



D21 Privileged Access: Trained Listening to Serial Killers Yields Insights

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about historical efforts in psychology and psychiatry to identify factors in the development of extreme offenders (serial and mass murderers), and how these efforts became the foundation for today's neuroscience of violence.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating how intensive professional interviews may have drawbacks and benefits of clinical associations with extreme offenders.

Serial killer Ted Bundy once said that keeping him alive to study would provide valuable insights about the type of extreme violence he committed. Others have echoed him. Over the past century, some mental health experts took this idea seriously. They ventured beyond the typical evaluation period and devices to thoroughly explore a specific criminal's mind. These singular in-depth studies, starting with nineteenth-century "criminal autobiographies," offer tools and techniques for spending productive clinical time with violent offenders. Although some theories have been discarded as psychiatric fashions evolved, interviewers continue to seek clarity about motives, criminal behavior, and viable therapeutic interventions. We have more than a dozen case examples of extended professional interviews with serial and mass murderers from the past century from which to learn.

Thanks to clinical training, coupled with privileged access, these professionals have provided ideas about what makes the most perverse serial or mass murderers tick. No one is better positioned to offer intimate details than experienced professionals who know how to examine an abnormal mind.

Ever since the earliest days of psychiatry, "alienists" have tried to understand the violent acts of the criminally insane. At first, they believed that anyone who acted contrary to rational sense must be psychotic, but then a certain type of rational criminal stood out. In 1809, Philippe Pinel became the first to acknowledge the disturbing behavior of psychopathy. Following him, other wardens of insane asylums studied "moral insanity" to learn how the faculty for socially appropriate behavior could become corrupted.

French pathologist and jack-of-all trades Andre Lacassagne first urged offenders to tell their stories in full, instigating what he called criminal autobiographies. He encouraged a number of prisoners to write about themselves, and each week he checked their notebooks, correcting and guiding them toward insight. He learned that their family histories were full of violence, tension, and disease, so he developed a theory about social criminality.

During the 1930s and 40s, Dr. Fredric Wertham examined a demented deviant named Albert Fish, who cannibalized a child, and Karl Berg interviewed sexual sadist Peter Kürten. Two decades later, Marvin Ziporyn befriended mass murderer Richard Speck, who'd killed eight nurses in Chicago in a single night. While Ziporyn thought Speck's upbringing was overly protective, he also considered the unique new idea of a brain disorder. As serial murder became more prevalent, more professionals have taken time with these offenders to gain greater comprehension. Today, neuroscientists are putting criminal psychopaths through MRI machines.

Collectively, psychologists and psychiatrists who have used their training and skills to probe the minds of these extreme criminals have retrieved important information about motives, pre- and post-crime behavior, fatal fantasies, mental rehearsal, compartmentalized personalities, and the role of mental disorders. Thus, it has become possible to isolate recurring conditions and factors. From the first person who believed that criminals had self-insight to today's advanced technological approach, much has been learned from extended, engaged professional listening about how and why some people commit shocking acts of violence.

Criminal Autobiography, Violence, Serial Killer