among serial killers than in the general population. This does not mean that we

could or should screen children for violence proneness using physiological, psychological, or neurological examinations.

Joel Norris (1988) suggested that by the end of the 1990s, “most forms of episodic aggression—including serial murder—could be prevented through an organized program of testing and diagnosis and intervention” (p. 244). In retrospect, it is obvious that Norris was essentially wrong. It is questionable that we will soon understand the causes of human behavior well enough to allow predictions to be made with reasonable accuracy. Most of our explanations are incomplete at best, involving a long list of possible contributors. They simply do not permit us to identify in advance who will and who will not turn out to be a serial killer.

This didn’t stopped Norris from trying. He published a list of biological warning signs that he suggested could be used as part of a pattern to identify future serial killers. Norris’s list included a variety of physical features—some general and others quite specific—such as earlobes that adhere to the head, fine and unruly hair, abnormal teeth, a curved pinky finger, and a third toe that is equal in length to or longer than the second toe. Although many of the items reported by Norris may indeed be symptomatic of genetic damage, the connection between genetic abnormality and extreme criminality is tenuous. Even though researchers have found some association between biological makeup and violent behavior, the linkage is not nearly strong enough to permit prudent predictions. Furthermore, even if an individual is predisposed toward violence, whether for biological or environmental reasons, there is no guarantee that this propensity will ever be translated into assaultive behavior.

BLAMING THE FAMILY

There is a final concern surrounding the overemphasis on environmental or biological determinism—the notion that familial, developmental, or genetic abnormalities are always responsible for the propensity to kill. For example, Special Agent John Douglas of the FBI, an authority on serial murder, has claimed, “There are common denominators that you find with *each and every one* of these people. They come from generally broken homes. They are the product of some kind of abuse” (Public Broadcasting Service, 1992; emphasis added).

For the serial killer who strives to deflect blame for his actions, the “child abuse syndrome,” the “posttraumatic stress disorder syndrome,” and an irregular

EEG form the perfect excuse. "I'm not to blame," he insists. "I couldn't help myself. I'm a victim, too."

Unfortunately, clever and cunning serial killers who might exploit these syndromes to their own advantage frequently receive a sympathetic ear. As a sociopath, the serial killer is a convincing and accomplished liar. As a professional trained to be supportive and empathic, his psychiatrist may be easily conned. The case histories of such malingerers as Kenneth Bianchi and Arthur Shawcross, both serial killers who apparently fooled mental health professionals with fabricated tales of childhood trauma, remind us to be skeptical about the self-serving testimony of accused killers eager to escape legal responsibility for their crimes.

If the etiology of their murderous behavior involved only neurological impairment or failure to bond during early childhood, serial killers would, in all likelihood, start murdering people early in life—say, at the age of 12, 19, or 24. Instead, many serial killers do not begin taking lives until they are in their 30s or 40s. Some wait even longer in the life cycle. Not only have they experienced pain and suffering as children, but they also continue to suffer as adults.

Danny Rolling waited until he was 36 years old to kill. Then, he murdered three people in his hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana, and five more in Gainesville, Florida. Not only had Rolling been the victim of an abusive father, but his adjustment and personal problems also continued through adolescence into early adulthood. A brief marriage ended in divorce, his adult relationship with his parents continued to be severely strained, and he couldn't manage to hold a job. Instead, he drifted first from job to job, next from state to state, then from prison to prison, and finally from murder to murder.