



The Seeds of Crime: Childhood Experiences and Criminal Behavior

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What makes a criminal mind? What are the triggers that instigate sadistic behavior? Are all criminals predisposed to malevolent acts or is it the sum of their social experiences that prompt unlawful behavior? There are various biological and environmental reasons attributed to criminal behavior, and a study of both can help identify why a person ends up or may end up being that. There is a dire need to analyze the trauma behind illicit behavior. This article attempts to study these factors, especially the role of childhood experiences, family dynamics, and genetic traits in the make-up of an immoral mind.

Mental health practitioners have characterized people as having criminal instincts in two broader categories i.e. psychopaths and those who suffer from anti-social personality disorder. Psychological literature often refers to psychopaths as individuals having maladaptive personality traits, impaired empathy, and a lack of remorse with bold and egotistical behavior patterns. Psychopaths usually indulge in extreme criminal acts such as serial killing, kidnapping, etc. The above-mentioned characteristics of a psychopath share similarities with anti-social personality disorder. Yet, the fundamental difference between the two is that a psychopath tends to commit a crime with prior planning and his behavior is goal-oriented whereas, people with anti-social disorders act more impulsively than with prior planning. Also, both differ in the frequency and intensity of unlawful and unethical acts. Regardless, practitioners must diagnose these conditions and devise treatment plans accordingly. The overlapping relationship of personality traits of both may be charted as under (Figure.1):

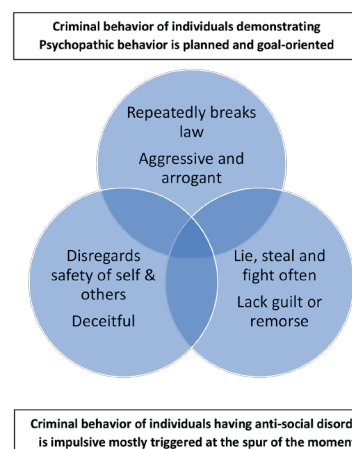


Figure 1. Overlapping characteristics – Anti-social personality disorder & Psychopathic Behavior

Let's take the example of the bio-psycho-social model to understand the role of innate ability and society to know the reasons behind maladaptive acts. This is an interdisciplinary model which claims that the health and well-being of a person depend upon a range of factors: biological factors, psychological factors, and social factors. By studying this model, we might intend to conclude with a fair degree of confidence what is the root cause of their criminal actions. However, they are usually a combination of all three, and assigning a single root cause is always difficult.

Multiple biological, psychosocial, and structural conditions may keep an individual in a vulnerable space. Early exposure to stress, trauma, and substance use in utero, and poor nutrition growing up add up to dysfunctional personality development. Early stages of brain development are critical soon after birth. The below model establishes role of environmental factors on the development of the mind i.e. the so-called nature.

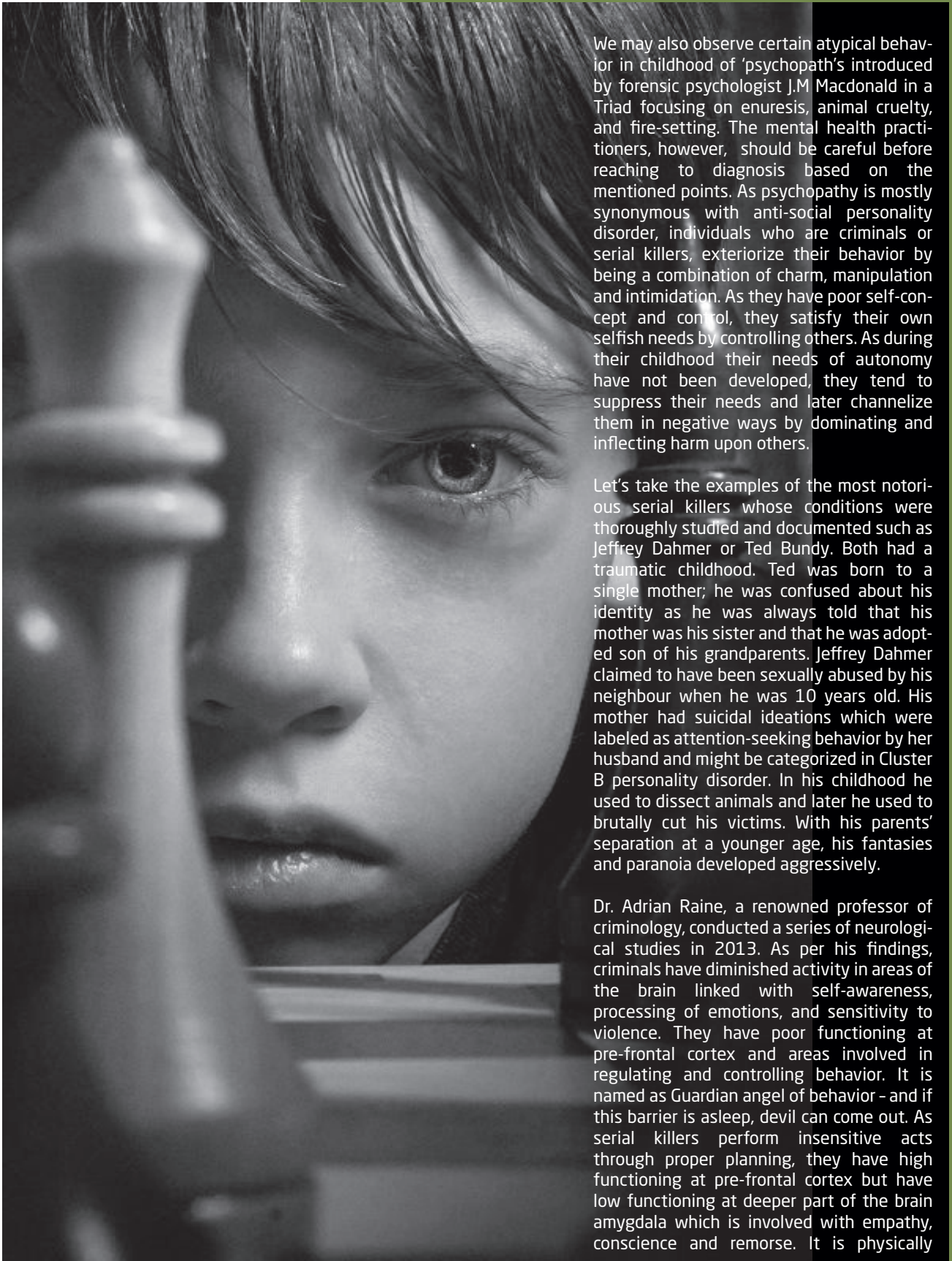
As we grow up our memories and experiences are stored in the above-mentioned parts of the brain. At birth, the mind is more like a clean slate, so if individuals go through constant neglect, abuse, and stress, during childhood, it makes them vulnerable, and they are not able to regulate their feelings. The development of their co-regulatory system is poor and remains so growing up. Co-regulation is the ability to adjust emotions and behaviors to soothe and manage stress through internal sensory input or external situations, with the support and direction from an individual/ caregiver who shares close bond with the child.

The feelings and behavior of people near us, directly impact how we feel, and respond to our own emotions. If parents or other social agents are abusive, indulge in alcoholism or substance abuse, and expose children to extremely violent or stressful environments for a prolonged period, children will develop sensitization towards distress. As a result, they

Family dynamics significantly contribute to the various levels of a child's self-esteem, autonomy, and emotional well-being. Parenting has a vital role in the personality development. A toxic environment lacking respect for the boundaries of children promotes the development of non-moralistic ways among them. If dig deep, we will find evidence that most if not all criminals had a disturbed and traumatic childhood and were from broken homes. Early introduction to challenging conditions in environment heavily dictates the prominence of fear response. Early trauma exposure impairs the ability of high-order cortical function (rational thinking) to regulate sub-cortically driven fear reflex. Together these responses mediate increased risk for defensive and aggressive responding, substance use and impulsive behavior.

might indulge themselves in acts that are not socially acceptable as they have poor self-regulatory systems. Research shows that common causes in childhood stages that contribute towards criminal behavior include dominating fathers involved with drug addiction and anti-social personality features. Domestic violence, sexual abuse and exposure to excessive alcoholism along with psychological, emotional, and physical exploitation significantly shape their adulthood. Revulsion against woman figures may develop in childhood and later be taken out on females.





We may also observe certain atypical behavior in childhood of 'psychopaths' introduced by forensic psychologist J.M Macdonald in a Triad focusing on enuresis, animal cruelty, and fire-setting. The mental health practitioners, however, should be careful before reaching to diagnosis based on the mentioned points. As psychopathy is mostly synonymous with anti-social personality disorder, individuals who are criminals or serial killers, exteriorize their behavior by being a combination of charm, manipulation and intimidation. As they have poor self-concept and control, they satisfy their own selfish needs by controlling others. As during their childhood their needs of autonomy have not been developed, they tend to suppress their needs and later channelize them in negative ways by dominating and inflicting harm upon others.

Let's take the examples of the most notorious serial killers whose conditions were thoroughly studied and documented such as Jeffrey Dahmer or Ted Bundy. Both had a traumatic childhood. Ted was born to a single mother; he was confused about his identity as he was always told that his mother was his sister and that he was adopted son of his grandparents. Jeffrey Dahmer claimed to have been sexually abused by his neighbour when he was 10 years old. His mother had suicidal ideations which were labeled as attention-seeking behavior by her husband and might be categorized in Cluster B personality disorder. In his childhood he used to dissect animals and later he used to brutally cut his victims. With his parents' separation at a younger age, his fantasies and paranoia developed aggressively.

Dr. Adrian Raine, a renowned professor of criminology, conducted a series of neurological studies in 2013. As per his findings, criminals have diminished activity in areas of the brain linked with self-awareness, processing of emotions, and sensitivity to violence. They have poor functioning at pre-frontal cortex and areas involved in regulating and controlling behavior. It is named as Guardian angel of behavior - and if this barrier is asleep, devil can come out. As serial killers perform insensitive acts through proper planning, they have high functioning at pre-frontal cortex but have low functioning at deeper part of the brain amygdala which is involved with empathy, conscience and remorse. It is physically

shrunk by 18%. They have resting heart rates slower than controls. It is researched that the ones who have lower heart rates don't feel fear as strongly as others and therefore engage in acts to bring thrill and excitement in their lives.

It may be fairly argued that nurture plays a more vital role in the development of anti-social behavior as compared to biological predisposition. A conducive environment is more likely to promote better personality development. Even if there are negative genetic bearings, healthy nurture may help overcome those through strong brain development. It is therefore essential to create awareness among people that early age needs special attention by providing children with insight to be self-regulated. On the contrary, exposure to domestic violence, substance abuse, fractured family and constant stress is likely to make a child sensitized and eventually lead to antagonist behavior.

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