

Assignment 2- Serial Killer Case Study

John Wayne Gacy 'The Killer Clown'



(a)

John Wayne Gacy, who lived from 1942 until 1994, is widely regarded as one of the most notorious and infamous serial killers in American history due to the exceptionally heinous and shocking nature of his crimes, which included both rape and murder targeting at least 33 young males throughout the turbulent decade of the 1970's. Gacy was born in the city of Chicago, Illinois, and during his formative years, Gacy was raised in a family environment that was marred by a history of physical abuse and deeply troubled relationship with his father, who struggled with alcoholism. Underneath all these apparent surface problems was a multiplicity of other serious underlying issues. With all his faults and inadequacies, Gacy made every effort to give the impression that his life and personality were relatively normal. Gacy became a successful businessman, enthusiastic and busy community activist, and entertained many people as a clown at different functions. Perhaps most unfortunately, this veneer of innocence and friendliness eventually helped him gain the chilling moniker of 'The Killer Clown'.

His crimes were shocking in their brutality, from 1972 to 1978, Gacy would lure his victims into his home in suburban Chicago, where he would sexually assault them and then strangle them. He buried most of the bodies in a crawl space under his house while others were dumped in rivers nearby. Gacy was finally

arrested in December 1978, after a missing teenager, Robert Piest, had been traced to him. Law enforcement officials uncovered the horrific remnants of his victims, which ultimately resulted in his conviction and subsequent execution by lethal injection in 1994. Gacy's bifurcated existence, projecting a facade of responsibility while clandestinely engaging in atrocious offences has intrigued both criminologists and psychologists, prompting inquiries into the interrelations among biological, psychological, and sociological influences on his actions. (Biography.com Editors and McEvoy, C. (June 16th, 2023) 'John Wayne Gacy', Biography.com)

(b)

Biological Factors

The actions of John Wayne Gacy has been widely scrutinized through a variety of criminological theories, with several scholars trying to search for biological, psychological, and sociological explanations that could shed some light on what powered such horrible and heinous crimes, In the following sections, the influential factors and relevant theories in this regard are dealt with in detail so as to give a comprehensive insight into the complex case of John Wayne Gacy.

Biologically-based criminology posits that certain genetic predispositions, combined with specific abnormalities in brain functioning, can have a strong bearing on and shaping effect on criminal behaviour. While there is no direct evidence to show a clear link between Gacy's crimes and biological factors, extensive studies on serial killers indicate that there may be possible neurological or genetic influences that could contribute to such behaviour. For example, damage to the prefrontal cortex- that part of the brain is responsible for impulse control, regulation of emotions, and the decision- making process can have far reaching consequences, such as a noticeable lack of empathy or increased aggression. In the specific case of Gacy, there exists no documented evidence that indicates he suffered from brain injuries, however, it is worth nothing that his behaviour may correspond with more extensive theories in the field, such as Raine's concept of biosocial criminology. This particular theory seeks to integrate and combine genetic vulnerabilities that an individual might possess with various environmental triggers that could influence their behaviour.

Research concerning the MAOA gene, often referred to as the 'warrior gene,' has also established connections between certain genetic mutations and a

heightened level of aggression in males. This effect is particularly pronounced when these genetic factors are combined with experiences of childhood abuse. In the case of John Gacy, his history of being raised in an abusive environment, when taken together with any potential genetic predispositions he may have inherited, could have played a significant role in shaping violent tendencies and behaviors.

(Rodriguez, B (2016) 'The Criminological Dissection of Pogo the Clown'. Public Justice Review, Oswego Writing Across the Curriculum Program)

(McDermott, R., Tingley, D., Cowden, J., Fazzetto, G., and Johnson, D.D.P. (2009) 'Monoamine oxidase A gene (MAOA predicts behavioural aggression following provocation'. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106(7), pp. 2118-2123)

Environmental And Sociological Factors

Environmental criminology emphasizes the influence of one's environment, socioeconomic factors, and formative life experiences on behavioural development. Gacy's background in a dysfunctional family clearly contributed significantly to his behaviour. The physical and emotional abuse inflicted by his father, along with his struggle to express his homosexuality openly, led to profound internal conflicts and feelings of inadequacy.

The theories of strain and inequality are particularly useful here, as first explained by Robert Merton. He hypothesized that those who believe they cannot achieve socially desirable goals through conventional means often turn to deviant behaviour. The desire for status and power, together with the suppression of self-identity, might have contributed to Gacy's crimes as a means of asserting power. Furthermore, social learning theory, as proposed by Albert Bandura, states that 'behaviour is learned through observation.' Although Gacy's environment most likely did not encourage violence, the tolerance of aggression in his family may have desensitized him to the pain he caused others. Bandura's theory also explains how Gacy might have justified his actions by reducing the humanity of his victims.

Routine activity theory implies that Gacy exploited situations where there was a lack of guardianship, the presence of vulnerable targets, and an alignment of his motivations. He targeted young males, often drifters or from unstable backgrounds, and carefully planned the encounters to avoid detection.

(Aithor.com (2024) 'Essay on John Wayne Gacy Childhood')

(Simply Psychology (n.d.) 'Albert Bandura')

Psychological Factors

Psychological frameworks provide crucial insight into Gacy's personality and motivational dynamics. Studies in personality disorders indicate that Gacy showed many traits of psychopathy, which is characterized by a lack of empathy, superficial charm, and manipulative behaviours. The 'Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), formulated by Robert Hare, identifies many actions of Gacy in his deceptive charm, effective manipulation, and complete disregard for convention.

During his trial, Gacy was diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder, which is marked by a lack of remorse and a pervasive disregard for the rights of others. These traits probably helped him to compartmentalize his double life. In the public, he was a jolly clown, but privately, he harbored sadistic impulses that he eventually acted out.

Another psychological perspective is attachment theory, espoused by John Bowlby. Bowlby's theory posits that early attachment disruptions can lead to emotional cutoffs and a lifelong inability to establish satisfactory relationships. Gacy's traumatic early years doubtless stunted his emotional development, leaving him in a state of isolation and an inability to form connections that typified much of his adult relationships.

(Assessment and Referral Core (ARC, University of Wisconsin- Madison (n.d.) 'Psychopathy Checklist- Revised (PCL-R)')

(Simply Psychology (n.d.) 'John Bowlby'.)

(Psychologs (n.d.) 'Psychology of John Gacy: Pogo the Clown')

Interactionist Approaches

Interactionist criminology tends to focus on how individual behaviour is sustained by societal reaction and stigmatization. The concept of secondary deviance proposed by Edwin Lemert describes how, through labeling, society forsters deviant identity. Although Gacy manifested a facade of respectability, his hidden acts and eventual defamation may be taken as epitomizing the conflict between self- identity and social remorse.

Moreover, Erving Goffmans's dramaturgical framework elucidates the manner in which Gacy upheld a socially acceptable persona in the 'front stage' while permitting his authentic 'backstage' identity to surface in private settings. This duality underscores the intricate relationship between self- perception and deviant conduct, especially as Gacy sought to align societal norms with his individual aspirations.

Independent research that delves into a wider array of criminological theories uncovers additional and significant insights. According to Travis Hirschi's well known social bond theory, it is suggested that Gacy's fragile connections to the established norms of society, despite his seemingly active participation and engagement within the community may have played a crucial role in fostering his criminal tendencies. Lacking any authentic emotional attachments or a strong sense of moral commitment, Gacy discovered that it became much simpler for him to dehumanize the individuals he chose as his victims.

(SozTheo (n.d.) 'Labeling: Primary and Secondary Deviance (Lemert)'

(Cherry, K. (2019) 'Goffman's Front Stage and Back Stage Behavior'. *ThoughtCo.*)

(Simply Psychology (n.d.) 'Hirschi's Control Theory of Crime')

Environmental And Sociological Factors

The neutralization theory, which was developed by the scholars Sykes and Matza, provides valuable insight into how Gacy managed to justify his heinous actions. The techniques of neutralization that are outlined in his theory, which include mechanisms such as the denial of responsibility, encapsulated in the phrase 'it's not my fault,' or the denial of the victim, articulated through the assertion that 'they deserved it.' enabled him to rationalize and make sense of his criminal

behavior. This process allowed him to engage in these crimes while maintaining a coherent self- concept that did not feel threatened or diminished by his immoral deeds.

(SozTheo (n.d.) 'Techniques of Neutralization: Sykes and Matza')

©

The case of John Wayne Gacy represents the multidimensional attributes of criminal behaviour, which is driven by biological, psychological, and sociological perspectives. While conclusive proof of biological basis remains absent, potential predispositions, genetic vulnerabilities or neurological abnormalities might have interacted with environmental factors, including childhood abuse and societal pressures, to influence his actions.

Psychological theories provide a tremendous amount of insight into Gacy's lack of empathy and emotional detachment. Diagnostic frameworks, such as psychopathy and attachment theory, explain his inability to form meaningful relationships and his detachment from moral restraints, elements that likely enabled his horrific crimes. Sociological insights further contextualize Gacy's behaviours by highlighting how his chaotic childhood, repressed sexual identity, and limited options for genuine social acceptance contributed to his deviant behaviour. The interplay of strain theory, social learning theory, and routine activity theory indicates that Gacy's surroundings and available opportunities were pivotal factors.

The evidence presented shows that Gacy was 'made,' not born, a criminal. Biology might have played a part, but his abusive childhood and struggles with his identity were more so. His case is illustrative of the need to understand crime in a way that balances personal traits with external factors in an attempt to explain extreme behaviour.

Reference List

Aithor.com (2024) 'Essay on John Wayne Gacy Childhood-

<https://aithor.com/essay-examples/essay-on-john-wayne-gacy-childhood>

Assessment and Referral Core (ARC, University of Wisconsin- Madison (n.d.)
'Psychopathy Checklist- Revised (PCL-R)-

<https://arc.psych.wisc.edu/self-report/psychopathy-checklist-revised-pclr/>

Biography.com Editors and McEvoy, C. (June 16th, 2023) 'John Wayne Gacy',

Biography.com- <https://www.biography.com/crime/john-wayne-gacy>

Cherry, K. (2019) 'Goffman's Front Stage and Back Stage Behavior'. *ThoughtCo.*-

<https://www.thoughtco.com/goffmans-front-stage-and-back-stage-behavior-4087971>

McDermott, R., Tingley, D., Cowden, J., Fazzetto, G., and Johnson, D.D.P. (2009)
'Monoamine oxidase A gene (MAOA predicts behavioural aggression following
provocation'. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 106(7), pp.

2118-2123- <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.0808376106>

Psychologs (n.d.) 'Psychology of John Gacy: Pogo the Clown-

<https://www.psychologs.com/psychology-john-gacy-pogo-the-clown/?srsltid=AfmBOOrNzNGjS8XQybif6Fdxfa0FU7LJlein0qnDliDZZJ4-y-esODOp>

Simply Psychology (n.d.) 'Albert Bandura-

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/bandura.html>

Simply Psychology (n.d.) 'John Bowlby'-

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/bowlby.html>

Simply Psychology (n.d.) 'Hirschi's Control Theory of Crime-

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/hirschi-control-theory-crime.html>

Rodriguez, B (2016) 'The Criminological Dissection of Pogo the Clown'. Public
Justice Review, Oswego Writing Across the Curriculum Program-

https://www.oswego.edu/writing-across-the-curriculum/sites/www.oswego.edu.writing-across-the-curriculum/files/pbj_rodriguez_3-22-16.pdf

Reference List

SozTheo (n.d.) 'Labeling: Primary and Secondary Deviance (Lemert-
<https://soztheo.de/theories-of-crime/conflict-oriented-theories-of-crime/labelling-primary-and-secondary-deviance-lemert/?lang=en>

SozTheo (n.d.) 'Techniques of Neutralization: Sykes and Matza-
<https://soztheo.de/theories-of-crime/learning-subculture/techniques-of-neutralization-sykes-und-matza/?lang=en>

