



Short Communication

Which serial killers commit suicide? An exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

In a sample of 483 serial killers, 6.2% were documented to have committed suicide. Those who committed suicide were found to come from more dysfunctional homes characterized by more psychiatric disturbance in the parents. The sexual acts involved in the murders by the suicides seemed to be more deviant in some aspects, such as committing more bizarre sexual acts or more often taping the murder.

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1. Introduction

Unlike mass murderers, serial killers commit suicide much less often. In a study of 98 rampage mass murderers in the United States, Lester et al. [1] found that 34 (34.7%) committed suicide. Those who committed suicide were less often judged to have a diagnosis of schizophrenia and were less often students killing fellow students, but they were more often killing co-workers as a result of friction at work. Although some serial killers do commit suicide, they do so at a lower rate, and the present paper reports an exploratory study of a sample of serial killers who did die by suicide.

The present study is of a sample of 483 serial killers for whom the authors have compiled a data set. Of these, 30 committed suicide, 453 did not, and the fate of 17 others is unknown. Thus, only 6.2% of these serial killers committed suicide compared to 34.7% of the mass murderers studied by Lester et al. mentioned above.

In a data set for 594 serial killers compiled by Newton [2], 26 committed suicide (4.4%). White and Lester [3] compared those who committed suicide with those who did not, using the limited descriptive data provided by Newton, and the only statistically significant difference identified was that the serial killers who committed suicide were more likely to be killing in the course of criminal enterprise. They did not differ in sex, race, whether territorial/stationary/nomadic, personal cause, or sexual or sadistic motives.

The present study was designed to explore how the serial killers in the present data set who committed suicide differed from the

rest of the sample using the much more detailed characteristics of the serial killers collected for the data set of 483 serial killers.

2. Methods

Seven criminal justice graduate students collected data initially on 500 serial killers using true crime books, encyclopedias of murderers, newspaper accounts and court records, and coded the data using a coding sheet. Fourteen different encyclopedias and handbooks were used to gather the names of serial killers (see Appendix), and books (especially true crime books of which we located 143 relevant to the data set), court records and articles on them were collected, read and coded. The project stopped after 500 serial killers were identified because, after that number had been reached, the names of additional serial killers who had sufficient information about them in published documents were becoming very difficult to locate.

The coders used at least three different sources for each variable for each serial killer. The present study looked at 88 different variables based on the life history of the serial killer and the circumstances of murders. All serial killers were suspected of killing, or known to have killed, at least three people with a cooling off period between each of their murders. There was no time period restriction, only a cooling off period. All the murders in this data set occurred after the year 1900. The variables chosen were selected by investigating questions used in other studies on serial murderers, especially Ressler et al. [4], as well as information gathered by the junior author's interviews and psychosexual evaluations of over 300 sex offenders, including murderers.

As noted above, 30 of the sample of 500 serial killers are known to have committed suicide. They are listed in Table 1, together with some details of their suicide. The 30 who committed suicide were compared with the 453 who were known to have not committed suicide. Thus, 17 of the serial killers were deleted from the initial data set of 500 individuals since it was not certain whether or not they committed suicide, leaving 483 individuals in the data set.

3. Results

Eleven significant differences were found for the serial murderers who committed suicide (see Table 2). Eleven significant differences at the .05 level of statistical significance or better in 88

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Table 1

Serial killers who committed suicide.

Name	Born	Died	Nationality	Suicide	Method	Place
1. Ball, Joe	1896	1938	USA	During arrest	Gun	His own bar
2. Baumeister, Herb	1947	1996	USA	Avoid arrest	Gun	Park
3. Birnie, David	1951	2005	Australia	After conviction	Hanging	Prison
4. Butts, Vernon	1957	1981	USA	Before trial	Hanging	Jail
5. Chase, Richard	1950	1980	USA	After conviction	Medication	Prison
6. Costa, Antone	1945	1974	USA	After conviction	Hanging	Prison
7. Denke, Karl	1870	1924	Silesia	After arrest	Hanging	Jail
8. Edwards, Mack Ray	1919	1971	USA	After conviction	Hanging	Prison
9. Evonitz, Richard	1963	2002	USA	During arrest	Gun	Public place
10. Fazekas, Julia	1865	1929	Hungary	Avoid arrest	Poison	Home
11. Gamper, Ferdinand	1957	1996	Italy	During arrest	Gun	Home
12. Glover, John Wayne	1932	2005	Australia	After conviction	Hanging	Prison
13. Grossman, George	1863	1921	Germany		Hanging	Jail
14. Iqbal, Javed	1959	2000	Pakistan	After conviction	Hanging	Prison
15. Lake, Leonard	1945	1985	USA	After arrest	Cyanide	Jail
16. Macek, Richard	1948	1987	USA	After conviction		Prison
17. Player, Michael	1960	1986	USA	Prior to identification	Gun	Hotel room
18. Rooyen, Gert van		1990	South Africa	During arrest	Gun	Public place
19. Sack, George		1963	USA	After conviction		Prison
20. Schmidt, Helmuth		1918	USA	After arrest	Crushed head	Jail
21. Shipman, Harold	1946	2004	UK	After conviction	Hanging	Prison
22. Succo, Roberto	1962	1998	Italy	After conviction	Plastic bag	Prison
23. Travis, Maury	1965	2002	USA	After arrest	Hanging	Jail
24. Unterwager, Jack	1952	1994	Austria/Czech/USA	After conviction	Hanging	Prison
25. Vakrinos, Dimitros		1997	Greece	After arrest	Hanging	Jail
26. Vermilyea, Louise		1910	USA	During arrest	Poison	Home
27. Weber, Jeanne	1875	1910	France	After conviction	Strangulation	Asylum
28. Wenzinger, Gerd	1944	1997	Germany/Brazil	Awaiting extradition	Hanging	Jail
29. West, Fred	1941	1995	UK	After arrest	Hanging	Jail
30. Wilder, Christopher	1945	1984	Australia/USA	During arrest	Gun	Gas station

statistical tests are more than would be expected by chance (four would be expected by chance). In order to provide hypotheses for future research on this issue, differences that are significant at the 10% level are also identified clearly in Table 2.

In respect of the statistically significant differences identified, the serial murderers who committed suicide more often confessed to their murders, more often taped the killings, and more often had previously made non-fatal suicide attempts. This latter finding raises the possibility that the serial killers who committed suicide had been suicidal over a long period of time in the past, but this requires further detailed examination in order to ascertain when suicidal ideation first occurred in the serial killers who committed suicide. In addition, the serial killers who committed suicide were older at the time of their first murder than the serial killers who did not commit suicide (35.5 versus 29.3, $t = 3.05$, $df = 413$, two-tailed $p = .002$), older than the non-suicides at the time of their last murder (40.0 versus 34.4, $t = 2.47$, $df = 421$, $p = .01$) and older than the non-suicides when caught (40.3 versus 35.0, $t = 2.23$, $df = 420$, $p = .03$). Although the suicides did not differ in the number of murders for which they were convicted (5.6 versus 6.4, $t = .14$, $df = 478$), the suicides were suspected by law enforcement officers of killing more victims than the non-suicides (32.0 versus 16.4, $t = 3.19$, $df = 481$, $p = .002$).

Looking at the trends, the serial murderers who committed suicide came from more dysfunctional homes (with psychiatrically disturbed parents and a seductive mother) and seemed to be more sexually deviant – they more often had a chronic sexual offending history, more often committed bizarre sexual acts with the victims, more often drugged the victims, more often recorded the killings, and more often had sexual dysfunctions.

4. Discussion

This is the first study to explore in which ways serial killers who commit suicide differ from those who do not do so. The results of

this study are limited by the small number of serial killers who committed suicide (only 30 out of 483) but, despite this, it is surprising to find so few significant differences between those who did commit suicide and those who did not do so. Only eleven significant differences were identified in 88 variables examined, and only three of these were significant at the .001 level of statistical significance.

Even though few variables differentiated the suicides from the other serial killers, those identified differences do suggest that the serial murderers who committed suicide came from more dysfunctional homes, characterized in particular by more psychiatric disturbance in the parents. Furthermore, the sexual acts involved in the murders do seem to be somewhat more deviant in a few respects (such as committing bizarre sexual acts and recording the murder), although only a few were statistically significant. The serial killers who committed suicide were more likely to have a history of non-fatal suicide attempts than the serial killers who did not commit suicide, suggesting that they had been suicidal over a long period of time. In future research, it would be of interest to document, if possible, the dates of occurrence of these non-fatal suicide attempts. In particular, did these attempts at suicide occur prior to the murders and prior to the arrest?

Unlike the dataset provided by encyclopedias such as Newton's (2006) [2], the present data had 88 variables compared to only 7 in Newton's encyclopedia. Furthermore, Newton included murderers of only two victims (not typically considered to be serial killers) and cases prior to 1900. The present sample was limited to serial killers with three or more victims occurring after 1900.

The present study is limited by the small number of serial killers who committed suicide, but it may provide hypotheses for further study in future studies of suicidal ideation and attempts and completed suicide in serial killers. Serial killers comprise a heterogeneous group of individuals and include

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