

On July 22, 1991, Jeffrey Dahmer, age 31, was arrested in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and entered the annals of America's most notorious serial killers.

When examining all the broken pieces, sometimes it is impossible to see exactly which piece broke first. What we do know is that his first murder, committed while a teenager, was only the beginning of a tortuous descent into multiple murder, sexual depravity, and cannibalism. Dahmer was raised in a family in which his father was oblivious to the inner struggles of his son. At age eight, Dahmer is believed to have been sexually abused by a neighbor boy. His father recalls that Jeffrey was a loner and a poor student. He was unaware of his adolescent son's use of alcohol, his more than scientific interest in dissecting road kills, and his penchant for young men. Only three weeks after his senior high school prom, at age 18, Dahmer would kill and dismember his first victim, a 17-year-old male—a deed kept secret from everyone.

After several years of apparent family turmoil, Dahmer's parents divorced. His mother took the youngest son to live with her while Dahmer remained with his father. Dahmer joined the military but was discharged for abuse of alcohol. He began working a night shift at the Ambrosia Chocolate Company in Milwaukee. In 1986, he received a year's probation for exposing himself to young boys. He struggled with his sexual orientation and felt that being gay was wrong. His inner struggles found him frequently contemplating suicide, but he was also developing aberrant sexual fantasies. His capacity for killing was being enhanced by these increasingly deviant sexual fantasies. He struggled against the urge to harm other human beings but was torn by sexual fantasies and driven by his need to control his life by controlling others. After the first homicide, Dahmer is believed by some to have visited graveyards in hopes of retrieving a corpse rather than killing another person. Unsuccessful, Dahmer finally yielded to his growing fantasies. Succumbing to their ever-tightening grip, Dahmer continued to suffer a string of failures in his work and education.

To most of his victims, he seemed like a very average person wanting to be social. A resident of Milwaukee's West Side, Dahmer lived alone in an apartment. He frequented bars, some of them gay, looking for contacts. Initially he used his grandmother's basement to have sex with drugged men and act out some of his deviant fantasies. He often rented cheap rooms at bathhouses, where he gave alcohol laced with drugs such as Halcion (a sleeping pill) to his victims. He had gotten the routine down very well. Potential victims, many of them African American or Asian, were then brought to his apartment. Others he brought directly to his apartment, had sex with them, and then offered them tainted alcohol. Dahmer then handcuffed his victims, who were unaware that the alcohol had been laced with drugs, and led them into the bedroom. This was his killing room, where he kept and disposed of his victims. Most of his victims he strangled to death. One 14-year-old boy, a Native American, was sexually assaulted, drugged, strangled, dismembered, and his corpse pulverized with a sledgehammer. While some of his victims lay unconscious, Dahmer would drill holes into their skulls in an attempt to make zombies out of them. In this state, he either hoped or fantasized they would become his sex slaves and never leave him. Dahmer also cannibalized several of his victims. The goal of all this carnage was, in fact, pitiful. Dahmer had a fantasy: by consuming his victims, they would become part of him and make him more powerful. He fantasized having his two favorite victims, fully skeletonized, standing on either side of him. He, Dahmer, would be sitting in a large black chair like the one used by the antagonist in the movie *Star Wars*. Directly behind him on a shelf and between the two skeletons would rest the shrunken skulls of several of his victims. This scene was a powerful one for Dahmer. In his mind he would achieve the ultimate.

Surrounded by his victims who now had become part of him, Dahmer fantasized a sense of power and control unlike any he had ever felt before.

The last victim he attempted to lure into the killing chamber managed to escape and alert two police officers on patrol. (Over the years, four other potential victims had also escaped and told their stories to police and friends, but still Dahmer had remained free.) Responding to the man's complaint that Dahmer had tried to handcuff him and that his bedroom contained photographs of dead men, the police went to the apartment. Dahmer greeted them at the door and appeared very cooperative. Stepping into the apartment, the officers noticed a severe stench, like that of rotting carcasses. One of the officers asked for the key to the handcuffs still attached to the arm of the man. Dahmer insisted on retrieving it himself from the bedroom. Concerned for their own safety, one of the officers moved past him and entered the bedroom.

What he found would soon become international headlines. A blue barrel containing human body parts stood in one corner and two skulls lay unconcealed in a box. Restraining Dahmer, the officers looked around the apartment and counted at least 11 skulls (7 of them carefully boiled and cleaned) and a collection of bones, decomposed hands, and genitals. Three of the cleaned skulls had been spray-painted black and silver. These were to be part of the shrine fantasized by Dahmer. A complete skeleton suspended from a shower spigot and three skulls with holes drilled into them were found throughout the apartment. Dahmer had attempted to lobotomize some of his victims by pouring muriatic acid through the drilled holes and into their brain tissue. Chemicals, including muriatic acid, ethyl alcohol, chloroform, and formaldehyde, were also discovered, along with several Polaroid photographs of recently dismembered young men. A complete human head sat in the refrigerator.

The next day, Dahmer confessed to murdering and dismembering 15 to 17 young men and boys. He blamed no one or no thing for his crimes, including his parents, society, or pornography. Dahmer was sentenced to 15 consecutive life sentences (957 years) and incarcerated at the Columbia Correctional Facility in Portage, Wisconsin. There he was the recipient of much fan mail and letters from curiosity seekers. Several writers, some from as far away as South Africa and Europe, sent him money. In contrast, the families of the victims obtained judgments against Dahmer totaling more than 80 million dollars. Dahmer admitted that he should never be allowed freedom again because he still felt the compulsion to kill. Nor did he wish to remain in prison. On November 28, 1994, Dahmer was beaten to death by Christopher J. Scarver, another inmate serving time for murder. His remains were cremated, although efforts were made by his mother to have her son's brain donated to science.

How do we explain Dahmer's criminal behavior? Like other serial killers, there is no single causal factor. His biological father, Lionel Dahmer, outlines several possibilities that in combination may have triggered his son's urge to kill. Mr. Dahmer (1994) points out that Jeffrey's mother, Joyce, frequently used medications such as phenobarbital and morphine during her pregnancy with Jeffrey to deal with both psychological and physiological problems. Could these medications have affected Dahmer's fetal development, or did he inherit mental illness from his mother or antisocial personality traits from his father? From a neuropsychological perspective, was there some genetic predisposition to violence inherited by Jeffrey? Mr. Dahmer does mention his own obsession with fire and a fascination with bombs and making explosives. Another possible factor was the constant family discord that seemed to alienate Dahmer and led to divorce and further family disruption. Eventually, Dahmer turned to alcohol to assuage his pain of abandonment, his feelings of low self-esteem, and his perceived pattern of failure in life. How do you explain Dahmer's diminished conscience, lack of empathy, and cold-blooded attitude as he hunted, selected, and killed each victim?