ANATOMY OF A CANNIBAL
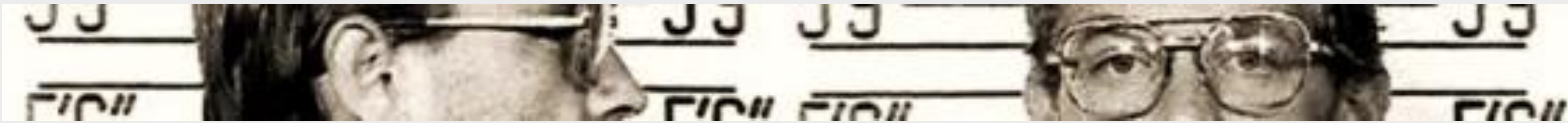## A Psychiatric Portrait of Jeffrey Dahmer

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Jeffrey Dahmer, as most serial killers, instills a morbid curiosity which aims to explain the heinous crimes committed, which include murder, dismemberment, rape and cannibalism. A tendency to attribute posthumous psychiatric diagnosis through retrospective study has flourished recently in an attempt to explain and explore what mechanisms underlie such behaviours. Prior to trial, Dahmer´s mental status and competency were up for debate, with various psychological evaluations carried out, ultimately deeming him legally sane. Of the various evaluations, a unique constellation of symptoms suggestive of mental illness having been revealed with various psychopathological states have been attributed to Dahmer, spanning from alcoholism, to paraphilia, namely, necrophilia, to a mixed personality disorder with sadistic, obsessive, fetishistic, and antisocial features as well as the hypothesis of Asperger´s syndrome. Through this case, the authors aim to explore the available literature concerning the eventual role of psychopathology in the etiology of serial murder.

Introduction and Context

Jeffrey Dahmer, also baptized by the media as the "Milwaukee Cannibal" due to his affinity for ingesting human flesh, was a serial murderer and sexual offender that was responsible for the death and dismemberment of 17 boys and men between 1978 and 1991. Dahmer was convicted of 16 of those murders and received a life sentence for each in 1992, culminating in 941 years, after he was classified as legally sane enough to participate in a trial.

Profiling, especially retroactive psychopathological profiling, has flourished recently as an attempt to explain and explore mechanisms and associated risk factors associated with some of the most heinous criminal acts. Taking into consideration the uniqueness of the Dahmer case, it is no surprise that he was the target of various attempts at posthumous diagnosis.

Dahmer's case is unique in the sense that he did not adhere to what is generally imagined as the typical serial killer's path in development, execution and victimology.

His childhood was marked by a relatively normal upbringing and development until the age of 6, when he underwent hernia surgery. From this age, social difficulties and withdrawal were noticed by his parents, namely his father Lionel Dahmer. The family environment was strained by constant conflict between the parents which ultimately led to their divorce. His younger years were marked by negligence, due to his father's distance as well as his mother's unstable mental health.

By the age of 13, Dahmer began abusing alcohol which resulted in conflict with his father as well as his being sent to the Army, and ultimate discharge. Of the MacDonald Triad of serial killers, although formally not exhibiting any of these, Dahmer did manifest a fascination with dead animals, dissecting those that he found as roadkill. At 18, he committed his first murder.

The conjunction of these factors, might have made part of a recipe that ended up in the unprecedented case of the horrors that occurred in apartment 213.

Proposed Psychopathological Profiles

Dahmer was subject to psychiatric evaluation as part of the attempt to invoke the *insanity defense* due in part to the nature of the crimes for which he was being tried. In addition to the formal psychiatric evaluations carried out during the court trial, various studies have attempted to retroactively diagnose and explore eventual existence of psychopathology in Jeffrey Dahmer. Expert opinions on whether or not he was legally insane were divided.

Of these evaluations, based on interviews with Dahmer and others posthumous, various diagnosis were proposed, including: **borderline personality disorder, substance use disorder (alcoholism), psychotic disorder, schizotypal personality disorder and necrophilia**. Although various diagnosis were proposed, he was not found *not guilty by reason of insanity.* This was mainly due to the maintenance of his comprehension of the legal and moral wrongfulness of his acts and the steps he took to hide his crimes, as well as his tendency to plan the murders beforehand, proving the crimes were not impulsive and uncontrollable acts in the context of mental illness.

Another recent study, proposed that Dahmer was most likely on the autistic spectrum, namely with the proposal of him having Asperger's Disorder.

"I know I was sick or evil, or both"
- Jeffrey Dahmer

Trauma in childhood could underlie the development of unstable moods and lack of emotional regulation, and the childhood neglect in the context of significant life events might generate sentiments of inferiority and social withdrawal.

Dahmer was different in many ways to other infamous serial killers, one of which was by his transparency in telling the authorities of the victims and the crimes, with no compulsion to keep secrets. When classifying Dahmer in terms of serial killer type, he was a lust murderer and hedonic serial murderer. He was afflicted with a perfect storm of psychological and personality disorders, as well as severe social skill deficits that aided him in his pathway to murder.

Conclusion

Throughout history, people have maintained a fascination with serial killers, with numerous books, documentaries, television series and films dedicated to the topic. This fascination could stem from the inability to comprehend what drives a human to kill other humans. Areas of sociology, criminology, psychology and psychiatry have dedicated attention to serial murderers, especially through the application of retrospective studies and profiles, exploring biopsychosocial factors as well as eventual existence of psychopathology so as to understand the origins, risk factors associated with these crimes so as to ideally develop and implement preventive strategies so as to save lives. Attempting to understand Dahmer, could aid in these strategies.

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