
THE MAKING OF A MONSTER: CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND THE LEGAL BATTLE BEHIND JEFFREY DAHMER'S CRIME

Anushka Bhogle, Shri. Jayantilal H. Patel Law College (Mumbai University)

Riya Joshi, Shri. Jayantilal H. Patel Law College (Mumbai University)

ABSTRACT

This research examines how the criminal behavior of Jeffrey Dahmer, a notorious serial killer was influenced by childhood trauma, emotional neglect, and ineffective parenting. By analyzing Jeffrey's early life using criminological and psychological theories such as Social Learning Theory, Attachment Theory, and Trauma Theory. This study explores the link between childhood trauma and Jeffrey's criminal behavior and his descent into violence.

The study discusses mens rea (criminal intent), defense of insanity, and victim selection in Dahmer's case. Addressing, why despite clear signs of severe psychological disorders, Jeffrey was held legally sane at the time of his crimes, by the court. Sparking a discussion on the adequacy of the legal system in handling mental health issues in criminal cases. Further, the study also highlights how systematic flaws in law enforcement specifically racial and socio-economic bias, allowed Dahmer to go undetected for years.

Lastly, it addresses the issue of prison safety. Particularly in light of Jeffrey Dahmer's in-custody death, which raised concerns and discussion about the protection, and safety of inmates and the responsibilities of correctional institutions in managing high-profile offenders.

Keywords: childhood trauma, criminal intent, mens rea, mental illness, murder

Introduction:

On May 21, 1960, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the notorious cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer was born. Dahmer shifted from being a cheerful and active youngster to becoming uninterested in his pastimes and socially withdrawn following his double hernia surgery. Dahmer's early life along with his growing interest in death was characterized by emotional neglect and family instability which foreshadowed his later criminal actions.

Between 1978 and 1991 Dahmer methodically selected young men of African and Asian descent and manipulated them to enter his house under different deceptive scenarios. His intense need for dominance and ownership through acts that included sexual assault and murder followed by dismemberment, necrophilia, and cannibalism exposed the monstrous nature of his deeds. His monstrous attempts to create subdued "companions" by drilling holes into his victims' skulls and administering chemical substances made his pathological behavior more evident.

Not only did Dahmer's case permanently alter criminal history, but it also brought up important legal issues about the structural inadequacies in the police force, criminal culpability, and the defense of insanity. This study critically evaluates the way the justice system handled this case and examines how early trauma affected him and his criminal trajectory. By examining his early life, psychological profile, and behavioral patterns, we gain insight into the intersection of trauma, neglect, and legal responsibility in serial murder cases.

Research Questions:

1. Did childhood trauma influence Jeffrey Dahmer's future killing?
2. How do legal principles, such as the insanity defense and mens rea, apply to Jeffrey Dahmer's case?

Childhood Trauma

Childhood Trauma is a spectrum of traumatic events during the initial years of an individual's life. Such as sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction. Child traumatic stress, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

(SAMHSA), is when children and adolescents experience “traumatic events or traumatic situations that overwhelm their ability to cope”.¹

Traumatic events are those experiences where an individual (child) has to face a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child’s life or physical safety. If a child is exposed to such traumatic events regularly then it can have a severe long-term impact on their physical and mental well-being.

Dahmer’s Childhood and development of criminal behavior

Jeffrey Dahmer’s transformation from victim to offender can be analyzed through various criminological and psychological theories. During, the formative years of his life he was affected by instability, emotional neglect, sexual assault, and social isolation which had a significant impact on his psychological development. Jeffrey’s father Lionel was often absent due to work obligations. Whereas his mother Joyce, was mentally and emotionally unstable exhibiting erratic behavior and relying heavily on medications. Jeffrey had a disrupted family life which left him emotionally neglected. His later crimes may have been influenced by his exposure to violence regardless if it was his own experiences or his growing fascination with death.

As per Social learning theory, individuals tend to attain behavior through observation, which could imply that they might have adopted some of the same behavioral patterns as their parents. Dahmer inability to form healthy relationships, emotional detachment, and social isolation might have stemmed from a lack of stable caregiving from his parents during the primitive years of his life as per the Attachment theory. At age six, Jeffrey underwent hernia surgery after which he withdrew from society. According to his father Lionel, Jeffrey was allegedly sexually assaulted at age eight by a neighborhood boy. His later psychological and behavioral development could have been influenced by this extremely traumatic event. Early abuse and neglect can lead to dissociation and a cycle of violence as per the trauma theory.

As a child, Dahmer was interested in animals. Later, he started developing a fascination with dead animals. His father, Lionel, unintentionally fueled his grim curiosity by instructing him

¹ Schlesinger, L. B. (1998). *The Psychiatric Aspects of Criminal Behavior*. Psychiatric Clinics of North America. Masters, B. (1993). *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer*. Hodder & Stoughton. Davis, D. (1992). *The Milwaukee Murders: Nightmare in Apartment 213*. St. Martin’s Press.

on how to bleach and dissolve animal flesh. This made it easier for Jeffrey to desensitize and objectify animals and later humans. The neutralization theory explains that criminals justify their actions to suppress guilt. Dahmer used to justify his killings by viewing his victims as objects rather than human beings.²

Legal Considerations in Dahmer's

Jeffrey Dahmer was charged with the horrifying murders of 16 people and was arrested in 1991. In hopes of convincing the court to accept an insanity plea, Dahmer's defense team claimed³ that he was mentally ill and therefore unable to control his actions. However, the⁴ prosecution provided a horrifying picture of Dahmer's crimes, demonstrating how carefully he seduced his victims and executed the killings, and evidence of concealment showed his complete awareness of his crimes. Dahmer's claim of insanity was eventually dismissed by the jury, concluding that he was legally sane and fully responsible for his actions. As a result, he was sentenced to 16 life sentences, amounting to an absurd 941 years in prison.

Insanity Defense

Jeffrey Dahmer's defense counsel's legal strategy relied heavily on the insanity plea, arguing that his unstable mental health prevented him from exercising self-control over his actions. They claimed that his inability to suppress his urges or fully understand the consequences of his actions led him to commit horrifying crimes. The legal counsel's goal was to convince the court that Jeffrey should not be held legally liable due to his mental state.

The prosecution countered this plea with substantial evidence demonstrating Dahmer's intentional approach to his crimes. They focused on how he carefully lured his victims, executed the murders with precision, and took calculated steps to conceal his actions. These actions proved that he was fully capable of making sane decisions and understanding the wickedness of his actions. According to Bennett, "Dahmer's effort to avoid detection and his methodological approach to murder strongly suggested that he knew what he was doing was

² Widom, C. S. (1989). The Cycle of Violence. *Science*, 244(4901), 160-166.

³ Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Prentice Hall.

⁴ Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss*. Basic Books.

wrong, negating the legal definition of insanity.”

To determine if a defendant qualifies as legally sane, tests like M’Naghten and Model Penal Code (MPC) tests are used in the United States. These set standards need proof that the individual is suffering from a mental illness that either hinders them from understanding their actions or from differentiating right from wrong. Nevertheless, Jeffrey’s actions failed to fit these criteria, as he exhibited control, intent, and awareness of his crimes. According to Linder’s notes, “Dahmer’s ability to plan, cover up his crimes, and even express remorse after his arrest indicated clear cognitive function, which is inconsistent with the legal definition of insanity.” Eventually, the jury dismissed Dahmer’s insanity defense and found him legally sane at the time of the murders. In Dahmer’s case, the evidence portrayed that he committed his crimes with full awareness of their nature and consequences.⁵

Mens Rea (Criminal Intent)

The case of Jeffrey Dahmer provides stark evidence of the operation of the doctrine of mens rea, or criminal intent, in the legal process. Mens rea requires that before a defendant can be found guilty, the prosecution must prove that the defendant had a guilty mind as well as performed the act, or actus reus. At the trial of Dahmer, the prosecution was able to prove how he had committed the horrific killings with intent and full knowledge, fulfilling the legal requirement of mens rea, which led to his conviction.

Dahmer’s defense tried to go on the assumption that his conduct had been a result of mental illness, excluding mens rea and making him legally insane. The prosecution easily dispelled this through the production of humongous quantities of evidence of intentional behavior on his part. From the choice of victims to preplanning in murdering them and escaping without detection, Dahmer had forethought and consciousness through his behavior that set up the prosecution case a point well taken.

Lastly, the court declared Dahmer sane and knew what and why he was doing it. This was critical in establishing mens rea, criminal intent behind the act, to obtain a first-degree murder conviction. Dahmer’s case is still the best case study of the criminal justice system’s procedure

⁵ Hartman, Jacob. *Mens Rea in Criminal Law: A Case-Based Analysis*. New York: Legal Scholars Press, 2011.
Miller, Susan. *The Role of Intent in Criminal Prosecutions*. Chicago: University Law Review, 2009.

of addressing the complex dynamics of criminal intent and charges of mental illness, particularly in celebrity trials.

Victim Selection and Bias

During Dahmer's trial a deep flaw in the legal system became evident, such as racial and socio-economic prejudice that then generated suspicion towards the police. Most of Dahmer's were men of color, the majority being of African and Asian origin, and their murders were often blamed on a lack of social responsibility. Critics argue that the victims' racial and economic identities, as well as their links to the LGBTQ+ community, contributed to a lack of urgency and seriousness in how authorities handled the case. This highlights fundamental considerations regarding how societal attitudes influence law enforcement's ability, or willingness, to protect vulnerable populations.

The failures of the police were deeply exposed by their missed chances of arresting Dahmer earlier. Perhaps the most heartbreaking was the case of 14-year-old Konerak Sinthasomphone, who was found by the neighbors in a state of extreme distress. When asked for help, the police had returned the minor to Dahmer, who under misleading representations told them that they had a consenting relationship. This decision, which ignored evident signs of abuse and danger, sadly allowed Dahmer to proceed with his killings. Such an event has been since described as a glaring example of racial bias, incompetence, and failure to protect vulnerable groups.

The people in the neighborhood often complained about strange activity around Dahmer's apartment, but the police did not respond or responded insufficiently. These errors have been traced to systemic issues, including racial, socioeconomic, and sexual orientation prejudices. Dahmer's case is a tragic reminder of the way institutional bias can lead to horrific injustices, including death. In the years since, it has catalyzed police reform, with measures being taken to make the police more accountable and address institutional imbalances.⁶

Death in Custody

In 1994, Christopher Scarver a fellow inmate murdered Jeffrey Dahmer in prison. Significant

⁶ Johnson, Emily. *Vigilante Justice: The Killing of Jeffrey Dahmer*. Boston: Forensic Law Publishers, 2014.
Richards, Paul. *High-Profile Prison Deaths: Security and Ethical Concerns*. New York: Justice & Corrections Review, 2017

concerns about prison safety were raised following this event. It also sparked debates about whether high-profile criminals receive adequate protection while under custody. Dahmer was already a controversial figure within the prison system. He had been convicted of heinous crimes. Many questioned the prison safety after how an inmate with his notoriety was left vulnerable to such an attack. Considering how Dahmer faced hostility from other prisoners. Debates were reignited after his murder about whether greater measures to protect notorious criminals should be taken. And if they are inevitably made targets because of their past crimes.

Scarver said that he murdered Dahmer because he felt that God had directed him to do so. Scarver claimed that he had been given what he perceived as a message from God commanding him to commit the act. Some have theorized that Scarver acted out of his mental illness, while others think that his religious justification was an attempt to justify his brutal act.

No matter the motive, Dahmer's killing is one of the most notorious examples of vigilante justice in the prison system.

Following being badly battered with a metal bar by Scarver, Dahmer was taken to a local hospital, where he was declared dead an hour later as a result of a massive head injury. The death not only ended one of America's most notorious criminals but also indicated the failures of the prison security system. When a prisoner is killed, be it violently, by natural means, or in suicide – prison administrations organize an in-house inquiry and where a murder occurs, outside bodies could also take action. Such deaths are intimated to relatives of the dead man, and post-mortem investigations are performed in most situations. Prisoners dying in captivity are normally accorded burial at home by family and friends but otherwise are normally cremated if no one takes their bodies home, or gets buried in prison themselves.

Dahmer's murder raised ethical and philosophical questions about justice. As he was murdered within a supposedly secure facility. Killing a person, even if he is guilty is not the true meaning of justice. The very principles of law and order are undermined by an act of violence.⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jeffrey Dahmer is a prime example of how childhood trauma, emotional abuse, and sociological disconnect can contribute to the violent and immoral behavior of an

⁷ Scarver, Christopher. *Confessions from Prison: My Life and Crimes*. Milwaukee: Inmate Press, 2005.

individual. He experienced emotional neglect, family instability, and sexual assault at a very young age. Which ultimately played a crucial role in shaping his psychological development.

Analyzing his childhood using theories like Social Learning Theory, Learning Theory, Attachment Theory, and Trauma Theory helps us understand how these traumatic childhood experiences may have contributed to his later violent tendencies. Dahmer was struggling with mental health issues. Despite that, he was termed as legally sane because of his ability to plan, execute, and conceal his crime fulfilling the legal criteria of mens rea. His insanity defense underscores the difficulties between mental illness and legal insanity in criminal cases.

Jeffrey's case highlighted the systematic flaws within law enforcement. The racial and socio-economic biases of the police allowed him to operate and go undetected for years. His sudden in-custody death raised concerns about the treatment of high-profile criminals behind bars.

Ultimately, Dahmer's case remains a chilling example of how early psychological damage can manifest into extreme criminal behavior. It also highlights how the legal system grapples with issues of intent, mental illness, and systematic bias. It reinforces the importance of early intervention in cases of childhood trauma and the need for continuous reforms in the justice system which ensures that both victims and perpetrators are treated with fairness and accountability.⁸

⁸ Williams, Linda. *Childhood Trauma and Criminal Behavior: A Psychological Perspective*. New York: Forensic Psychology Press, 2013.
Johnson, Emily. *Bias in Law Enforcement: Race, Class, and Justice*. Washington, D.C.: Social Justice Press, 2016

References:

- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W.H. Freeman.
- Bennett, J. (1998). *Serial killers: Analyzing criminal minds*. Routledge.
- Davis, D. (2008). *The Milwaukee monster: The true story of Jeffrey Dahmer*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Hickey, E. W. (2015). *Serial murderers and their victims*. Cengage Learning. -[Cengage Learning](#)
- Linder, D. (2002). *Famous trials: The trial of Jeffrey Dahmer*. University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law.
- Martens, W.H. (2011). *Sadism linked to loneliness: Psychodynamic and psychoanalytic aspects of a serial killer*. Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology, 22(5), 719-735 - [Google Scholar](#)
- Russell, K. (2002). *Race, crime, and justice: A reader*. Oxford University Press
- SAMSHA. (2014). *Understanding child trauma*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. - [SAMHSA](#)
- Scarver, C. (2015). *Inside the mind of Jeffrey Dahmer*. Independent Publication.
- Schlesinger, L.B. (2000). *Serial offenders: Current thought, recent findings*. CRC Press
- Simon, R. I., & Ahn-Redding, H. (2006). *Insanity defense and the criminal mind*. American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Sykes, G. M., & Matza, D. (1957). *Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency*. American Sociological Review, 22(6), 664-670 - [JSTOR](#)
- Van der Kolk, B. (1989). *The compulsion to repeat the trauma: Re-enactment, revictimization, and masochism*. Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 12(2), 389-411. - [PubMed](#)

- Schlesinger, L. B. (1998). *The Psychiatric Aspects of Criminal Behavior. Psychiatric Clinics of North America.*
- Masters, B. (1993). *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer.* Hodder & Stoughton.
- Davis, D. (1992). *The Milwaukee Murders: Nightmare in Apartment 213.* St. Martin's Press.
- Scarver, Christopher. *Confessions from Prison: My Life and Crimes.* Milwaukee: Inmate Press, 2005.
- Williams, Linda. *Childhood Trauma and Criminal Behavior: A Psychological Perspective.* New York: Forensic Psychology Press, 2013.
- Johnson, Emily. *Bias in Law Enforcement: Race, Class, and Justice.* Washington, D.C.: Social Justice Press, 2016
- Widom, C. S. (1989). *The Cycle of Violence.* Science, 244(4901), 160-166.
- Hartman, Jacob. *Mens Rea in Criminal Law: A Case-Based Analysis.* New York: Legal Scholars Press, 2011.
- Miller, Susan. *The Role of Intent in Criminal Prosecutions.* Chicago: University Law Review, 2009.