Original Paper

Sadipaths - A Look at the Public's Familiarity With Some of the Most Nefarious Serial Killers

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Abstract

Sadipaths are the worst of all offenders. They are callous, vicious, and lacking in remorse. This study investigated the beliefs and familiarity that people have with 10 infamous serial killers. The final sample of 455 participants revealed some notable findings regarding various demographic variables and familiarity with serial killers. Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Richard Ramirez were the three most well-known sadipaths. The findings also show that the majority of people do not believe these offenders can be rehabilitated (78.4%) and that most believe they should face the death penalty (65.6%). Most (77%) also believe they have sadistic personalities. The study may be of interest to psychologists, criminologists, lawyers, and social scientists.

Keywords

Sadipathy, Serial Killers, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, Richard Ramirez

1. Introduction

There is a certain academic and public fascination with criminal offenders that commit the most heinous acts. At the top of this depraved list are the sadipathic offenders. The mass media seem to thoroughly enjoy covering stories involving the most brutal acts of violence. Hollywood has long produced movies and television shows that portray extreme and psychologically demented characters. Some popular examples of this include, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Psycho*, *The Bone Collector*, *Saw*, *Seven*, *Hannibal*, *Monster*, *Natural Born Killers*, *American Psycho*, and *Kalifornia*. This is just a short list of all the films that portray vicious and violent criminal behaviors, but they all seem to have one thing in common. These films appear to resonate and activate something in the human brain that generates psychological arousal and interest.

There are various cultural, social, and psychological theories and explanations that attempt to account for why people tend to be intrigued by taboo and extreme behaviors. Clinical psychologists and

evolutionary psychologists have attempted to make sense of why some people engage in such vile and harmful behaviors. Increasing numbers of colleges and universities are now offering courses focused on the study of criminal and violent behaviors. Criminology has fast become one of the most popular majors across many college campuses. Based on enrollment numbers, college students are clearly interested in the study of psychopathology and trying to make sense of why some people are able to commit such horrendous acts of violence against others.

This project will look further into the sadipathic offender and the public's familiarity with these particular types of extreme miscreants. The study will highlight some of the most notorious serial killers from the United States. Most of these perpetrators have had movies, television shows, books, and other types of media content dedicated to their lives, behaviors, and criminal acts. This work will bring forth further insight and information concerning public awareness about certain convicted serial murderers. This work may be of interest to anyone studying or working in the areas of criminology, criminal psychology, clinical psychology, psychiatry, sociology, media psychology, and forensic areas.

2. Literature Review

Serial killers are generally regarded as cold, callous, and lacking in empathy (Anderson & Marcus, 2019; March, 2019). Serial killers murder their victims across several distinct episodes. That is, murdering several people in a single episode does not meet the criteria for "serial murder." The Federal Bureau of Investigation is the lead agency in the United States that investigates crimes connected to serial murder and the tracking and capturing of offenders. Serial murder refers to the killing of at least three or more people across a period of time (Bartels & Parsons, 2009). In the literature, it is commonly stated that there needs to be a "cooling off" period between killings to qualify as serial murder (James, 2019). For example, if a person committed three murders across a single afternoon, in different locations, this would be viewed as a single episode. Serial killers typically commit their acts of violence across many years.

The most vicious and cold-blooded of these offenders are those with sadipathic personality traits. Sadipaths actually enjoy causing extreme pain and suffering on their victims. Sadipathic killers have no genuine remorse or guilt for what they have done (Berger, 2019). The acts of brutal serial killers, which are almost always males, typically peaks in the 20's and 30's. Extreme cruelty is characteristic of these offenders, and there is also often some kind of sexual arousal that is associated with the violence (Miller, 2014; Spehr et al., 2010). Jeffrey Dahmer is a fitting example of this. He committed almost all of his murders in his 20's and early 30's. He generally drugged his victims before killing them. He cut their bodies into various pieces, ate certain body parts (e.g., biceps), stored the body parts in various places (e.g., skull in refrigerator), and engaged in sexual acts with the dead bodies (Berger, 2020; Martens, 2011). Joseph DeAngelo, Dennis Rader, Ted Bundy, and Samuel Little are additional prototypic examples of the sadipathic offender. Each of these individuals displayed the core traits of the sadipath, such as lack of distress over their actions, lack of guilt, cold indifference toward their victims,

emotional detachment, and violent sexual fantasies (Berger, 2020).

Many scholars argue that serial killers suffer from early trauma and involves clinical and personality disorders. Others believe that there are larger social and cultural factors that play into these brutal and callous acts (Haggerty, 2009; Lachmann & Lachmann, 2007; Miller, 2004). Lachmann and Lachmann (2007) argued that physical and sexual abuse, deprivation, and neglect in early development are common among serial killers, and that this leads to certain dysfunctional motivations and fantasy systems. Arrigo and Griffin (2004) positioned predatory and serial homicide as being largely rooted in unhealthy attachment patterns formed in early life and lack of secure bonding with others. Severe psychopathology and demented cognitive structuring are also central to this understanding. LaBrode (2007) argued that to be able to understand the behaviors and motivations of psychopathic serial killers, one must pay attention to the interplay of environmental, biological, genetic, and personality characteristics.

There are some clear risk factors that are associated with sadipathic behavior. Among the most studied and understood involves the developmental sequences of these offender's life histories. Among the most distinct factors are early childhood trauma and parental abuse (Keatley, Golightly, & Shephard, 2018). The acts and cruelty of these types of brutal murderers can often be linked to early sexual, physical, and psychological abuse. These early traumatic experiences can often explain the sequential progression of their violent and callous acts toward others (Marono et al., 2020).

The majority of sadipathic offenders begin showing signs of deviant behavior and pathology well before they commit their first murder. Conduct disorder is often viewed as a precursor to more serious offending. Chopin and Beauregard (2021) studied the criminogenic factors and sadistic manifestations of juvenile offenders. In their study analyzing the behaviors of 124 sadistic juvenile offenders, they found several distinct dimensions underlying the behaviors. The dimensions included descriptors and constructs such as mutilation, torture, anger, paraphilia, antisocial behavior, and mental illness. This is in line with the findings of Fox and DeLisi (2019), which reported that brutal and callous killers tend to be defined by a constellation of affective, behavioral, and lifestyle characteristics that are associated with impulsivity, shallow emotion, manipulation, pathological lying, self-centeredness, and ongoing violation of social norms.

Whatever one thinks about the causes and motivations behind serial murder, there is one thing that most can agree upon – it is a culturally relevant and intriguing topic. There is something about such extreme and cruel acts that compels attention. This would explain why people are so often interested in hearing about these types of cases. This could also help to explain why Hollywood and mass media producers seem to be so motivated to make films, programs, and other types of content on these types of culturally taboo and violent topics. Evolutionary psychologists have argued that morbid curiosity on topics of terror and death often involve sensation seeking and a censored sexual curiosity. Curiosity and a sense of protective vigilance may help to explain why such disturbing acts of violence are found to be both interesting and entertaining (Harrison & Frederick, 2020). This paper will play off of the

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perspective that serial murder is intrinsically compelling. Members of the public know about cases of serial murder through what they hear and read in the media. This work takes an exploratory look into the public's awareness of some of the most nefarious and documented sadipathic killers.

3. Methodology

Data for this study were collected via a quantitative survey. The survey was designed to collect data on respondent's beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about sadipathic serial killers. The final sample size for this study was 455. Data were collected through various surveying approaches, including face-to-face, telephone, and Internet. All respondents had to be 18 years of age or older to be eligible for the study. Consent was provided via the participants willingness to fill out the survey after the purpose was explained to them. There was no deception employed in this study. There was no compensation provided for participation. Any survey with multiple missing responses was discarded in order to protect the validity of the data and findings. All of the surveys included in the final analyses had legible responses and were deemed to have been answered in an honest and forthcoming manner.

Demographic information was collected across certain variables to help detect and make sense of group differences. The final sample consisted of 267 women and 181 men. Two respondents identified as "other." Five respondents did not answer the question on gender. The majority of participants identified as Hispanic (n = 300). The remainder of participants identified as White (n = 76), Asian (n =35), Black (n = 24), Middle Eastern (n = 7), Multiracial (n = 7), and Native American (n = 1). Five of the respondents did not answer this question.

The majority of respondents identified as belonging to the working-class (n = 244, 53.6%). The remainder of the sample broke down as middle-class (n = 142, 31.2%), lower-class (n = 49, 10.8%), and upper-class (n = 12, 2.6%). Eight respondents (1.8%) did not answer this question. The bulk of participants were between the ages of 18 to 29 (n = 306, 67.3%). The remainder of the ages for the final sample was 30 to 39 (n = 72, 15.8%), 40 to 49 (n = 30, 6.65%), 50 to 59 (n = 36, 7.9%), 60 to 69 (n = 7, 1.5%), 70 and older (n = 3, 0.7%). One respondent did not answer the question concerning age.

The questionnaire was designed to collect information that would allow statistical analysis. The items on the form were closed-ended. The average respondent was able to answer all of the questions within 5 minutes. Beyond the demographic questions, respondents were also asked about their beliefs and knowledge of serial killers (e.g., average age, death penalty, sadistic personality, rehabilitation). Central to this study were items asking about specific known serial killers (e.g., Dahmer, Gacy, Little, Bundy). A key goal of this survey was to gather information about the public's awareness and familiarity with some of the most nefarious and well-known convicted serial killers.

Data were analyzed via SPSS software. Various statistical techniques and tests were employed, including crosstabulations, chi-square, analysis of variance (ANOVA), t-test, measures of association, post-hoc comparisons (e.g., Bonferroni, LSD, Tukey HSD), and logistic regression. Statistical tests of inference were set at the standard .05 alpha level. Any finding that resulted in a probability (p) value

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larger than 0.5 was deemed to be statistically insignificant. All significance tests were two-tailed.

4. Findings

When asked about their feelings toward serial killers and whether or not they can be rehabilitated, there was a clear majority that felt that they could not be (valid = 78.4%). In regard to the death penalty, the majority of respondents also felt that serial killers should be put to death for their crimes (valid = 65.6%). A clear majority of participants also believed that sadistic personality is associated with serial murder (valid = 77%). Respondents were also asked about how old these offenders tend to be, and how many separate times they need to kill to become "serial killers." Figure 1 shows the pattern across the study sample. The reference lines cross at true intersections in the general population of serial killers. The spline line displays the smooth curve for the two-dimensional data across the pool of respondent points (n = 435). Most of the participants beliefs were within a reasonable range of the true numbers in the population of serial killers.
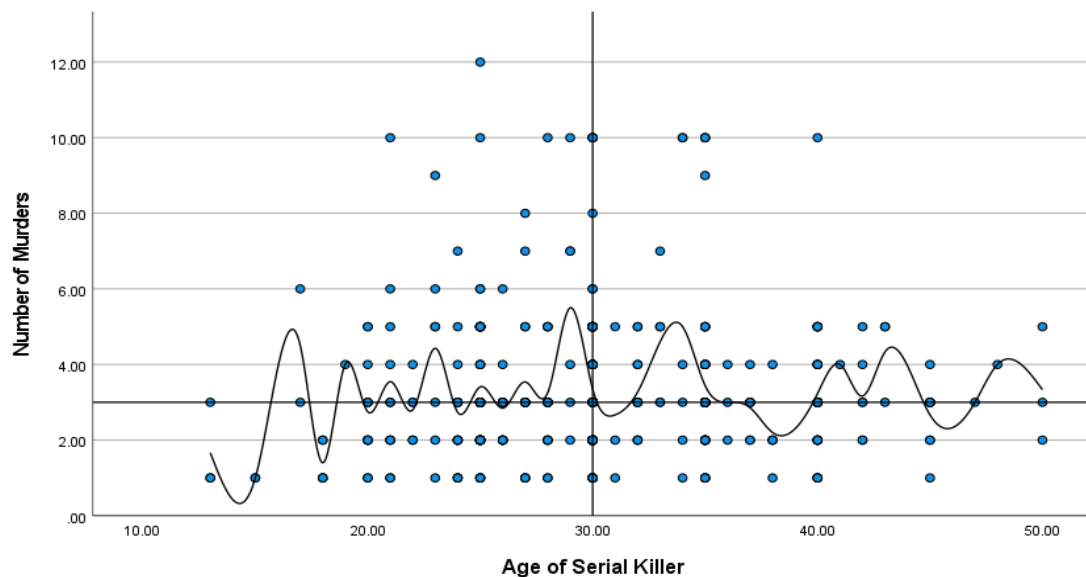

Figure 1. Scatterplot and Spline Fit Interpolation

When asked about their familiarity with the listed serial killers, there were offenders that were clearly more well-known than others. The respondents were asked about 10 established serial killers. There appears to be a distinct pattern in the familiarity of the respondents to serial killers that have had the most media coverage and content devoted to them. As the vast majority of serial killers are male, 8 out of the 10 listed serial killers were of this sex. Table 1 provides a basic summary of the awareness that people have of these recognized offenders. As can be seen, Bundy and Dahmer are easily the two most well-known offenders on this list. This makes sense seeing they have been among the most widely covered in the media (e.g., documentaries). Others, such as Little and DeAngelo, were more recently apprehended and convicted. Public awareness of these offenders may grow over time as well.

Table 1. Ranking of Familiarity of Listed Serial Killers

Ted Bundy	89.2%	Aileen Wuornos	21.0%
Jeffrey Dahmer	60.2%	Joseph DeAngelo	18.7%
Richard Ramirez	47.3%	Samuel Little	18.4%
John Gacy	37.5%	Dennis Rader	17.0%
David Berkowitz	25.4%	Genene Jones	13.9%

A number of nonparametric analyses produced significant results in regard to group differences and their awareness of various serial killers. When asked about Jeffrey Dahmer, there were significant differences across ethnic groups, $X^2(6) = 32.535$), $p = .000$. All of the respondents identifying as Multi and Native American were familiar with Dahmer. Black (87.5%) and White (75%) respondents were also more likely to know him than not. Only 42.9% of Middle Eastern respondents and 51.7% of Hispanic respondents were familiar with him. There were also group difference in regard to social class and Dahmer, $X^2(3) = 17.080$, $p = .001$. Those from the upper-class were the most likely to know of Dahmer (91.7%), followed by middle-class (71.1%), working-class (54.5%), and lower-class (51.0%). There appears to be trend whereby the wealthier the family, the more aware of this particular offender they tend to be.

There were also ethnic and class differences in regard to David Berkowitz. Regarding ethnicity, a chi-square test produced significant results, $X^2(6) = 15.257$, $p = .018$. Over half of the Multi-ethnic group (57.1%) were familiar with Berkowitz. The Native American sub-sample was too small to include in this analysis. Familiarity with remainder of the groups were, Asian (31.4%), White (36.0%), Hispanic (26.7%), and Middle Eastern (14.3%). Class differences were also detected with Berkowitz, $X^2(3) = 11.289$, $p = .010$. Upper-class respondents were the most likely to be familiar with Berkowitz (66.7%), followed by middle-class (26.2%), Working-class (23.9%), and lower-class (22.4%). There appears to be a trend whereby wealthier families are more aware of this particular offender.

In regard to Richard Ramirez, differences were detected in awareness across age categories, $X^2(5) = 20.749$, $p = .001$. All of the respondents aged 70 and older were familiar with Ramirez. Respondents in their 50's had a familiarity rate of 69.4%. This was followed by those in their 40's (60.0%), those in their 30's (56.9%), those in their 60's (42.9%), and those 29 and under (40.5%). The only female serial killer to have any significant differences across groups was Aileen Wuornos. This finding involved gender differences, $X^2(1) = 8.643$, $p = .003$. Female respondents were nearly twice as likely to be familiar with this offender than male respondents (25.3% and 13.8%, respectively).

An analysis of variance test looking at what the respondents believed about the average age of serial killers produced significant results across social classes. $F(3, 424) = 3.337$, $p = .019$. Those from the upper-class tended to think serial killers would be a little older (32.5 years). Those from the middle-class thought they were 30.5 years of age on average, followed by working-class at 30 years. Those from the lower-class tended to believe that serial killers were 27 years of age. Post hoc

comparisons revealed that there were significant differences between lower-class and working-class respondents (Tukey HSD = .039, LSD = .008, Bonferroni = .047). There were also differences across lower-class and middle-class (Tukey HSD = .027, LSD = .005, and Bonferroni = .032). The more liberal of the post hoc tests employed detected group differences across lower-class and upper-class respondents (LSD = .016).

Logistic regression analyses revealed a number of significant groups differences that highlighted some interesting patterns and findings. Concerning the death penalty, the group that identified as "multi-racial" was less likely to think that serial killers should be put to death than several other groups. Hispanics (OR = 9.60, p = .040), Whites (OR = 12.05, p = .027), and Asians (OR = 10.91, p = .038) were all more likely to favor the death penalty. Black respondents approached significance (OR = 10.00, p = .051) when compared to the multi-racial group. When looking at Jeffrey Dahmer and ethnicity (race), there were several significant findings concerning Hispanic respondents. White (OR = 2.81, p = .000), Black (OR = 6.55, p = .003), and Asian (OR = 2.70, p = .014) participants were more likely to be familiar with Jeffrey Dahmer than Hispanic participants.

There were also gender differences detected when it came to being familiar with female serial killer Aileen Wuornos. The odds of women being familiar with this particular serial killer is 2.11 that of men (p = .004). No other serial killers produced significant odds between women and men. Age did produce significant findings concerning familiarity with the listed serial killers. Respondents aged 18 to 29 were less likely than respondents in their 30's (OR = 1.92, p = .025) to know of Aileen Wuornos. Younger respondents (18 to 29) were also less likely than older respondents in their 30's (OR = 1.94, p = .012), 40's (OR = 2.20, p = .043), and 50's (OR = 3.34, p = .002) to be familiar with Richard Ramirez. The same younger respondents were also less likely to be familiar with Ted Bundy than respondents in their 50's (OR = 2.53, p = .037). No other comparisons produced significant findings in regard to age.

There were a number of results produced via logistic regression analysis that revealed patterns across social class and awareness of the highlighted serial killers. Respondents from the lower-class appear to be generally less familiar with the listed serial killers. Those from the upper-class tend to be more familiar with these serial killers overall. Table 2 highlights some useful trends in the data concerning social class and familiarity with specific offenders. As can be seen in the table, each odds ratio demonstrates that those from higher social classes are, in every case, more likely to know the listed serial killers. As an example, the odds of upper-class respondents being familiar with Jeffrey Dahmer is 10.56 that of lower-class respondents. When looking at Samuel Little, those from the upper-class have familiarity odds of 8.04 when compared to those from the lower-class. In regard to Dennis Rader, the odds of upper-class respondents being familiar with this sadipath is 5.12 that of lower-class respondents. Concerning David Berkowitz, the odds of upper-class respondents being familiar is 6.91 that of lower-class respondents. The same type of pattern can be seen across the other social class groups.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Looking at Social Class and Sadipathic Killers

Sadipaths	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Jeffrey Dahmer						
middle-lower	.861	.341	6.389	1	.011	2.365
upper-lower	2.357	1.083	4.738	1	.030	10.560
upper-working	2.217	1.052	4.439	1	.035	9.174
Samuel Little						
middle-lower	1.244	.558	4.962	1	.026	3.470
upper-lower	2.084	.784	7.060	1	.008	8.036
upper-working	1.283	.611	4.415	1	.036	3.610
Dennis Rader						
upper-lower	1.633	.730	5.005	1	.025	5.119
upper-working	1.349	.612	4.865	1	.027	3.846
David Berkowitz						
upper-lower	1.933	.702	7.590	1	.006	6.909
upper-working	1.853	.631	8.635	1	.003	6.369
upper-middle	1.764	.642	7.544	1	.006	5.848

5. Discussion

There is a general fascination with crime and criminal behavior. Media producers, directors, and Hollywood writers like to create content that highlights the lives and actions of nefarious serial killers. Many fictional sadipathic characters are based on the behaviors and crimes of actual convicted serial murderers. There are various reasons as to why people seem to be so intrigued by the behaviors and crimes of these cruel offenders (e.g., taboo subjects, vicarious experiencing, evolutionary factors). Harrison and Frederick (2020) state that the fascination is due to a type of morbid curiosity. Violence seems to be a gripping topic that many like to explore from a safe distance. There are also a number of psychological factors involved with all of this. Serial murder also appears to be associated with early trauma and abuse, dysfunctional environmental factors, early deviant behavior, and prior convictions (Keatley et al., 2021; Marono et al., 2020). Other cofactors often include early criminal behavior, antisocial personality, mental illness, anger, and sadistic tendencies (Berger, 2019, Berger, 2020; Chopin, 2021).

This study has revealed useful information concerning the public's knowledge and beliefs about sadipathic offenders. The findings clearly demonstrate that most people believe that serial killers cannot be rehabilitated (78.4%) and that most serial killers have sadistic personality (77%). The majority of participants believed that these offenders should be put to death for their crimes (66%). There was a clear connection between social class and knowledge of convicted serial killers. For example,

upper-class respondents were the most likely to be aware of the most well-known serial killers of interest. Age was also correlated with knowledge of serial killers. As an example, those over 30 were clearly more familiar with sadipathic killers that those under 30. Ethnic (racial) differences were also detected. As an example, White, Black, and Asian respondents appear to be more knowledgeable of serial killers than Hispanic and Middle Eastern respondents.

There were clearly some serial killers that were more well-known than others. Almost 9 out of 10 participants were familiar with Ted Bundy. Around 6 out of 10 had knowledge of Jeffrey Dahmer, and almost 5 out of 10 were familiar with Richard Ramirez. Women were more knowledgeable about the most notorious female serial killer, Aileen Wuornos. Some covered sadipathic killers were more recently caught and convicted (e.g., Samuel Little, Joseph DeAngelo), so their infamy may increase with the public over time as Hollywood and mass media producers create content about them (e.g., documentaries, movies).

Future research in this area could be enhanced by increasing the sub-sample sizes across certain demographic groups (e.g., Native American, upper-class, participants over 60 years of age). There were limitations placed on a number of tests and analyses due to small sub-sample sizes. Larger sub-samples could help to reveal significant findings and differences in the general population. Further studies could also include a larger pool of convicted serial killers, with additional questions about their behaviors and crimes, to gain a better sense of the public's overall awareness and knowledge of these types of criminal offenders. This study has focused its attention on sadipathic offenders and the public's beliefs and familiarity with them. Serial murder is a topic that both frightens and fascinates. Professionals, practitioners, and the general public all seem to be drawn in by these curiously morbid and disturbing behaviors. Unfortunately, we can also expect there to be many more clinical profiles and criminal cases to arise in the future.

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