

Running Head: POGO THE CLOWN

The Criminological Dissection of Pogo the Clown

Brandon Rodriguez

PBJ 312: Homicide and Lethal Weapon

Dr. Jaclyn Schildkraut

SUNY Oswego

Introduction

John Wayne Gacy Jr. is a name that lives in infamy in the study of American serial killers. His diabolic means of murder and numerous victims makes Gacy a fascinating subject when attempting to understand the pathology of a serial murderer. This paper will analyze the contextual factors surrounding Gacy's murders and the psychological factors that may have contributed to his offending, such as paraphilia. Certain theoretical principles of homicide will also be used to analyze John Wayne Gacy's murder motivations, including Hirschi's social control theory, frustration-aggression hypothesis, and psychosexual aggression (Fox, Levin, & Quinet, 2012). Hypothetical strategies for interviewing Gacy will also be discussed. This paper aims at presenting comprehensive analyses of Gacy's offending and motivation to better grasp the phenomena of serial murder.

Background

In order to fully understand John Wayne Gacy's homicidal intent one must look into his early childhood. His early childhood was filled with both physical and mental abuse from his father, John Gacy Sr. Gacy's father was a severe alcoholic and was disappointed in his son for his lack of masculinity ("John Wayne Gacy Biography," 2015). At a young age, Gacy preferred gardening and cooking, which was synonymous with feminine roles rather than fishing, sports, or other typically male activities ("John Wayne Gacy Biography," 2015). Due to this, Gacy would often be berated and abused by his father. Gacy was struggling with his sexual identity from a young age, but he moved to Illinois, married, and had a family to conceal his homosexual desires ("John Wayne Gacy Biography," 2015). Despite the layers of concealment, Gacy shrouded around himself through his heterosexual family life, he succumbed to his homosexual desires when he sodomized a young boy ("John Wayne Gacy Biography," 2015). He was

convicted for 10 years in state prison but only served 18 months (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). During Gacy’s incarceration, his father died of cirrhosis of the liver due to his drinking problem (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). Upon learning of his father’s death, Gacy seemed to snap, believing his father died from the shame of Gacy’s conviction of sodomy (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). He grew violent towards other inmates and repressed his sexual desires for young males further (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015).

After release, Gacy moved to Chicago and attempted to restart his life, becoming a highly respected member of the community (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). He was a successful businessman with his own construction company and had close ties to community leaders and political figures (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). Gacy hosted block parties as well, where he dressed up as Pogo the Clown for children (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). Pogo the Clown was a character Gacy donned to obtain the trust and respect of his community.

In an interview, Gacy recounted how when he wore his costume, it regressed him to a childlike state (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). Despite Gacy’s exterior success, behind closed doors, he would lure young men and boys to his home where he restrained, raped, and murdered them (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). Gacy recounted committing his murders in his Pogo the Clown costume, providing the ghastly image of a killer clown that people associate Gacy with today (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). Gacy’s murder track lasted for six years without drawing substantial suspicion from authorities or associates. That ended when he raped and murdered a young man who was well known and respected in the community. The boy was last seen with Gacy, which invoked law enforcement to investigate and eventually uncover the vast amount of victims buried under Gacy’s home (“John Wayne Gacy

Biography,” 2015). Authorities concluded John Wayne Gacy’s murder spree lasted from 1972 to 1978 in which he amassed a victim count of 33 boys and young men (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). Analyzing John Wayne Gacy Jr.’s biography identifies key aspects to assessing his psychological profile.

Psychological Assessment

The Pogo the Clown persona is a prime example of John Wayne Gacy’s ability to manipulate the individuals with whom he interacted. His ability to coerce and charm was so sharp that parents enthusiastically allowed Gacy to interact with their children (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). John Wayne Gacy’s manipulatively charming nature, heinous offending, and subsequent lack of remorse for his crimes are indicative of an antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) (Hatchett, 2015). John Wayne Gacy exhibited personality characteristics in tune with ASPD, such as superficial charm. This was indicative through his ability to gain his victims’ trust and use it to his advantage to bind, rape, and kill them (Hatchett, 2015).

Gacy also had emotional instability, another characteristic of ASPD, within his marriages that lead to the degradation of the relationships (Hatchett, 2015). His feelings of grandiosity and lack of remorse could be detailed in the video recorded interviews with Gacy while he was in custody. He discussed the murders with no emotional sentiment, rather in a laundry list type fashion, lending to the distance he felt towards his actions (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). His inflated ego fit his desire to hold positions of authority. “It was a means by which he gained control of others”, stated an associate of Gacy’s (“John Wayne Gacy Biography,” 2015). These sensibilities for manipulation and a blatant disregard for human life are indicative of an anti-social personality disorder. The onset of the disorder is also categorized with child abuse

and parent related alcohol abuse (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). John Wayne Gacy's pathology, coupled with his potential ASPD, could be explained by three theories of offender motivation: frustration-aggression, social control theory, and the psychosexual aggression theory.

Frustration-Aggression & Self Control Theory

Testimonials from John Wayne Gacy's family and friends provided in-depth analyses of his early childhood. Video recorded interviews were not essentially psychologically based but provided some insight into his cognitive functioning. From his early childhood, Gacy was abused by his father for his inability to conform to typical "boy activities" ("John Wayne Gacy Biography," 2015). This time period was probably the beginning of John Wayne Gacy discovering his difference with other boys and perhaps his attraction to them. This created an unpleasant state of mind where he was unable to meet his sexual desires. Essentially, this was a frustrating circumstance that can be explained in part by the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Fox et al., 2012). The frustration-aggression hypothesis states that when a desired goal is interfered with by some perceived or real circumstance an individual will develop hostile thoughts and/or actions from being barred from obtaining said goal (Fox et al., 2012). This frustration rose from the unattainability of accepting his sexual identity and desires created the first tier of Gacy's aggressive complex. His father's violent disapproval caused him to suppress his emotions further resulting in subsequent repression of his aggression (Fox et al., 2012).

The frustration-aggression hypothesis further explains the reason why Gacy did not act out on his aggressions, which are the controlling factors in his life (Fox et al., 2012). His familial bonds and fear of his father may have limited his aggressive reactions earlier in his childhood. The hypothesis further postulates that aggressive outbursts are more likely to occur when the individual feels they can get away with the action (Fox et al., 2012). This perhaps explains why

Gacy's murders occurred primarily when his wife divorced him. He no longer had a substantial restrictive factor in his life that prohibited him from engaging in his aggressive intent. The self-control theory corroborates this point positing that an individual's pathway to offending is measured in the "salience" of societal bonds at the time of the offending decision (Morris, Gerber, & Menard, 2011). Although serial killers can exhibit abilities to self regulate through their calculative tactics and cooling off periods, it is not a profound indication of impulse control (Fox et al., 2012). The self-control theory explains the lack of impulse control as an absence or degradation of parameters that negates the will to kill in the occurrence of a murder (Morris et al., 2011). To exemplify, Gacy's ties were stronger in the moment to his family than to his desire to murder. Once Gacy's salient bond to his family dispersed, the motivation for self-control was abated and he succumbed to his innate aggression (Morris et al., 2011). A separate perspective that correlates with the frustration-aggression hypothesis and self-control theory is the psychosexual perspective of aggression (Knight, 2007).

Psychosexual Aggression Perspective

Fundamentally, John Wayne Gacy's murders are considerably corresponding with what current research holds about serial murder, that is they are in part sexually motivated (Fox et al., 2012). This sexual motivation is clearly present in Gacy's murders; he restrained, tormented, and raped his victims ("John Wayne Gacy Biography," 2015). His acts were primarily sexually motivated as the principal action was the sexual thrill he received from the fear he instilled and the control he held over his victims. Many sexually motivated serial killers begin, as Gacy did, as sex offenders (Knight, 2007). Knight also provides that, "the sexual nature of the crime, which may or may not be explicit, is perverse and sadistic and reflects an aggression that is particularly destructive, pathological and rooted in violent fantasies that are acted out on the victim" (2006,

p. 1189). This definition astutely fits the typology of Gacy's homicide methods as seen in the torture of his victims. He often stuffed his victims' underwear and other clothes in their mouths as he sodomized them with various sex toys, and he eventually suffocated them through the use of a tourniquet ("John Wayne Gacy Biography," 2015). This highlights the pervasiveness, sadism, destructive aggression, and violent fantasies he played out on his victims. The acts become a means of release to the killer, where the compulsion is so intense that it demands resolution (Knight, 2007). This may present itself as a defense to the offender's responsibility in his actions; however, Knight's research indicates murder is a yield to the offender's desires rather than a diminished capacity of control (Knight, 2007). The offender is still cognizant of the right and wrong of their actions but disregards it to appease the sexual tension (Knight, 2007). Gacy was a willing killer with certain psychological affinities and trauma that preceded his murderous intent. However, this did not diminish his culpability in his actions.

Interviewing Strategies

John Wayne Gacy was an interesting serial killer, although he almost precisely fit the typical mold of serial killer characteristics. Given the analysis conducted on his psyche and pathology of murder, interviewing this subject would be a difficult task. Gacy's hypothetical diagnosis of ASPD would present many challenges to obtaining cohesive and accurate information from him. The significant issues would be his manipulative nature, callousness towards his crimes, and overall grandiosity ("John Wayne Gacy Biography," 2015). To approach this subject would be difficult since counseling professionals have still not developed an effective means of treating ASPD (Hatchett, 2015). Many treatment options can cause or exacerbate symptoms of a psychological illness depending on the therapy practices making the management of this disorder much more difficult (Hatchett, 2015). From a research perspective,

it would be best to allow Gacy to control the dialogue. His heightened ego would prove difficult to battle against (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). His manipulative nature may cause him to embellish or downplay certain scenarios to fit his motivations (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Whether he desired to seem like the victim or justified in his actions would determine his responses. It is best to stick to the objectivity of his responses rather than the tone or direction he chose to answer the questions in (Douglas, 2007).

The challenging but revealing personality characteristic of lack of guilt/remorse would prove most useful when discussing Gacy's motivations, mind state, method, and attitudes towards his victims (Douglas, 2007). Essentially his inability to identify with his victims in an emotional capacity would allow the researcher to obtain objective information rather easily when the subject feels in control of the situation (Douglas, 2007). Although his manipulative nature would draw question into anything he remarked, it is best to develop the same rigidity to the actions and play along with his motives to obtain information on his crimes (Douglas, 2007). Developing rapport with the offender by controlling discomfort and other emotional responses to the actions of the murderer would ease the interview (Douglas, 2007). By putting oneself in the offender's perspective, it may allow them to believe they were justified in their actions (Douglas, 2007). This will put them at ease and allow the suspect to open up about their crimes more readily (Douglas, 2007).

Conclusion

John Wayne Gacy endured a harsh childhood and had a perceived anti-social personality disorder. Through the evaluation of his life and murder through various theories, certain theoretical conclusions have been made. His actions were heinous yet very cohesive with serial killings (Fox et al., 2012). His murders were classified as a combination of frustration-

aggression, self control, and psycho-sexual aggression principles of offending (Fox et al., 2012; Knight, 2007; Morris et al., 2011). Gacy was an opportune specimen for studying serial homicide because he was captured alive and in-depth insight into his early life and crimes provided the foundation for the correlation of his actions with psychological, social, and motivational theories. The examination of these theories through the lens of Gacy's offending is indicative of his detachment from societal bonds, susceptibility to his sexual-aggression, and severe lack of remorse. In sum, the sexual aggression Gacy faced, coupled with his psychological trauma from youth, suppression of sexual identity, breakdown of social controls, and antisocial personality disorder created the infamous monster that once allured children as Pogo the Clown.

References

- Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5* (5th ed.). (2013). Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association.
- Douglas, J. (2007). Interviewing murderers and suspects: Learning about the crime and the killer. *The Forensic Examiner*, 16(2), 44-47.
- Fox, J., Levin, J., & Quinet, K. (2012). *The will to kill: Making sense of senseless murder* (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.
- Hatchett, G. T. (2015). Treatment guidelines for clients with antisocial personality disorder. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 37(1), 15-27.
- John Wayne Gacy Biography. (2015). Retrieved November 12, 2015, from <http://www.biography.com/people/john-wayne-gacy-10367544>
- Knight, Z. G. (2006). Some thoughts on the psychological roots of the behavior of serial killers as narcissists: An object relations perspective. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, 34, 1189-1206.
- Knight, Z. G. (2007). Sexually motivated serial killers and the psychology of aggression and "evil" within a contemporary psychoanalytical perspective. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 13(1), 21-35.
- Morris, R., Gerber, J., & Menard, S. (2011). Social Bonds, Self-Control, and Adult Criminality: A Nationally Representative Assessment of Hirschi's Revised Self-Control Theory. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 38(6), 584-599.