



LW2 Giving Voice to a Serial Killer: Clinical Implications

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn how the use of a guided autobiography, which identifies developmental factors in extreme offenders, helped to structure a killer's self-report and ultimately benefited criminology and law enforcement.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating to the forensic community a layered approach to extreme offenders that affirms overlooked methods for identifying subtle but important dimensions of behavior.

Since the 19th century, mental health professionals have sorted through multiple factors that seem to set an individual on a violent path. Around 1830, these specialists began to collectively systematize their knowledge. Later that century, French pathologist Alexandre Lacassagne urged offenders to ponder their lives and acts in writing.¹ He instigated "criminal autobiographies," hoping to identify common and unique developmental factors. Although self-report has its limitations, it can also be data-rich, especially when coupled with observation. Lacassagne used it as a tool for greater comprehension.²

In 1930, Karl Berg interviewed serial killer Peter Kürten before his execution. Kürten confessed freely, which became the basis for Berg's now-classic book, *Der Sadist*.³ Berg's guided interviews and analytical observations became a model for other professionals.

Lacassagne and Berg inspired an approach to the "Bind, Torture, Kill (B.T.K.)" serial killer, Dennis Rader, for specific types of questions to guide his life story. The goal was to provide insight for law enforcement, criminologists, and psychologists. Although Rader gave a lengthy confession to the police, they were interested primarily in the facts of each incident. They did not seek to understand or contextualize him with what is known about such offenders. They also paid little attention to his confession behavior.

There's a clear difference between the facts of a case and the way killers tell their story. Lacassagne and Berg both noted this. They retrieved important information about motives, pre- and post-crime behavior, fantasies, compartmentalized personalities, and the role of mental deviance and disorder.

However, an insight about self-reflection described by Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard suggests a different kind of "data-mining" that few criminologists are trained to exploit. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard described the difference between the *what* and the *how*, as well as how the latter shapes the former: "An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming; the actual existing subjective thinker constantly reproduces this existential situation in his thoughts, and translates all his thinking into terms of process."⁴ Today, the clinical and research communities identify this as cognitive bias. Always present, it sheds as much light on individuals' traits and behaviors as does what they state in their self-narratives.⁵

Even those offenders who make an honest effort to study themselves, Kierkegaard would say, cannot fully grasp all aspects of their experience. Their "pre-reflective engagement" (the "how") is infused with their idiosyncratic manner of experiencing. They can describe certain things but will inevitably have blind spots. Within these blind spots are revelatory aspects of personality.

Rader's narrative was partially structured with the psychological methods that Lacassagne, Berg, and Kierkegaard laid out. He was quite expressive, but his use of language, aimed to control his world, blocked him from noticing his own behaviors and attitudes that were nevertheless apparent to an observer. Several are described in this presentation.

In conclusion, there is more to an offender's story than what he might say, no matter how verbal. To give Rader his voice for a book about his life, earlier work has set a precedent for the type of observation and questioning used. This approach will benefit law enforcement, criminology, and psychology.

Reference(s):

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2. Starr, D. (2010). *The Killer of Little Shepherds*. New York, NY: Knopf
3. Berg, K. (1945). *The Sadist: An Account of the Crimes of Serial Killer Peter Kürten: A Study In Sadism*. London: Heineman.
4. Kierkegaard, S. (1846, 1974). Swenson, David F. & Lowrie, Walter, trans. *Concluding unscientific postscript*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p 79.
5. Breitmeyer, B. (2010). *Blindspots: The Many Ways We Cannot See*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
6. Forensic Interview, Serial Killer, Criminal Autobiography