Shaped by Society: Uncovering the Sociological Factors Behind the Development of Serial Killers

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Abstract

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Fatine Lfarouk

Serial killing is one of the most extreme and rare forms of deviant behaviour, but much of the existing research remains focused on psychological and criminological explanations. This critical literature review examines serial murder through a sociological lens, identifying key risk factors that contribute to the development and actions of serial killers. By emphasizing broader social, environmental, and structural influences, this essay challenges the notion that serial murder is solely an individual pathology. It explores how factors such as childhood abuse, dysfunctional family dynamics, socio-economic marginalization, media influence, and violent subcultures interact to shape serial killers' trajectories. The analysis draws on both positivist and social constructionist perspectives. Findings indicate that childhood trauma, particularly abuse, is a recurring risk factor among serial killers, though not a universal one. Additionally, media portrayals can contribute to the construction of serial killers as cultural figures, influencing both public perception and offenders' self-identities. Contrary to popular belief, socio-economic status alone does not appear to be a primary determinant of serial murder. By synthesizing various sociological perspectives, this review highlights the intersection of social forces that contribute to serial killing, positioning it as a product of broader structural and cultural dynamics within society rather than an isolated phenomenon.

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1. Introduction

Serial killing represents one of the rarest and most extreme forms of deviant behaviour, capturing both scholarly interest and public fascination due to its unique social, psychological, and criminological implications. While much of the existing research on serial murder focuses on psychological and criminological explanations, this critical review of the literature examines the phenomenon from a sociological perspective, emphasizing the broader social, environmental, and structural risk factors that contribute to the development and actions of serial killers. By situating serial killing within the frameworks of deviance, socialization, and identity formation, this essay challenges traditional understandings of serial murder that isolate it as a purely individual pathology. Instead, it explores the intersection of social forces such as childhood abuse, dysfunctional family dynamics, socio-economic marginalization, media influence, and sub-cultures of violence. These factors interact in complex ways, shaping one's trajectory and, in some cases, fostering violent behaviours that manifest in serial murder.

The primary research question guiding this work is: *What are the sociological risk factors that influence the development and actions of serial killers?* This question examines factors such as socialization, dysfunctional family dynamics, abuse, the long-term effects of trauma, media influence, socio-economic status and marginalization, and subcultures of violence. By focusing on these elements, this essay aims to explore the broader social conditions that can contribute to serial killing. To deepen the investigation, the following sub-questions will also be addressed:

- *How do early childhood social environments contribute to the emergence of serial killing behaviour?*

- *What role do family dynamics, such as abuse or neglect, play in shaping the actions of serial killers?*
- *How do socio-economic factors correlate with the likelihood of becoming a serial killer?*
- *How does media portrayal of violence and crime influence the behaviour and self-perception of serial killers?*

These questions provide a structured approach to examining serial killing as a product of intersecting social factors, ultimately contributing to the sociological understanding of this phenomenon.

To answer these questions, this work employs a literature-based approach, focusing on a comprehensive analysis of existing literature on serial killing. The methodology involved a targeted selection of articles and research that specifically examined serial killing from a sociological perspective while intentionally excluding works that framed the phenomenon solely within a criminological or psychological perspective. The selection process involved extensive searches through academic databases, such as JSTOR and Google Scholar, focusing on peer-reviewed articles, books, case studies, and empirical studies that analyze the social dimensions of serial murder. Additionally, I examined the theoretical frameworks used in these studies to identify key sociological theories that have been applied to explain serial killing.

Furthermore, this essay incorporates perspectives from both positivist and social constructionist approaches. The positivist framework examines serial killing as a phenomenon that can be studied through empirical methods, emphasizing patterns, causes, and measurable social influences such as family instability, socio-economic conditions, and deviant socialization. In contrast, the social constructionist perspective focuses on how serial killing is defined, perceived,

and socially constructed. It examines the role of societal reactions, moral panics, media representations, and institutional labelling in shaping public understanding of serial murder.

Moreover, it is essential to recognize potential limitations in this critical review of the literature, primarily due to its entire reliance on existing research and literature. One challenge was the availability of sociological research on serial killers since much of the existing literature remains dominated by psychological and criminological perspectives. Many criminological studies focus on psychological or biological explanations, potentially neglecting social factors that are crucial to a sociological analysis. Also, the limited scope of some sociological studies, such as research focusing primarily on male offenders or Western societies, may result in gaps related to how gender, ethnicity, or cultural contexts influence sociological risk factors. Another limitation is the lack of extensive empirical sociological studies on serial murder due to its rarity, which restricts the availability of large-scale quantitative research. Despite these limitations, this essay aims to provide a comprehensive sociological analysis of serial killing, situating it within broader discussions on deviance, violence, and identity formation. This critical literature review serves as the foundation for understanding serial killing not merely as an individual anomaly but as a socially constructed phenomenon influenced by multiple intersecting risk factors.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Serial Killing

When analyzing the sociological dimensions that can influence the development and actions of serial killers, the review of the existing literature on the topic revealed that there is a complex interplay of societal, familial, and individual risk factors. While psychological motivations like psychopathy are well-documented, sociological factors remain relatively less explored. Scholars who studied this field highlighted different social influences that provide a broader framework for understanding serial killers' development and actions through a sociological lens rather than viewing them solely from a psychological or criminological perspective. My critical review of the literature aims to locate itself within this broader debate to identify the most common sociological variables, such as media influence or abusive family dynamics, for example, that contribute to the development and actions of serial killers.

Over the past thirty years, various definitions of serial murder have been employed by law enforcement, clinicians, scholars, and researchers. Even though the definitions share several common themes, they diverge on specific criteria, such as the number of murders committed, the types of motivations, and the temporal aspects associated with the killings (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005; 8). Eventually, a definition accepted by both law enforcement and academia describes serial killing as the rarest form of homicide which occurs "when an individual has killed three or more people who were previously unknown to him or her, with a "cooling off" period between each murder" (Haggerty & Ellerbrok, 2011; 1). This definition provides a consistent framework for studying serial murder within the sociological field.

2.2 Profiles & Classifications of Serial Killers

To better understand the patterns of serial killing, scholars have developed various typologies based on crime scene characteristics and offender behaviour. Ressler et al. (1986) propose a fundamental classification of serial killers into two types: *organized* and *disorganized*. Organized killers tend to plan their crimes meticulously, selecting victims carefully and taking steps not to get caught. On the other hand, disorganized killers act impulsively and leave chaotic crime scenes that suggest a lack of premeditation (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 4). Another classification by Holmes and De Burger (1985) categorizes serial killers based on motivations: *visionary, missionary, hedonistic, and power-control* (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 4). Visionary killers are those who experience hallucinations or delusions that lead them to kill particular types of victims (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 4). Missionary killers believe they must get rid of a specific group of people within society (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 4). The hedonistic category is a more diverse one as it includes subtypes. The first subtype is "lust murderers" for whom the act of killing is associated with sexual gratification, and they may engage in sadistic acts (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 4). The second subtype is "thrill-oriented" killers who kill for excitement and dominance rather than sexual pleasure (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 4). The last subtype is "comfort-oriented" killers whose motivation is "instrumental, with psychological or physical security and comfort being gained from insurance payouts or accumulation of victim's property" (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 4). The last category of "power-control" killers seek complete dominance over their victims. Although sexual elements might be present, the primary motivation is absolute control (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 4). These classifications help sociologists understand the structured nature of serial killing by revealing patterns that extend beyond individual pathology and into broader social contexts.

2.3 Gender Differences in Serial Killers

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of serial killing, it is essential to examine the gendered differences. Serial killing has traditionally been studied with a focus on male offenders since men make up the majority of identified serial murderers (Weist, 2009; 9). These offenders are predominantly white and typically between the ages of 25 and 35, although individuals over 35 are also represented (Weist, 2009; 9). In contrast, Weist (2009) explains that adolescent serial killers are very rare, as Schlesinger (2000) identified only six cases of offenders under 18 years old in the last 150 years (Weist, 2009; 9). Additionally, serial killings in the United States tend to reflect broader patterns of interracial homicide and social segregation, as most offenders and their victims are white (Weist, 2009; 12). Despite the significant overrepresentation of white men in serial murders, few explanations have been offered for this phenomenon (Weist, 2009; 15).

While male serial killers are the primary focus of much of the literature, female serial killers have been comparatively understudied. The estimated number of female serial killers varies depending on the definition used. Women identified as serial murderers typically fall into one of three categories: those who kill family members, those who kill in professional contexts, such as in healthcare or childcare, or those who kill in collaboration with a male partner, often a husband or lover (Schechter & Everitt, 1996; Vronsky, 2007; 29). In cases of partner killings, the male is frequently portrayed as the mastermind, with the woman taking on the role of accomplice or follower (Weist, 2009; 14).

Moreover, there are significant gender differences when it comes to the nature and context of the killings. Weist (2009) draws on Douglas' and Olshaker's argument and explains that female serial killers are more likely to target family members or operate within professional environments like hospitals or childcare facilities. Women's motives also differ from those of their male

counterparts. Women are more likely to engage in "mercy homicides", where they believe they are relieving suffering, or "hero homicides", in which they cause distress for the victim with the intent of later 'saving' them and being recognized as a hero (Weist, 2009; 14). In such cases, unintended deaths may occur, which distinguishes these killings from the stereotypical image of male serial killers as 'lust murderers' who kill their victims in violent, sexually motivated fantasies (Schechter & Everitt, 1996; 311).

While gender differences in serial killing reveal distinct patterns in victim selection, motivations, and methods, they also point to broader social factors that may shape these crimes. Research suggests that gender roles influence both the opportunities available to female serial killers and the ways their crimes are understood (Vronsky, 2007; 432). For instance, the overrepresentation of female offenders in caregiving settings may reflect the intersection of occupational access and societal expectations about women's roles (Vronsky, 2007; 432). Additionally, the frequent portrayal of women who kill as accomplices rather than "masterminds" raises questions about how gender norms shape perceptions of agency in violent crime (Weist, 2009; 14, Vronsky, 2007; 433). While these gendered patterns do not fully explain serial killing, they highlight the need to consider structural and cultural factors when analyzing these crimes (Schechter & Everitt, 1996).

Recognizing these patterns also underscores the importance of examining other sociological risk factors that contribute to serial killing. Gender intersects with broader influences such as family dynamics, socioeconomic status, abuse and trauma, and violent subcultures. The following section, *Serial Killing & Sociological Risk Factors*, will explore these wider sociological explanations for serial murder.

2.4 Serial Killing & Sociological Risk Factors

To better understand the factors influencing the actions of serial killers, it is crucial to define *sociological risk factors*. Sociological risk factors refer to social variables or conditions that increase an individual's likelihood of engaging in specific behaviours, typically deemed delinquent or deviant by society (Murray & Farrington, 2010; 635). When it comes to serial killing, researchers have identified a few social risk factors, such as dysfunctional family environments, socioeconomic struggles, and traumatic childhood events. Gresswell and Hollin (1994) argue that childhood trauma, social isolation and exposure to violence can contribute to the emergence of deviant behaviour, including, but not limited to, serial killing (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 8).

It is important to note that these social variables do not directly cause such behaviour. However, they create an environment where specific patterns of deviance are more likely to emerge. This approach situates serial killing within a broader sociological framework, reframing it from an isolated individual pathology to a phenomenon shaped by larger social conditions. As Gresswell and Hollin (1994) state, the interaction between environmental risk factors and individual predispositions suggests that serial killing results from a multifaceted interplay of influences rather than a singular cause (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 5).

2.5 Serial Killing & Deviance

Serial killing represents an extreme form of deviant behaviour, yet these behaviours often emerge from familiar social environments like family, community, or economic situations. Scholars like Gunn and Caissie (2006) characterized serial murder as an act of "deviant leisure", highlighting the role of social alienation in fostering such behaviour. Gunn and Caissie (2006) propose that serial killing can be framed as an act of deviant leisure, in which offenders, due to social isolation or lack of fulfillment in traditional social structures, find excitement and validation

in acts of extreme violence (Gunn & Caissie, 2006, p. 30). This perspective suggests that certain deviant behaviours may arise from social dissatisfaction. In fact, serial murderers are often individuals who have experienced long-term marginalization or rejection from mainstream society. This supports theories, such as Robert Merton's Strain Theory, suggesting that such behaviours often emerge from an individual's pursuit of power, control, or gratification, which they are otherwise unable to attain through conventional social means (Jang & Agnew, 2015; 495). From this perspective, serial killing is not merely a psychological abnormality but a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by the interplay of deviance, leisure, and identity formation (Gunn & Caissie, 2006).

Moreover, serial killing challenges traditional conceptions of crime and rationality. While deviant leisure theory frames serial murder as a response to social alienation, other scholars, such as those utilizing *Rational Choice Theory*, focus on the strategic decision-making processes involved in serial killings. Gunn and Caissie (2006) state that "rational choice theory argues that offenders make a rational choice to commit crime after having examined the likelihood of being caught or convicted" (Gunn & Caissie, 2006; 30). This perspective suggests that serial killers operate within a strategic framework, carefully selecting victims and methods to minimize their chances of getting caught and arrested.

2.6 Serial Killing from a Positivist Perspective

The positivist perspective considers deviance as a real and measurable phenomenon that can be studied through observable patterns. Before the emergence of the sociology of deviance, early criminologists studied deviant behaviour, and many assumed that people who commit deviant acts possess fundamental biological characteristics that distinguish them from those who do not (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 4). This perspective aligns with three key deviance

assumptions: *absolutism, objectivism, and determinism* (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 4). These principles offer sociologists a framework for examining serial killers as products of identifiable social forces rather than only as psychological anomalies.

Absolutism assumes that deviance has inherently real and observable characteristics that set it apart from non-deviance (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 5). Consequently, Roberson and Azaola (2015) explain that within this view, "deviance is an attribute that resides in the individual, and the deviant person will always be a deviant person" (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 5).

On the other hand, objectivism is based on the idea that deviant behaviour is a tangible and observable phenomenon that can be systematically studied (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 5). According to this assumption, "the study of deviants should focus on studying deviants as objects of study rather than persons" (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 5). In other words, this perspective emphasizes the importance of researchers maintaining objectivity by avoiding moral judgment and emotional empathy toward the subject.

The last positivist assumption, determinism, proposes that external forces cause deviance beyond an individual's control, such as social, environmental, and structural factors that can shape one's behaviour (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 5). Early sociologists defended the scientific principle of determinism while maintaining their denial of free will (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 7). However, Roberson and Azaola (2015) argue that modern positivist sociologists have shifted from 'hard determinism' to 'soft determinism', acknowledging that while external factors shape deviant behaviour, individuals have some limited free will. They argue that factors such as family instability, abuse, social disorganization, differential association, and weak social controls influence but do not entirely dictate deviant actions (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 5).

This framework has influenced how sociologists analyze the social dimensions of serial killing. Scholars, such as Mitchell and Aamodt (2005) and Haggerty and Ellerbrok (2011), argue that structural influences like dysfunctional family dynamics and socio-economic marginalization contribute to serial killing, not merely as an anomaly but as a phenomenon shaped by broader social conditions. As mentioned earlier, early positivist criminologists believed that deviant individuals were biologically different from non-deviants, whereas contemporary sociologists acknowledge that social factors play a crucial role in determining deviant behaviour (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 5). Since then, the positivist perspective has evolved to recognize the multifaceted nature of causation, combining elements such as early-life experiences, social environment, and broader systemic inequalities in understanding serial killing.

In sum, the positivist perspective on deviant behaviour is based on three core assumptions, and it defines deviance as a real and distinguishable phenomenon. This structured framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of serial killing by emphasizing that extreme deviant behaviour emerges from recognizable social patterns rather than unpredictable, isolated acts (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 5).

Positivist research on serial killing primarily focuses on identifying social risk factors that contribute to its emergence. Studies in this area often examine how early-life socialization, dysfunctional family environments, and exposure to trauma shape long-term behavioural patterns that may lead to extreme violence. Scholars also explore the role of cognitive processes, such as the development of violent fantasies and the use of neutralization techniques, in sustaining deviant identities. Additionally, positivist research considers broader socioeconomic conditions, examining how marginalization and poverty shape pathways to serial killing. This perspective provides a foundation for analyzing key sociological factors that contribute to serial killing. The

following sub-sections will explore how socialization, childhood trauma, the role of fantasies and neutralization techniques, and socioeconomic status interact to shape the development of serial killers, demonstrating how positivist frameworks continue to inform contemporary discussions on deviant behaviour.

2.6.1 Dysfunctional Socialization, Childhood Abuse, & the Development of Violent Behaviour

The Role of Socialization & Dysfunctional Family Dynamics

Studies have shown that the socialization process deeply influences an individual's behaviours, norms, and attitudes. Serial killers often show signs of dysfunctional socialization, commonly marked by abusive family environments, social isolation, or associations with deviant peer groups. Specifically, the family plays a critical role in shaping whether a child might later develop serial killing tendencies (McMillion, 2019; 14). A nurturing family environment that fosters love, empathy, and emotional stability contributes to a balanced personality. However, in dysfunctional families, children are often exposed to trauma, such as abuse or neglect, which can later translate into criminal tendencies. Such early experiences of abuse and dysfunctional socialization can create a foundation for the deviant behaviours and emotional detachment characteristics often observed in serial killers.

Research suggests that many serial killers were raised in environments characterized by abusive, neglectful, or domineering parents (Reid, 2019; 72). Some mothers engaged in over-controlling, punitive, or rejecting behaviours, while other mothers engaged in hypersexualized or humiliating interactions with their children (Reid, 2019; 72). As Reid (2019) mentions, in certain cases, serial killers experienced maternal relationships that combined physical abuse, emotional neglect, and sexual exploitation, which severely disrupted their ability to form healthy emotional bonds. When it comes to the role of fathers in serial killer development, research is limited for a

few reasons. Many serial killers had absent or emotionally distant fathers, either due to abandonment or neglect (Reid, 2019; 74). In fact, "one study found that just under 50% of serial killers had been raised without a father or by a non-biological step-father" (Reid, 2019; 75). This is one of the reasons that studies on the father's role are limited and less detailed than research on the role of the mother. However, the studies that do exist describe the fathers of serial killers as "being authoritative, sadistic, and highly disciplinarian in their parenting style" (Reid, 2019; 75).

Family environments characterized by abuse, lack of support, or emotional neglect create conditions that can lead individuals to engage in antisocial behaviour, which may ultimately manifest in violent acts. This link between family dysfunction and violence aligns with the Social Learning Theory, as posited by Albert Bandura (1977). This theory argues that individuals acquire behaviours through observing, imitating, and receiving reinforcement from those around them (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's work (1977) suggests that individuals learn behaviours, including deviant ones, by observing role models within the family, peer groups, and media, highlighting the importance of environmental factors in the development of individuals. In this context, dysfunctional family settings may cultivate deviant values, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of the emergence of violent tendencies. For instance, Eric Hickey (2016) studied the lives of over 400 serial killers and found that early exposure to violent or abusive role models was a common factor. This supports the idea that deviant socialization within the family can establish a foundation for future antisocial behaviour (Hickey, 2016). Moreover, Braimovic (2015) mentioned that Robert Hale (1993) applied the Social Learning Theory to the phenomenon of serial killing, and his central claim was that serial murder is learned (Braimovic, 2015; 14). Braimovic stated that Hale's theory has been utilized in several studies that examine certain factors linked to serial murder, such as adolescent fire-setting, animal cruelty, and military service. However, these

studies show mixed results and highlight the need for further research to overcome the limitations of studying serial murders (Braimovic, 2015; 15).

Childhood Trauma & Its Long-Term Impacts on Violent Behaviour

Research indicates that a significant proportion of serial killers report unfavourable childhood experiences, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to parental violence. After conducting a study on the incidence of child abuse in serial killers, Mitchell and Aamodt (2005) concluded that the prevalence of serial killers experiencing some type of maltreatment, regardless of the type of abuse, is 68%. They also found that 36% experienced physical abuse, 26% experienced sexual abuse, 50% experienced psychological abuse, 18% experienced neglect, and only 32% experienced no abuse at all (Mitchell & Aamodt, 2005; 42). Then, they compared these results to the general population and found that only 6% experienced physical abuse during their childhood, 3% experienced sexual abuse, 2% experienced psychological abuse, 18% experienced neglect, 6% experienced other types of abuse, and 70% experienced no abuse at all (Mitchell & Aamodt, 2005; 44). These findings highlight how common abuse during childhood is within the serial killer population compared to the general population, except for neglect, which demonstrated equal rates in both populations (Mitchell & Aamodt, 2005; 44). Their study reinforces the idea that experiences of abuse, regardless of the type, can lead to alienation and resentment toward societal norms, which can potentially result in violent tendencies later in life.

Along these lines, Marono et al. (2020) also conducted a behaviour sequence analysis of serial killers, which reveals that traumatic early life experiences, such as emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, are strongly correlated with violent behaviours in adulthood. Marono et al. (2020) also argue that "there is a very strong link between early childhood abuse and individuals who kill

for sexual gratification (Lust/rape typology), as previous research has found that all types of abuse, excluding neglect, were significantly higher in the lust typology serial killer population than in a controlled sample" (Marono et al., 2020; 128). That being said, the authors conclude that abuse during childhood is linked to serial killers' later behaviours, but what is still unknown is the "sequential pathway between childhood abuse and different types of serial killer" (Marono et al., 2020; 128).

Furthermore, Fox et al. (2015) analyzed data from 22,575 delinquent youth referred to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, which examined the impacts of childhood trauma, abuse, and neglect. The findings of their analysis revealed that each time a child goes through an additional adverse childhood experience (ACE), it increases the likelihood of becoming a serious, violent, and chronic (SVC) offender by 35% (Fox et al., 2015; 163). This means that children with two adverse childhood experiences are 70% more likely to be serious, violent, and chronic offenders, "4 ACEs increase a child's SVC risk by 140%, and six or more ACEs lead to more than 200% higher risk of SVC vs. single felony offending" (Fox et al., 2015; 169). Moreover, a study by Terrie Moffitt (1993) found that individuals who have a history of childhood trauma are substantially more prone to engage in violent behaviour later in life, which indicates a strong correlation between early adverse experiences and adult aggression. The significance of trauma in this context is critical since it reveals the profound social-psychological scars that can push individuals toward violence (Moffitt, 1993). This illustrates how these early experiences can not only predispose them to criminal behaviour but also shape their perspective and interactions with the world around them.

However, although childhood abuse frequently appears in serial killer case studies, it is not a universal factor among the serial killer population (Reid, 2019; 75). Some research shows that

not all serial killers report histories of abuse, and other studies show that certain serial killers were raised in stable, seemingly "normal" environments. For instance, Mitchell and Aamodt (2005) found that 32% did not experience abuse, while Jenkins (1988) noted that half of his serial killer sample had "respectable and superficially normal childhoods" (Reid, 2019; 75). Similarly, Warren, Hazelwood, and Dietz (1996), as well as Gratzer and Bradford (1995), found that most sexually sadistic killers had no documented history of childhood abuse (Reid, 2019; 75), findings that contrast with the conclusions drawn by the more recent behaviour sequence analysis conducted by Marono et al. (2020). Reid (2019) explains that "[o]ne possibility that may account for these differences is the heterogeneity in the populations studied" (Reid, 2019; 76). In response to these conflicting findings, some researchers, such as Ebrite (2005), argued that the absence of reported child abuse for some serial killers does not necessarily mean that they experienced no abuse. In fact, some serial killers may conceal or suppress their memories of abuse due to a misplaced and inexplicable loyalty to their abusers, especially when it is a parent (Reid, 2019; 76). On the other hand, Pincus (2002) argues that serial killers may have repressed early trauma, leading to underreporting in self-reported case studies (Reid, 2019; 76).

While child abuse is unfortunately common, serial murder remains an extremely rare phenomenon. This suggests that while childhood trauma may be a contributing factor, it is not the only determinant. Gresswell and Hollin (1994) mention that "[s]everal of these background factors are at best predictive of anti-social behaviour in general (West, 1982), rather than multiple murder specifically (Levin and Fox, 1985)" (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 8).

Moreover, the long-term impact of childhood trauma on violent behaviour is undeniable, although not all abuse survivors become serial killers. Research suggests that trauma contributes to cognitive distortions, violent fantasies, and emotional detachment, creating a pathway to

aggression. However, trauma alone is not the sole determinant since it interacts with other factors, like social learning, personal predispositions, neutralization techniques and environmental influences, that shape an individual's likelihood to engage in violence.

The Role of Fantasy & Techniques of Neutralization

Childhood abuse, humiliation, and emotional neglect have been strongly linked to antisocial tendencies and violent fantasies in serial killers. Burgess et al. (1986) argue that individuals who experience early trauma without proper coping mechanisms often develop sadistic fantasies as a way to regain control over their environment (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 8). Over time, these fantasies become increasingly violent, especially when it is reinforced by social isolation and cognitive distortions (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 8). Additionally, serial killers with traumatic pasts often depersonalize their victims to justify their actions, removing moral and emotional barriers to violence (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 9). This cognitive process reduces guilt and reinforces the ability to commit extreme acts.

Research further suggests that childhood trauma manifests in serial killers through the development of violent fantasies. According to Burgess et al. (1986), individuals who experience repeated abuse often retreat into fantasy worlds as a means of psychological escape, using them to regain a sense of power and control (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 8). These fantasies, initially a coping mechanism, can become increasingly elaborate, especially in socially isolated individuals. In the Prentky et al. (1989) study, "evidence of fantasy rehearsal and forethought in the planning and execution of the murder was found to be highly correlated with the degree of organization of the crime" (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 11).

Beyond violent fantasies, serial killers may also engage in psychological strategies that neutralize moral conflict and further reinforce deviant behaviour. This process aligns with the

Neutralization Theory, which was first developed by Gresham Sykes and David Matza in 1957. Neutralization techniques, such as denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, appeal to higher loyalties, and condemnation of the condemners (James & Gossett, 2017; 1122), play a crucial role in helping offenders reconcile conflicting identities and maintain a coherent sense of self. As mentioned by James and Gossett (2017), "[n]eutralizations allow offenders to engage in criminal and/or deviant behaviour while avoiding moral culpability, shame, and/or damage to their sense of self-identity or self-concept" (James & Gossett, 2017; 1122). Such techniques can be utilized by serial murderers when trying to shape and display different aspects of their identity in various social contexts. For instance, they present themselves as respectable citizens in conventional society while also adopting a heartless murderer persona in their interactions with their victims (James & Gossett, 2017; 1120).

Additionally, these techniques of neutralization not only allow offenders, such as serial killers, to justify their deviant behaviour but also help them avoid moral culpability or shame and minimize stigma (James & Gossett, 2017; 1121). James and Gossett (2017) draw on Maruna's and Copes' (2005) argument to explain that techniques of neutralization should be understood not only as mechanisms to mitigate guilt but as "techniques of self-presentation" (Maruna & Copes, 2005; 274) that allow offenders to defend themselves against labelling and construct meaningful narratives about their behaviour (James & Gossett, 2017; 1123). Since their socialization is in the same moral framework as non-offenders, serial murderers likely employ these techniques to navigate the deviant identities and stigma associated with their crimes (James & Gossett, 2017; 1123).

Positivist Interpretations

The discussion of violent fantasies and neutralization techniques aligns with the positivist perspective on serial killing, which emphasizes the role of social risk factors and internal psychological processes in shaping deviant behaviour (Roberson & Azaola, 2015). Positivist theories seek to identify underlying causes, such as family instability and childhood trauma, that may contribute to patterns of deviance (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 5). In this context, theories linking childhood trauma to violent fantasies reflect the positivist assumption of *determinism*, as they suggest that offenders' deviant tendencies develop in response to identifiable past experiences. Similarly, Neutralization Theory posits that offenders use psychological techniques to suppress guilt and justify violence (James & Gossett, 2017; 1122). This aligns with the positivist assumption of *absolutism*, which holds that deviance stems from identifiable and measurable characteristics, such as specific psychological processes, that distinguish it from non-deviance (Roberson & Azaola, 2015; 5).

2.6.2 Socio-Economic Status & Its Link to Violent Behaviour

While some researchers argue that economic marginalization contributes to serial murder, others suggest that socioeconomic status is not a primary risk factor, as serial killers emerge from diverse backgrounds (Zuniga, 2021). The extent to which socio-economic status directly contributes to serial murder remains unclear.

McMillion (2019) suggests that children who experience social seclusion and economic marginalization may develop feelings of alienation, frustration, and resentment, increasing the risk of engaging in violent acts later in life. Additionally, as mentioned by Miethe et al. (2004), lower socioeconomic status often correlates with increased exposure to environmental stressors and limited access to mental health resources, which can both accentuate the risk of engaging in

extreme forms of deviance, like serial murder. Analyzing these socio-economic risk factors helps shed light on how marginalization may drive serial killers to commit violent acts as an attempt to reclaim power in a society that excludes them (Miethe et al., 2004).

Wiest (2009) draws on previous studies to describe a 'typical' serial killer as someone who is considered to be "a white, American man of middle to low socioeconomic status who killed alone; was convicted of killing at least three people previously unknown to him on separate occasions; and who did not steal items of value from his victims or kill for any apparent reason other than personal gratification" (Wiest, 2009; 70). Although that being said, not every single serial killer comes from a lower socioeconomic background. For instance, Ted Bundy represents a case that differs by socioeconomic status as he was an upper-middle-class man (Wiest, 2009; 77). Nonetheless, serial killers from lower socio-economic backgrounds may develop frustration that fuels a desire for power and control, potentially leading to violent behaviour. Research indicates that serial murderers often encounter obstacles to education and employment, which intensifies their feelings of inadequacy and social exclusion (Agnew, 1992). Along these lines, Malizia (2017) argues that even those who show a "facade of normality", by holding stable jobs or maintaining families, "in reality, it is an inclusion which stops at a superficial level and does not involve the core of the personality, haunted by deep inner anxieties" (Malizia, 2017; 55).

On the contrary, Zuniga (2021) provides evidence against socioeconomic status as a primary risk factor for the phenomenon of serial killing. Zuniga (2021) found that only 4.7% of 149 serial killers in their study had a documented history of poverty (Zuniga, 2021; 30). While financial hardship may contribute to general criminal behaviour, serial murder differs significantly from crimes like robbery or gang violence, which are more directly linked to economic survival. Additionally, the challenge of establishing a clear correlation between socioeconomic background

and serial killing is due to gaps in research data since the financial histories of many serial killers remain incomplete or undocumented; therefore, "socioeconomic status could not be determined for these cases" (Zuniga, 2021, p. 47).

Given the limited empirical evidence, socioeconomic status does not appear to be a prevalent sociological risk factor for serial killing specifically. While financial instability and social marginalization may contribute to feelings of powerlessness and frustration, potentially contributing to deviant behaviour, there is little evidence to suggest that economic hardship alone is a determining factor in serial murder. Instead, serial killers seem to emerge from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, with some coming from stable or even privileged upbringings. Therefore, while socio-economic status is a relevant variable in understanding criminality in general, it does not appear to play a decisive role in the development of serial killers.

2.6.3 Conclusion of the Positivist Perspective

The positivist perspective, rooted in *absolutism*, *objectivism*, and *determinism*, provides a structured framework for analyzing serial killing by identifying observable patterns and contributing factors rather than viewing it as a random or inexplicable phenomenon (Roberson & Azaola, 2015).

The research discussed in this section of the critical literature review aligns with the positivist perspective by emphasizing social risk factors and observable patterns in serial killing. The positivist assumption of *determinism* suggests that external forces, such as childhood trauma, dysfunctional socialization, and exposure to violence, shape deviant behaviour, reinforcing the idea that serial killing follows identifiable patterns (Roberson & Azaola, 2015). Social Learning

Theory (Bandura, 1977) also supports the positivist approach by demonstrating how individuals may adopt violent behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement.

Additionally, the discussion of violent fantasies and neutralization techniques further reflects a positivist approach by examining specific cognitive patterns that may influence criminal behaviour. Neutralization techniques allow offenders to justify their actions, which supports the assumption that deviance can be linked to identifiable psychological processes shaped by past experiences (Roberson & Azaola, 2015).

Lastly, the analysis of socioeconomic status aligns with positivist principles by evaluating whether financial instability and social marginalization contribute to the development and actions of serial killers. While some studies link lower socioeconomic status to increased exposure to stressors that may contribute to violent behaviour, other findings suggest that serial killers come from diverse economic backgrounds, which makes it difficult to establish a direct correlation to serial murder (Zuniga, 2021). This reflects the positivist approach's focus on identifying patterns while acknowledging the complexity of causation.

Overall, the research reviewed in this section illustrates how the positivist perspective seeks to identify recurring social, cognitive, and environmental influences on serial killing. While no single factor fully explains why individuals engage in serial murder, positivist research highlights potential risk factors that may contribute to extreme violence.

2.7 Serial Killing from a Constructionist Perspective

Since the 1960s, the social constructionist perspective has challenged the positivist view of deviance by shifting the focus from identifying causes of deviant behaviour to understanding

how society defines and reacts to it. This perspective is based on three key assumptions: *relativism, subjectivism,* and *voluntarism* (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013).

Constructionists argue that deviance has no inherent characteristics but is defined by societal perceptions. As Howard Becker (1963) stated: "[d]eviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label" (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 7), meaning that without the label, deviance does not exist. This relativist perspective frames deviance as a social construct, emphasizing that its existence depends on how society reacts to certain behaviours rather than any objective reality (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 7). As a result, constructionists are less interested in focusing on deviant acts themselves and more on who applies deviant labels and for what reasons, particularly law enforcement and social control agents. They analyze how labelling influences and shapes individuals' identities and interactions with society (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 8).

Unlike positivists, who view deviance as an objective reality, constructionists argue that deviant behaviour is a subjective and lived experience. They emphasize that humans are conscious, reflective and emotional beings, distinguishing them from passive objects of study (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 8). Treating individuals merely as research subjects for classification and control overlooks their personal and internal perspectives. Instead, constructionists advocate for empathetic and interpretative methods, such as ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth interviews (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 9) "to understand the deviants' personal views and seeing the world as it appears to them" (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 9). These subjective approaches provide insight into how deviants perceive themselves, their actions, and society, rather than reducing them to surface-level statistical data on factors like poverty, education, or criminal history (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 9).

Constructionists reject the positivist view that deviant behaviour is only shaped by external forces, arguing instead that it is a voluntary act that is driven by individual choice. The positivist perspective is often interpreted as portraying humans as passive beings or as machines that automatically respond to their environment (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 9). In contrast, constructionists argue that individuals have free will and, therefore, the ability to make choices, so they shape their own behaviour (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 9). To reinforce this voluntarist assumption, constructionists examine how social control agencies label individuals as deviant and impose sanctions against them. Their analyses reveal "the arbitrariness of official action, the bias in the administration of law, and the unjustness of controlling deviants" (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 10). This suggests that those in power actively construct and impose deviant labels rather than simply enforcing pre-existing societal norms. Furthermore, constructionists also examine individuals labelled as deviants and challenge the idea that they passively accept stigma or internalize a negative self-image because of the labels given to them by society (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 10). On the contrary, they argue that deviants actively interpret their behaviour, often redefining it positively rather than adhering to societal norms. For instance, Jack Katz (1988) found that some murderers view themselves as morally superior to their victims, believing they are defending their dignity against perceived insults (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 10). This perspective sees deviance as an intentional and meaningful act rather than a response to social conditions.

In sum, the social constructionist perspective challenges positivist views by arguing that deviance is a social construct shaped by perception and power dynamics rather than an objective reality. It is built on three key assumptions: *relativism, subjectivism*, and *voluntarism*. The relativist view claims that deviance is not inherently real but is constructed through societal labelling.

Subjectivism emphasizes that deviant behaviour is a lived experience best understood through empathy and interpretation rather than objective analysis. Lastly, voluntarism maintains that deviance results from individual choice rather than being strictly determined by external forces (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013; 10). Therefore, while serial murderers are shaped by social constructions of deviance and violence, they also play an active role in defining their identities, either by embracing or challenging the labels imposed on them.

Research from a constructionist perspective on serial killing focuses on how cultural narratives, historical shifts, and social structures influence the way serial murder is defined and perceived. Scholars in this field examine how the classification of serial killing has evolved by considering the societal factors that have shaped its recognition as a distinct criminal phenomenon. Additionally, constructionist research explores the role of violent subcultures in the socialization of serial killers, analyzing how deviant identities are reinforced or challenged within specific social contexts. The following sub-sections will expand on these ideas, first by exploring the historical evolution of serial murder as a concept and then by examining how violent subcultures contribute to serial killers' behaviours. From this perspective, constructionists take a non-causal and interpretive approach, challenging positivist perspectives that seek to explain deviant behaviour through fixed social or cognitive factors.

2.7.1 Serial Murder as a Modern vs. Historical Phenomenon

A key debate among scholars centers on whether serial murder is a modern phenomenon or a form of violence with historical precedents. Some argue that serial murder is a product of contemporary social conditions such as urbanization, media sensationalism, and advancements in law enforcement (Jenkins, 1994; Schmid, 2005; Haggerty & Ellerbrok, 2011). Others suggest that serial killing has existed for centuries but was previously understood through different frameworks

(Jenkins, 1989; Wilson, 2007). From a sociological perspective, serial murder must be examined not only in terms of individual pathology but also as a product of broader social forces that shape patterns of violence, deviance, and public response.

The Modern Perspective

Scholars such as Jenkins (1994), Schmid (2005), and Haggerty and Ellerbrok (2011) argue that serial murder is tied to structural changes in society, especially because of the effects of industrialization and urbanization. These scholars argue that as cities expand and close-knit communities dissolve, there is increased anonymity that allows serial killers to avoid immediate social detection (Haggerty & Ellerbrok, 2011; 6). They explain that this shift created a critical condition for the emergence of serial murder, as a distinguishing feature of serial killers is targeting strangers, which sets them apart from most homicides that generally involve a prior connection between the perpetrator and the victim (Haggerty & Ellerbrok, 2011; 6). Therefore, dense urban environments provide ideal conditions for the impersonal interactions that facilitate serial killing.

Beyond the structural conditions that enable serial murder, society's reaction to serial murder, whether it is shock, outrage, or fascination, reflects how these deviant behaviours violate social norms. This perspective highlights the importance of studying deviance since it allows sociologists to examine how societal horror and fascination influence serial killers' self-perception. Along these lines, Gunn and Caissie (2006) suggest that the social labels assigned to serial killers play a crucial role in defining and reinforcing their deviant identities, which demonstrates how broader societal norms impact individual behaviour.

Moreover, media sensationalism further amplifies public fear and fascination, shaping serial murder as a modern cultural phenomenon. Schmid (2005) argues that the media amplifies public fear by portraying serial killers as archetypes of extreme deviance, which then generates

moral panics within society. Similarly, Haggerty and Ellerbrok (2011) argue that media sensationalism not only amplifies violence but also circulates the concept of the "serial killer", which could potentially inspire imitation among future offenders. However, they emphasize that this argument does not suggest that "serial killing might be the product of some straightforward media effect" (Haggerty & Ellerbrok, 2011; 7), as multiple other factors can influence engagement in such behaviour.

The social construction of serial killing plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions and, consequently, the identities of offenders. Media representations reinforce the fascination surrounding serial killers, often framing them as monstrous anomalies rather than social products. This social labelling process reinforces the construction of deviant identities, shaping both how offenders perceive themselves and how society responds to them (Gresswell & Hollin, 1994; 11). Beyond simple reporting, media and law enforcement narratives actively shape the public understanding of serial murder, which reinforces its classification as a distinct crime category.

Haggerty (2009) also argues that the media has cultivated a culture of celebrity, where achieving fame is highly desirable because it offers a way out of a sense of powerless anonymity. Instead of feeling ashamed of their actions, serial killers frequently embrace their notoriety and actively pursue media attention. Ted Bundy exemplifies this phenomenon, as he thrived on the media's fascination with him. He was in constant communication with the global press, even after a judge attempted to restrict that access. (Haggerty, 2009; 174). This suggests that media attention not only influences public perceptions but also shapes how serial killers view themselves and their crimes, further reinforcing their deviant identities.

The Historical Perspective

Other scholars who studied serial murder from a historical standpoint have argued that accounts of serial murder indicate that the behaviour itself may be timeless, even if it was not always labelled as such. The formal recognition of serial killing as a distinct category of crime did not take place until the 20th century. Historically, such crimes were often interpreted through the lenses of folklore, superstition, or isolated acts of brutality rather than as a part of a broader pattern (Jenkins, 1989; 377). From 1900 to 1940, serial murder in the United States was largely underreported and poorly understood. Jenkins (1989) states that law enforcement agencies, at the time, lacked the forensic expertise and investigative resources to be able to identify patterns between multiple murders, which resulted in many cases being misclassified or overlooked (Jenkins, 1989; 378). Additionally, the absence of centralized criminal databases, along with the limited reach of national media, made it challenging to connect murders that occurred across different jurisdictions. Consequently, many serial killers remained undetected, with their crimes perceived as random or isolated events rather than being perceived as a part of an ongoing series of connected homicides (Jenkins, 1989, p. 379).

The mid-20th century marked a turning point in the public and academic understanding of serial killing. Throughout the early 20th century, "terms such as slayer, ripper, butcher, and maniac were common descriptors of serial killers and other, non-serial killers who committed acts of sexualized homicidal violence" (Reid, 2019; 45). At the time, it was believed that criminals could be distinguished from others by physical traits and appearance alone (Reid, 2019; 46). Eventually, during the 1970s, there was a breakthrough in the development of psychological profiling techniques within the FBI's Behavioural Analysis Unit, which significantly shaped modern understandings of serial murder (Reid, 2019; 49). Moreover, Reid (2019) states that on April 8th,

1930, the Berlin Chief of Police Ernst Gennat suggested a new terminology to specifically describe the repetitive acts of homicide: '*Serienmörder*', which translates to '*serial murder*' in English (Reid, 2019; 48). Due to the translational barriers, "Gennat's (1930) label and definition would not be adopted for another fifty years; at which time it was then popularized in the North American literature and the credit for coining this term was given to another" (Reid, 2019; 48). In 1978, the FBI began a project that consisted of conducting in-person interviews with convicted serial killers and discovering how they were able to avoid capture for as long as they did (Reid, 2019; 50). Reid (2019) states that this project led them to identify two sub-groups of serial killers, the *organized* and *disorganized* typologies, which was an important consideration when it came to investigating cases of serial murder (Reid, 2019; 51). At the same period, Ressler et al. (1988) and Cormier (1973) were starting to investigate the psychopathology of serial killers (Reid, 2019; 51). These developments laid a foundation for a more structured approach to studying serial killing, shifting the focus from physical characteristics to behavioural patterns and psychological profiling.

As law enforcement refined its investigative techniques, serial murder also gained increasing visibility in popular culture, where media portrayals began to play a crucial role in shaping serial murder as a modern cultural phenomenon. During the 1980s and 1990s, the media's attention to high-profile cases, such as Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and John Wayne Gacy, reinforced the perception of serial murder as a new and modern social threat (Haggerty, 2009; 174). As mentioned earlier, some scholars argue that media portrayals of serial killers as archetypes of extreme deviance contributed to moral panics, reinforcing their image within the public's perception (Schmid, 2005). However, despite its increased visibility in society, historical analysis suggests that serial murder has existed in various forms for centuries, although it was understood through different frameworks. Early cases that would now be classified as serial murders were

often attributed to insanity, ritualistic violence, or unexplainable brutality, which reflected the dominant social and legal narratives of their time (Jenkins, 1989; 381). In fact, some scholars argue that acts of serial murder can be traced back to the fifteenth century. Gunn and Caissie (2006), Vronsky (2004), and Schechter (2003) highlight figures such as Gilles de Rais and Elizabeth Bathory, whose actions would be classified as serial murder today since they murdered over 100 victims. This implies that while the term "serial killer" is contemporary, patterns of repetitive and extreme violence have existed as part of societal structures across time. Moreover, Wilson (2007) argues that in some pre-modern societies, ritualistic killings or sacrificial practices resembled what we now define as serial murder (Wilson, 2007; 157). These acts were often embedded within a cultural or religious context, reinforcing the idea that serial murder-like behaviours were once institutionalized under systems of power rather than framed as individual deviance. Sociologists' examination of these cases suggests that the distinction between ritualized violence and serial murder reflects changing social structures and value systems rather than the emergence of a new phenomenon.

Constructionist Interpretations

From a constructionist perspective, the recognition of serial killing as a distinct crime category reflects broader societal changes in how deviance is defined, understood, and regulated. Rather than viewing serial murder as an inherent or timeless crime, constructionists argue that it has been shaped by evolving cultural narratives and institutional responses (Jenkins, 1994; Schmid, 2005; Haggerty & Ellerbrok, 2011). The expansion of urbanization and advancements in law enforcement have influenced how serial murders are identified and prosecuted, while the rise of mass media has reinforced moral panics and public fascination with serial killers (Schmid, 2005; Haggerty & Ellerbrok, 2011). By examining how labels, public reactions, and institutional

narratives define serial killing in contemporary society, constructionists reveal how crime is not just an objective act but a socially constructed phenomenon.

This perspective also sheds light on how historical societies framed repetitive homicide long before the term "serial killer" emerged. While extreme violence has existed across different historical periods, the way such acts were interpreted depended on dominant cultural, moral, and legal frameworks. Before the 20th century, acts now categorized as serial murder were often interpreted through religious, supernatural, or ritualistic lenses rather than as individualized deviance (Jenkins, 1989; Wilson, 2007). Figures such as Gilles de Rais and Elizabeth Bathory, who today would be labelled as serial killers, exemplify how acts of extreme violence were once normalized or explained through different societal lenses (Gunn & Caissie, 2006; Vronsky, 2004; Schechter, 2003). From this perspective, serial murder is not a fixed historical phenomenon but a concept that has been reshaped and reinterpreted over time in response to changing social values, power dynamics, and institutional frameworks.

In sum, the debate over whether serial murder is a modern or historical phenomenon highlights the social construction of crime. While some argue that societal transformations, such as urbanization and media sensationalism, have created new conditions for serial killing, others emphasize that similar patterns of extreme violence existed long before modernity, only framed through different moral and legal discourses. Ultimately, rather than being a new phenomenon, serial murder reflects changing societal frameworks of power, morality, and deviance, which demonstrates how crime itself is continuously shaped by evolving structures that define it.

2.7.2 Subcultures of Violence & Their Links to Violent Behaviour

From a constructionist perspective, deviance is not an inherent trait of an individual but is shaped by social environments, cultural norms, and power dynamics. In this context, violent subcultures influence how deviance is understood, experienced, and, at times, even legitimized. Constructionist research explores how individuals, including serial killers, are socialized into violent norms and how individuals may adopt or resist these socially constructed understandings of violence.

Sociologists have examined for a long time the role of violent subcultures in shaping deviant behaviour. DeFronzo and Prochnow (2004) studied the concept of a "subculture of violence", which helps explain environments where violent behaviour is tolerated, sometimes rewarded, or even celebrated. Within these subcultures, violence is a normalized response to conflict, often devaluing human life and increasing the likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviour (DeFronzo & Prochnow, 2004). The researchers who examined serial murder within such a context argue that the social environment plays an important role in the normalization of violence, which can help explain to some extent why some individuals may be more likely to commit violent acts. DeFronzo and Prochnow (2004) provided concrete data from their research on violent subcultures, which supports this view. They analyzed three uncorrelated dimensions of legitimated violent culture: hunting and military violence legitimation, TV and sports violence, and punitive violence. These cultural factors were linked to variables such as the rate of hunting licenses issued, the rate of National Guard enrollment, the rate of violent media consumption, and the use of the death penalty and corporal punishment (DeFronzo & Prochnow, 2004; 107). Their findings suggest that men with psychiatric predispositions for violent behaviour, such as sexual sadism, may be encouraged or stimulated by local cultural traditions that legitimize violent actions, therefore

increasing the likelihood that they will act upon their violent fantasies in real life (DeFronzo & Prochnow, 2004; 108).

Building on this idea, exposure to criminal subcultures or violent social environments during childhood can have lasting effects on an individual's worldview. When children are raised in households or communities where violence is normalized, they may learn to see aggression as a legitimate means of achieving control or asserting dominance (McMillion, 2019). The presence of violent role models and the absence of social sanctions against violence can lead children to internalize deviant norms, making violent acts seem more acceptable or even necessary (McMillion, 2019). Additionally, Franklin D. McMillion (2019) suggests that for some individuals, specific life events, such as abandonment, abuse, or neglect, may act as triggers that escalate underlying violent fantasies into aggressive behaviours. When combined with an early immersion in violent subcultures, these experiences can significantly shape an individual's likelihood of engaging in extreme forms of deviance.

Beyond early childhood exposure, some individuals are socialized into criminal subcultures where violence is both normalized and expected. Malizia (2017) and McMillion (2019) emphasize that some serial killers grow up in environments where violence is deeply ingrained, especially within criminal families or gang-affiliated communities, where violence and aggression serve as tools for asserting dominance or ensuring protection (Malizia, 2017; 55). From an early age, these individuals may be conditioned to perceive harming others as acceptable or, in some cases, essential (McMillion, 2019; 15). This perspective aligns with the Social Learning Theory, which suggests that individuals adopt behaviours by observing and imitating those around them (Bandura, 1977). In violent subcultures, individuals may internalize aggression by observing role models who justify, reward, or engage in violent acts. This learned behaviour can later manifest in

deviance. In some extreme cases, future serial killers may internalize aggressive attitudes and dehumanizing perspectives shaped by their social surroundings. For instance, McMillion (2019) draws on Ryan et al. (2017) to state that just as gang members may be socialized to view law enforcement as adversaries, some serial killers may come to see certain groups as inferior, reinforcing their capacity for extreme violence toward them (McMillion, 2019; 15).

However, while exposure to criminal subcultures may contribute to the development of violent tendencies, the vast majority of serial killers do not emerge from organized crime settings. Unlike gang-related homicides or other forms of collective violence, serial murder is typically an individualized and premeditated act that is motivated by personal gratification rather than group affiliation (DeFronzo & Prochnow, 2004; 107). This distinction is crucial because it highlights the limits of subcultural explanations in accounting for serial murders. Although criminal environments may provide early exposure to deviant behaviour, they do not fully explain why certain individuals progress to committing repeated homicides instead of engaging in other types of violent crimes (Malizia, 2017; 56).

Another factor in the development of violent tendencies is how society responds and reacts to an individual's early deviant behaviour. Malizia (2017) argues that:

[t]he way society reacts to the first deviant and criminal acts by a potential serial killer plays an important role in guiding the future behavior of the subject. The criminal path of an individual does not begin with a serial murder, but with less serious incidents. The subject may receive rewards or punishments for their actions, or a punishment with an educational function, which can serve to slow or block the evolution of serial homicidal behavior" (55).

In other words, if their early violent acts are met with approval, indifference, or a lack of consequences, they may become desensitized to harming others. On the other hand, if they face punishment or social rejection, they may try to suppress their violent tendencies or redirect them

into more socially acceptable forms of aggression. This process illustrates that exposure to violent subcultures not only influences how individuals perceive violence but also whether they adopt it as a legitimate means of achieving their goals.

That being said, not everyone exposed to violent subcultures becomes a serial killer, highlighting the role of additional risk factors, such as psychological predispositions or personal trauma (DeFronzo & Prochnow, 2004; 107). While violent environments may create social conditions that facilitate deviant behaviour, the transition from violent thoughts to serial murder is shaped by a complex interplay of sociological and psychological factors (Malizia, 2017; 57). Although violent subcultures provide valuable insights into how violence is normalized and transmitted within certain environments, they do not fully explain the distinct and individualized nature of serial killing. Unlike other forms of criminal violence that arise from collective or retaliatory contexts, serial murder is often premeditated, deeply personal, and motivated by personal gratification rather than social utility (McMillion, 2019; 17). However, exposure to violent subcultures may still play an indirect role in shaping the worldview of some serial killers by fostering desensitization to violence, reinforcing dominance-based ideologies, or legitimizing aggression as a means of control. Therefore, while subcultural explanations alone cannot fully account for serial murder, they contribute to a broader understanding of how violent norms and learned behaviours may shape the development of extreme deviance in some individuals.

2.7 3. Conclusion of the Constructionist Perspective

The constructionist perspective frames serial murder as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural narratives, institutional responses, and public discourse rather than an inherent crime (Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013). Unlike the positivist approach, which seeks to identify

causal factors, constructionist research focuses on how deviance is defined and regulated within specific social and historical contexts (Becker, 1963).

The research discussed in this section illustrates how serial killing has been historically framed, from religious to legal classifications (Jenkins, 1989; Wilson, 2007). Media sensationalism reinforces these shifts, shaping public perceptions and law enforcement responses (Schmid, 2005; Haggerty & Ellerbrok, 2011). Research on violent subcultures sheds light on serial killing by supporting the constructionist argument that deviance is learned and reinforced through social interactions rather than solely individual pathology, though it does not fully account for the complexities of serial murder (DeFronzo & Prochnow, 2004; McMillion, 2019; Thio, Taylor & Schwartz, 2013).

Ultimately, constructionist research on serial murder highlights how crime categories evolve alongside societal changes, emphasizing the role of social meanings and power structures in defining extreme violence (Jenkins, 1994; Schmid, 2005).

3. Conclusion of the Literature Review

This critical literature review has examined the complex sociological risk factors that influence the development and actions of serial killers. By analyzing key factors such as socialization, dysfunctional family dynamics, childhood abuse, trauma's long-term impacts, media influence, socio-economic status, and subcultures of violence, this work situates serial killing within broader social contexts rather than attributing it solely to individual pathology. In doing so, it has addressed the primary research question: *What are the sociological risk factors that influence the development and actions of serial killers?* This review of the existing literature has demonstrated that while serial killing is a rare phenomenon, it is shaped by a combination of

environmental, structural, and social influences that contribute to deviant behaviour. Moreover, by synthesizing various sociological perspectives, this essay highlights the interaction between learned behaviours, cultural narratives, and structural conditions in shaping serial murder.

To answer the first sub-question, *How do early childhood social environments contribute to the emergence of serial killing behaviour?*, existing research has shown that childhood socialization plays a fundamental role in shaping future deviant behaviour. According to the Social Learning Theory, individuals learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and reinforcement, meaning that children raised in environments characterized by violence, neglect, or abuse are more likely to develop aggressive tendencies. Many serial killers report experiencing significant childhood trauma, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, which contributes to emotional detachment, violent fantasies, and a lack of empathy later in life. Empirical evidence supports this by showing a high prevalence of childhood trauma among serial killers, with studies like Mitchell and Aamodt (2005) reporting that 68% experienced some form of maltreatment compared to significantly lower rates in the general population. Moreover, Marono et al. (2020) found a strong correlation between early childhood abuse and violent behaviours in adulthood, particularly among serial killers who kill for sexual gratification. However, since not all serial killers have documented histories of abuse, this suggests that while early social environments are a key factor, they interact with other variables, such as broader social conditions, to shape criminal behaviour.

Regarding the second sub-question, *What role do family dynamics, such as abuse or neglect, play in shaping the actions of serial killers?*, the review of the existing literature highlights that dysfunctional family environments are one of the strongest sociological risk factors linked to serial killing. Research shows that a significant proportion of serial killers grew up in homes marked by instability, authoritarian parenting, or neglect. The absence of a stable parental figure,

exposure to domestic violence, or a highly punitive or emotionally distant parent figure can disrupt normal emotional and social development, leading to antisocial tendencies. Studies suggest that maternal abuse or neglect, as well as emotionally absent or authoritarian fathers, are common among serial killers. For instance, Reid (2019) notes that many serial killers had controlling, punitive, or neglectful mothers, while nearly half were raised without their biological fathers. However, since some serial killers come from stable households, this further reinforces that family dysfunction alone is not sufficient to explain serial killing; rather, it interacts with broader sociological and personal factors.

The third sub-question asks: *How do socio-economic factors correlate with the likelihood of becoming a serial killer?* The relationship between socioeconomic status and serial killing is complex. While lower socioeconomic status can contribute to feelings of alienation and frustration, which could fuel deviant behaviour in general, existing research does not establish a direct causal link between financial hardship and serial murder. Although some serial killers come from disadvantaged backgrounds where limited access to education and employment opportunities may contribute to resentment and a desire for control, leading to violent behaviour, Zuniga (2021) found limited empirical evidence directly linking poverty to serial killing. Studies also show that serial killers emerge from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, including middle- and upper-class environments, which suggests that financial hardship alone is not sufficient to explain serial murder. Unlike other crimes driven by economic survival, serial murder is primarily motivated by personal gratification rather than financial need.

Regarding the final sub-question, *How does media portrayal of violence and crime influence the behaviour and self-perception of serial killers?*, the literature highlights that media sensationalism is influential yet not determinative. Media influence contributes to the social

construction of serial killers by shaping public perceptions, reinforcing serial killers' notoriety, and contributing to their deviant identities. According to Haggerty (2009), the media's fascination with serial killers fosters a culture of celebrity, providing some killers, such as Ted Bundy, the notoriety that they actively seek. While there is no direct evidence that media exposure causes serial killing, Haggerty (2009) argues further that media sensationalism can reinforce violent fantasies, shape self-perception, and potentially influence future offenders. Additionally, media representations play a role in framing serial killing as a distinct crime category, shaping both public discourse and institutional responses. While media influence does not directly cause serial killing, it can contribute to the normalization of extreme deviance and reinforce violent identities.

Finally, while this work emphasized the positivist approach, it also considered the social constructionist perspective, which highlights how societal reactions, labelling processes, and cultural narratives influence the perception and identity of serial killers. The interaction between structural social factors and individual experiences demonstrates the complexity of serial murder as a sociological phenomenon.

In sum, this essay has demonstrated that serial killing is a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple sociological risk factors rather than a singular cause. Early childhood socialization, family dysfunction, long-term trauma, media influence, exposure to violence, and, to a lesser extent, socio-economic conditions all play a role in shaping the development and actions of serial killers. This challenges traditional criminological perspectives, which focus solely on psychological or biological explanations, emphasizing instead the broader social conditions that contribute to serial murder. Furthermore, by incorporating both positivist and constructionist perspectives, this review of the literature illustrates that serial killing is not only shaped by structural factors but also how deviance is socially constructed, labelled, and understood. By

situating serial killing within the context of deviance, identity formation, and societal reactions, this critical review of the literature contributes to the sociological understanding of extreme criminal behaviour.

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