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Q&A

Pioneering FBI Profiler Answers Questions About Serial Killers

By James L. Knoll IV, MD and Robert R. (Roy) Hazelwood, MS | 2012-01-20 21:09:00.0



An Introduction by Editor in Chief, James L. Knoll IV, MD

One of the things I value about forensic psychiatry is the opportunity for collaboration and “cross training” with other disciplines. Some of the best cross training I’ve had the good fortune to receive has come from one of the original FBI profilers. In this age of “profiling” shows and TV “talking heads,” there are but a *very few* legitimate experts who have the requisite knowledge, training and experience in behavioral analysis and offender profiling. To say that Roy Hazelwood is an encyclopedia of such knowledge would be understatement. Whenever I spend a mere hour with him, I come away with the distinct impression that I have absorbed a month’s worth of knowledge.

Robert R. (Roy) Hazelwood, MS (FBI ret) spent 22 years as a Supervisory Agent with the Behavioral Science Unit, FBI Academy in Quantico, Va, and is generally regarded as the pioneer of profiling sexual predators. He also has a background in forensic medicine from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. Mr Hazelwood has interviewed incarcerated sexual offenders and many of their wives and girlfriends, and has conducted extensive research on violent crimes. He is widely published, and his books—*The Evil That Men Do* and *Dark Dreams*—have been [well received by the lay public](#).¹ He currently works for [The Academy Group, Inc](#), the world’s largest privately owned forensic behavioral science firm.² He now gives lectures across the country on a variety of topics, including sexual sadism, autoerotic fatalities, and the spouses of sexually sadistic serial predators.³

Here Mr Hazelwood answers questions about serial murderers that are commonly posed to him. The term “serial murderer” (or “serial killer”) was not even a part of the forensic lexicon until the 1970s, when it was popularized by one of Mr Hazelwood’s FBI Behavioral Science Unit colleagues, Robert Ressler. Most proposed definitions of serial murder share the following elements in common: (1) there have been at least 3 victims, (2) victims are killed in a non-continuous fashion (ie, there is an emotional “cooling-off” period between murders), and (3) the murders usually involve a sexual component.⁴⁻⁶ Now on to the forensic and behavioral insights of one the world’s leading experts on sexual predators.

[Answers to Questions About Serial Killers, With Roy Hazelwood, MS \(FBI ret.\)](#)

[See next page . . .](#)

[Editor’s note: Comment insertions by Dr Knoll are noted with "JK."]



Roy Hazelwood: Occasionally, I am asked questions by police, mental health workers, or academics. Here are my responses to some of the more commonly asked questions.

Q. What are your thoughts on the motivations of serial killers such as Dennis Rader [aka, BTK, short for “Bind, Torture, Kill”] and Joel Rifkin? What drives them to kill in your experience?

A. The motivations vary with each killer, but in my opinion the underlying motivation for all sexual crimes is power, anger, or a combination of the two.

Q. Are serial killers legally insane? Why or why not?

A. Insanity is a *legal* term and psychosis is a *medical* term. Not all persons with psychosis are insane, but practically all legally insane people have psychosis at the time of the offense. Fewer than 3% of all violent crimes are carried out by persons with a psychosis. I don’t know the exact percentage of violent crimes that are carried out by serial killers, but it has to be very small. In my experience, very few serial killers have been insane.

As to why, a serious psychosis is too disorganizing and debilitating an illness to permit the type of behavior we see in serial killers. For example, it logically flows that those who are truly legally insane are caught shortly after their first murder and before they can ever engage in serial murder (ie, 3 or more victims). An offender who is genuinely psychotic commits a dramatically “disorganized” murder and consequently leaves a great deal of evidence that results in rapid identification and arrest. Of course, the golden rule of “there are no absolutes” applies here.

Q. Serial killers are often referred to as monsters by the media. Is that an accurate depiction in your opinion? How so?

A. When I teach “profiling,” I tell my students that when referring to sexual killers, they are not to use the following terms in my class: “pervert,” “weirdo,” “wacko,” “monster,” “sicko,” or my favorite Texas word (I’m from Texas), “Sumbitch”—regardless of the type of crime(s) the killer has committed. My reasoning is that when they use those terms to describe the offender, they have begun the process of structuring a mindset as to the type of person they are looking for.

In reality, an offender may be a person studying to become a doctor (Craiglist Killer) or a lawyer (Ted Bundy) or a police officer (Gerard Schaefer). So no, I don’t believe that “monster” is a descriptor that should be used because the person then applies his or her idea of what a “monster” looks or behaves like and consequently, when the offender is identified, the public is shocked at how “normal” he appears

Q. What was the nature of your involvement in the case of Dennis Rader (BTK)?

A. My involvement occurred on 2 occasions. I provided 2 “profiles” of the unidentified killer. The first was in 1978. It was given to detectives while I was in Wichita, Kan. The second was given at Quantico on October 25, 1981, to a Wichita detective, and it was tape-recorded and transcribed. John Douglas (another FBI agent) and Pierce Brooks (retired LAPD sergeant of homicide and the man who conceived the FBI’s VICAP—Violent Criminal Apprehension Program) also participated in the roundtable discussion.

After the arrest of Rader, the Wichita police invited me to examine the evidence seized from Rader. The sheer volume of the seized materials was staggering. [JK: See our publication exploring the case of Rader.⁷]

Q. Why do serial killers such as BTK sometimes contact the press and/or law enforcement following their murders? What needs does it fill or what gratification does it give them?

A. Rader is a person who has several personality disorders, one of which is *malignant narcissism*. I teach that this is the Achilles heel of many serial killers. [JK: *The syndrome of malignant narcissism has been defined as consisting of (1) narcissistic personality disorder, (2) severe antisocial behavior, (3) significant paranoid traits, and (4) ego-syntonic aggression.*⁸]

Think about it—Rader was “home free.” He was not a suspect, and he was no longer killing. Then Robert Beattie wrote *Nightmare in Wichita: The Hunt for the BTK Strangler* and gave a press conference in which he was asked about BTK. Beattie said that he was either in prison or an institution or was dead. Rader’s personality could not allow this to pass. He began to communicate with the media (he sent a photocopy of a murder victim’s driver’s license and a copy of photos he had taken of another murder victim). That was the beginning of his downfall.

This type of contact accomplishes several things for the killer. First, it allows him to brag. Up to this time, Rader was the only one who knew what he had done. BTK had 3 secrets: (1) what actually happened during the crime, (2) whether the killer was alive or dead, and (3) who committed the crimes. Keeping a secret is no fun unless you can share it. In Rader’s case, he shared 2 of his 3 secrets—the killer took pictures, and the killer was still alive and living in the area. What remained a secret was the identity of the killer.

Second, it validates his sense of superiority over society in general and police in particular. Third, it reignites the fear and emotional trauma in the community, giving him a tremendous sense of power. Finally, it allows him to read about himself on an almost daily basis (the media revives the case by rewriting old stories; reinterviewing friends and neighbors of previous murder victims; interviewing experts from the mental health, law enforcement, and academic professions, etc).

Q. Why do some serial killers become high-profile media celebrities or pop culture icons? Why is the general public so fascinated with serial killers, whether real ones like BTK or fictional ones like Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*?

A. There are probably several reasons: (1) the public’s fascination with violence (How many cars slow down at traffic accidents? Not all are trying to help.), (2) the public’s fascination with dangerous predators (human and animal), (3) the media’s hunger to feed the public’s fascination and simultaneously obtain high scores in media ratings, and (4) there are some people who are fascinated by corresponding with or meeting such offenders. Here I am referring to individuals who correspond not to learn, but to brag, about the relationship.

I am aware of some women who have claimed to have “fallen in love” with these men, believing them to be “misunderstood.” It has been my general experience that, sadly, many of these individuals have low self-esteem. By interacting with serial killers, they fulfill a need for attention. Others may experience a perverse enjoyment in becoming “vicariously” involved with the offenders’ crimes.

Q. What do you think about the premise that serial killers may elicit both fear and excitement in a person similar to roller coasters at amusement parks?

A. There is no question that a sense of fear and excitement is what attracts some people to “reach out” to serial killers in one way or another. But let’s look at true fear elicited by serial killers. During BTK’s reign of terror, many people locked themselves in their homes and refused to go out alone. [JK:

Residents in a community exposed to serial murder may even experience posttraumatic stress symptoms for varying periods of time.^{9]}

During the DC Sniper Case, there were 2 shootings in a particular community south of Washington, DC. The local paper reported on a woman who dressed herself and her small son in camouflaged clothing until the sniper was caught. Another woman, apparently shopping, was observed crouched over and running from her car into a toy store. She explained that her purpose was to minimize the possibility of being shot.

For others, there is a true sense of excitement. I again refer you to what happens when there is an accident involving fatalities. Many people stop—some to help—but most actually want to see the carnage (I experienced this first hand when I was in the military police in the Army).

As for fear and excitement combined—Why do people like horror films or go to watch tigers at the zoo? *Shark Week* is a very popular TV program/series.¹⁰ What's the commonality? These are among the most dangerous predators on the planet, and one can get very close to danger without actually being killed. It may be difficult for some to accept, but I can tell you that I interviewed 4 women who participated in murders with their sadistic, predatory husbands. Every one of them admitted to being afraid of the killer—and yet aroused by the acts.

Q. Perhaps serial killers cause us to reflect on our own individual potential to commit unspeakable acts of violence. For example, a person might make himself or herself feel better by thinking, “I’m bad, but I’m not THAT bad!” Can that help explain part of the public’s fascination?

A. It's not something my work has led me to study. I'd best leave that to the sociologists, criminologists, and psychiatrists.

[JK: See Zimbardo,¹¹ Baumeister,¹² and others¹³ on the notion that giving “evil” a distinct face gratifies our need to project and rigidly separate ourselves from badness. When a bright line separating good from evil has been illuminated, society may “take comfort in the illusion that such a line constrains crossovers in either direction.”¹⁰ On the other hand, our desire to know the “face of evil” conflicts with our desire to keep it at least partially obscured. Note that “humanizing” a monster “makes him less compelling as the embodiment of evil.”¹⁴ The “celebrity status” of serial killers in culture reflects such contradictory desires.¹⁵ The public is repulsed by their deviance, yet attracted by the vicarious thrill and tension. The tension between the killer’s outer normalcy and inner deviance elicits much fascination. Finally, there is the comforting dénouement to the societal morality play—the killer is an “alien” aberration, whose detection has made society a much safer place.]

Q. What do you think of the premise that serial killers may actually serve a function in society by clarifying the moral boundaries between “good and evil,” or “man and monster”?

A. I don't believe they help clarify the moral boundaries. The proof of this lies in the many other cruel and depraved acts committed by people that result in those boundaries being continually crossed in countless ways (eg, the non-physically violent pedophile, the female teacher who molests her students, or the person who abuses animals).

For more on Roy Hazelwood, see his [video on ritualistic serial rapists](#).

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