

Revenge: The Missing Category in Serial Murder Typologies

Arnon Edelstein

Criminology Department, Ashkelon Academic College, Ashkelon, Israel
Email: arnonede@gmail.com

How to cite this paper: Edelstein, A. (2024). Revenge: The Missing Category in Serial Murder Typologies. *Psychology*, 15, 1086-1091.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2024.157064>

Received: May 11, 2024
Accepted: July 13, 2024
Published: July 16, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Typologies of human behavior in general and those of criminality in particular have always interested researchers in many scientific fields, including psychology and criminology, as well as law enforcement authorities. Since the 80s' more and more typologies appeared, trying to make sense and understanding of serial criminals, mainly serial murderers. One issue remains unsolved. While on the basis of the explanations for serial killing, the revenge is one of the more emphasized factors or explanations, there is no category that addresses revenge in the typologies of serial murder and murderers. This review wishes to confront this phenomenon and propose the missing and the unique category in typologies of serial murder, that of revenge.

Keywords

Typology, Serial Murder, Revenge

1. Introduction

Science, and particularly criminology, aims to establish classifications of traits and causes related to specific phenomena, based on similarities and common characteristics. Classification enables a better understanding of a phenomenon by examining its various and specific components. A typology must include all the categories that belong to the phenomenon under study, and these categories should be exclusive to the phenomenon and not overlap with other areas (Edelstein, 2014).

Typologies have been part of the criminological field since Lombroso's time in the 18th century and have been influenced by biological, psychological and sociological disciplines. For example, Sutherland identified two categories in the typology of thieves: the professional and the lay thief, with the professional thief adhering to different norms and ethical codes, as well as more professional tech-

nological methods (Sutherland, 1988). Over the years, an increasing number of typologies have emerged for various types of crimes and criminals, such as pedophiles, rape and rapists, and burglary. During the 1980s and 1990s, typologies for serial crimes, including serial murder and murderers, began to appear (Edelstein, 2006; Fox & Levin, 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 1998; Levin & Fox, 2001; Vronsky, 2007). These attempts were not without criticism.

2. The Main Categories of Serial Murder and Murderers

In order to understand why there is a missing category, we should mention the main categories that exist in the current typologies for serial murder.

Typologies of serial murder and murderers originated from the FBI, which used them to profile the two main types of serial murderers: the organized and the unorganized serial killers (Ressler & Schachtman, 1992). The latter was easier to detect since he tended to leave DNA or other forensic evidence at the crime scene and did not bring a weapon, instead using the victim's clothing or a nearby object to kill her. The organized serial killer, on the other hand, was more challenging to apprehend, often only being caught after murdering numerous victims. A famous example is Ted Bundy, who killed tens of victims before his arrest (Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988).

While these two categories were sufficient for the FBI, other scholars believed they were too broad to encompass the many different kinds of serial killers and their motives, which the former typology did not address (Edelstein, 2006, 2009; Fox & Levin, 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 1998; Levin & Fox, 2001; Vronsky, 2007). Over the years, more typologies have been established to account for the various types and sub-types as well as motives of serial murderers. For example, Holmes and Holmes' (1998) well-known typology suggests that there are two main motives for serial killing: material and psychological. While the material motive is straightforward, the psychological motive is much more complex and includes many different sub-motives, such as sadistic, sexual, and hedonistic.

The first category in their typology is unique because it includes killers who suffer from psychotic paranoid personality. The "visionary" serial killer claims to murder in compliance with orders given by God, Satan, demons, angels, or other non-human figures. These figures dictate who the killer should murder but not why, threatening severe and deadly punishment for disobedience. This type of murderer acts rationally in choosing to live and uses his illness to normalize his deadly acts (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

The second category includes the "mission-oriented" serial killer, who tends to murder "outsiders" such as prostitutes, vagrants, and runaway youth. The victims of this type of murderer are often lonely people whose disappearance will not raise alarm. Their motive and benefit are psychological, as this serial killer wishes to "cleanse" society of those deemed unworthy of living. The victims are chosen because they meet certain criteria that the murderer has judged as deserving of extermination, based on either objective or subjective experiences (Holmes & Holmes, 1998).

The next category in [Holmes and Holmes' \(1998\)](#) typology is the hedonistic serial killer, who seeks to achieve pleasure in violent and fatal ways, usually through sexual intercourse with the victim and their subsequent killing. This category can be divided into three subcategories. The lust serial murderer, whose main motive is sex. The thrill serial killer is a sadistic sexual predator who gains satisfaction from the victim's reaction to his behaviors. The comfort killer kills for material gain, such as a professional assassin or hitman. The hitman may work freelance or as part of a criminal organization and can kill both known and anonymous victims.

The final category in [Holmes and Holmes' \(1998\)](#) typology is the power/control serial murderer, who has a high capability of enchanting his environment. This killer enjoys the feeling of control over the victim and, after using them for his sadistic sexual needs, may take mementos from the victims, such as body parts, and engage in necrophilic behaviors. Ted Bundy is an example of this type of serial killer.

In later years, some scholars adopted the notion of power/control to describe different kinds of serial killers whose common trait was the satisfaction they gained from playing God with their victims and enjoying the attention of police and the FBI, showcasing their intelligence and desire for fame ([Levin, 2008](#); [Ramsland, 2015](#); [Vronsky, 2007](#)).

Interestingly, in typologies of female serial killers, the category of revenge is an integral one, in contrast to typologies of male serial killers ([Fridel, 2019](#)). In 2020, I proposed a new typology of serial murders and murderers, which included a new category that is most relevant to this article. This category addresses serial murderers who kill out of feelings of frustration or humiliation, essentially seeking symbolic revenge through victims who remind them of their original abuser. The question arises as to why a special category is needed for these kinds of motives.

3. Frustration and Humiliation as Precursors to Revenge

As most serial murderers experienced abuse in their childhood, it is evident that their motives stem from these feelings and experiences. They seek to rid themselves of these emotions by targeting victims who symbolize their abuser and killing them as an act of revenge against the original perpetrator ([Edelstein, 2020](#); [Holmes & Holmes, 1998](#)). From this perspective, one could conclude that humiliation or frustration is present in all categories of serial murder and, therefore, should not be considered a separate or distinct category in any typology of serial murder or murderers ([Fridel, 2019](#); [Holmes & Holmes, 1998](#); [Ramsland, 2015](#); [Yaksic, 2020](#)).

Despite this well-documented argument, there may be cases in which an individual seeks revenge against criminals who have harmed their family. Other instances can be observed among terrorists who act in a serial pattern, using shooting, stabbing, bombing, and other methods of killing as revenge for their own or

their relatives' deaths or arrests, or in the name of their fellow family members. Although humiliation or frustration is also present in these cases, the primary motive is not to gain power or control, as in many categories of serial murder, but to exact revenge directly against the perpetrator. The feeling of power may be a consequence of the revenge.

Another argument for the necessity of a separate category is that in other categories, the revenge is enacted against a symbolic victim. This is because the murderer could not kill their abuser due to being a child or for psychological reasons. The killer grows up harboring these feelings until they indirectly execute their revenge on a symbolic victim (Fredholm, 2017; Syder, 2017).

One could argue that the hitman is an example of this type of serial killer. He may kill an enemy who is a member of a rival criminal organization as an act of revenge for harming his criminal associates during competition over services and territory.

While I agree that the concept of revenge is more commonly associated with mass murder, particularly in the context of terrorism, sometimes killing victims one at a time may provide greater satisfaction to the perpetrator.

4. Revenge or Vengeance Serial Murderers

Revenge or vengeance as a motive for serial killing is not a new concept. Both Jewish and Islamic religious traditions believe in the principle of "an eye for an eye" or blood vengeance. There have been numerous cases throughout history in which vengeance was carried out by family members and others. For example, Frank Eaton, born in mid-19th century Connecticut, moved to Kansas with his family at the age of 8. After his father was killed by 6 ex-Confederate soldiers, Frank began training and eventually managed to kill 5 of the murderers responsible for his father's death. Similar examples can be found in the days of the Wild West.

Some terrorists and criminals confess during interrogation that they sought revenge for the killing of one or more of their family members, using this as an excuse for killing criminals, soldiers, police officers, or ordinary citizens. While it is true that in many cases, revenge is exacted through mass murder rather than serial murder, sometimes serial murder can make the revenge more personal, particularly in the criminal world.

Interestingly, the mass media has played a significant role in recognizing and portraying this type of serial murder. This is not surprising, given its imaginative nature and ability to predict future and emerging trends.

Many films address the theme of revenge by an individual against criminals, usually after the criminals have murdered one or more of the protagonist's family members. Some of these films focus on revenge by women, which is a known motive in typologies of female serial killers.

Other films depict male serial killers who seek revenge for the murder of a family member or members. This is an important innovation that needs to be in-

corporated into typologies of male serial killers. For example, the movie “Law Abiding Citizen” tells the story of a man who loses his wife and daughter to murder. When the state fails to convict the perpetrators and they receive short prison sentences, the man, furious at the legal system, takes the law into his own hands and seeks revenge against anyone involved in the plea bargain.

These types of movies are not new, but they make two important claims. First, they suggest that revenge serial murder can be carried out by both male and female serial killers. Second, the media not only helps us understand these killers but also encourages us to sympathize with them, as plea bargaining becomes increasingly common, even for serious crimes.

The question that arises is whether the mass media is predicting the future, as it has done many times before, or if it is merely trying to innovate with new thrills for its audience.

5. Discussion

Despite ongoing debates about serial killers, their motives, and typologies, there is a substantial body of academic literature that has established some common agreements. However, to date, there are still some missing categories in the typologies of serial murder and murderers, which does not enable us to have a complete insight into the phenomenon (Edelstein, 2020; Holmes & Holmes, 1998; Levin & Fox, 2001; Vronsky, 2007).

It is evident that serial murderers often grow up in hostile and abusive environments. Hence, frustration and humiliation become strong components of their personality and form the basis for revenge as a main psychological motive in serial murder. The revenge is seen clearly as the killer targets victims that symbolize his abuser (Edelstein, 2020).

While this explanation is clear and makes sense, it is odd that revenge does not appear as a motive in any of the categories mentioned above in typologies of male serial killers. In my opinion, we should add revenge as a new and unique category in the typologies of serial murder and murderers.

One of the main reasons for my claim is that, as we have seen, most scholars have discussed humiliation or abuse in childhood as a precondition, or predisposition for the killer’s direct or indirect acts against the original or a symbolic victim. Hence, there is no reason to look at revenge as a separate category in the typologies. In my opinion, a revenge or vengeance serial killer may want revenge for **later** humiliations, during his adolescence or adult years towards him by individuals who belong to a group, such as gender, physical traits, occupation and so on. This in turn is relevant only to a man who had already suffered abuse in his early life, otherwise, he would not become a serial killer. For example, Bundt took revenge against women not only because of his mother’s abuse, but because his fiancé canceled their marriage.

The question remains does a revenge serial killer have suffered earlier humiliation that is a predisposition for him to become a serial killer at all? Or maybe

people with personality disorders may become serial killers because they feel rage against others who hurt them or their families without having been abused at all in their childhood.

My conclusions are twofold. First, we should differentiate between revenge as a consequence of humiliation and abuse during childhood, which may be a fundamental aspect of most serial killings, and vengeance, which constitutes a special category in serial killing. Second, as long as plea bargaining continues, there is a risk that people will take the law into their own hands and seek revenge against those who have harmed them.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Edelstein, A. (2006). *Criminal Career and Serial Criminality*. Ben-Gurion University Press. (In Hebrew)
- Edelstein, A. (2009). *Multiple Victims Murder*. Ben-Gurion University Press. (In Hebrew)
- Edelstein, A. (2014). *Multiple-Victims Murder*. Contento de Semrik.
- Edelstein, A. (2020). *Mass Murder and Serial Murder: An Integrative Look*. Ibidem-Verlag.
- Fox, J. A., & Levin, J. (2005). *Extreme Killing: Understanding Serial and Mass Murder*. Sage Publications.
- Fredholm, M. (2017). *Understanding Lone Actor Terrorism*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315657622>
- Fridel, E. (2019). Female Serial Killers. In R. D. Morgan (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Criminal Psychology* (pp. 466-469). SAGE Publications, Inc.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118929803.ewac0167>
- Holmes, R. M., & Holmes, S. T. (1998). *Serial Murder*. Sage Publications.
- Levin, J. (2008). *Serial Killers and Sadistic Murderers*. Prometheus Books.
- Levin, J., & Fox, J. A. (2001). *Deadlines: Essays in Murder and Mayhem*. Allyn & Bacon.
- Ramsland, K. (2015). *Inside the Minds of Serial Killers: Why They Kill*. Praeger.
- Ressler, R. J., Burgess, A. W., & Douglas, J. E. (1988). *Sexual Homicide: Patterns and Motives*. Lexington Books.
- Ressler, R. K., & Schachtman, T. (1992). *Whoever Fights Monsters*. St. Martin's Press.
- Sutherland, E. (1988). *The Professional Thief*. University of Chicago Press.
- Syder, A. (2017). *Terrorism, Criminological and Psychological Theories*. GRIN Verlag.
- Sykes, G. M., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency. *American Journal of Sociology*, 22, 664-670. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2089195>
- Vronsky, P. (2007). *Female Serial Killers*. Berkley Books.
- Yaksic, E. (2020). Evaluating the Use of Data-Based Offender Profiling by Researchers, Practitioners and Investigative Journalists to Address Unresolved Serial Homicides. *Journal of Criminal Psychology*, 10, 123-144. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCP-09-2019-0032>