

Searchlight On Murder

# 'Sane Murder' Unanswered Questions In Law, Medicine

Causes for murders are listed on statistical charts as quarrels, jealousy, and robbery. But these are only superficial reasons, says the well-known criminologist, Dr. Ralph S. Ranney, in defining in this article the underlying forces that prompt people to murder. This is the third article in a series.

By DR. RALPH S. RANNEY

When the gun goes off or the knife is thrust into the victim, what is happening in the mind and emotions of the slayer?

Can murder be the rational act of a basically normal, calculating person? How often and to what extent is it a product of physical or mental pathology?

Is there, in fact, such a thing as sane murder, committed by a person in full possession of his faculties and fully aware of the nature and consequences of his act?

These are still controversial questions, with a large part of medical science and humanitarian advocates arrayed on one side of the debate over

criminal responsibility, and many lawyers, prosecutors, judges and other legal interpreters of the law clinging to the opposite standpoint.

FOR THE VICTIM, there are no degrees of extinction; the slain one is completely dead. But a society obsessed with punishment continues to concern itself with degrees and gradations of guilt in carrying out the medieval rite of imposing penalty.

The grim ceremony of execution will never wipe out murder. From an over-all social and scientific viewpoint, what happens to the killer is of secondary importance. What matters most in this advancing world is what we can learn from specific acts of homicide to help expose their causes and thereby work to prevent similar violence in others.

The infinite variety of murders and the complexity of their roots make it difficult to lay down uniform deductions concerning them.

There are, of course, murders that appear to have been logically planned and deliberately carried out, though that does not necessarily imply the sane responsibility of such killers.

are many homicides — and their number seems to be increasing — in which the killing frenzy apparently wells up as a sudden and unforeseen emotional explosion.

It is this latter variety that presents the keenest challenge to social action and scientific investigation.

For example, there was the case of two middle-aged, industrious law-abiding brothers who lived together. The younger one came home one evening late and prepared a cup of tea for himself, then casually left the dishes in the kitchen sink.

The other brother asked him to wash the china and put it away. Without any warning, the younger one impulsively picked up a kitchen knife and fatally stabbed his brother. Incidentally, he was one of the few killers I have encountered who showed genuine remorse for his crime.

could be expected to produce at least momentary phases of irrational or irresponsible behavior.

Furthermore, it has usually been possible to verify by psychiatric examination the fact that the fatal episode has been preceded, often repeatedly, by little-noticed eccentricities of action and conduct.

Perhaps the commonest of such defects — and the one most liable to be overlooked or tolerated until it leads to violence — is epilepsy in certain of its forms.

Nearly everyone has seen an epileptic fit. Such fits of epilepsy, once called the falling or sacred disease, were so familiar in early times that the Roman Senate provided for adjournment when one of its members was stricken. However, epilepsy occurs in many ways and degrees of conspicuousness, and the dramatic convulsive type is relatively less troublesome with regard to crime.

Many persons afflicted with epilepsy in its more obscure forms can suffer blackouts of a few seconds at a time without ever being aware of it. If these lapses can lead to crimes of violence when they give vent to sudden or smoldering resentments.

It is significant that the epileptic is subject to hallucinations and to a certain unconsciousness of attitude that may provide self-justification for violent acts, as well as an absence of such feelings as consideration or compassion for the victim.

In this category there was a case of a young boy who killed his mother with a knife when the parent objected to his lengthy telephone conversations. There was also the case of the mother who killed her child because in her hallucinative state she considered herself a monster. In another instance, a veteran, a known epileptic, parked his car in a

lovers' lane with a girl friend and later awoke from a blackout to find that he had battered his companion to death.

Such cases present extremely difficult problems in the administration of justice, for although the law may consider such killers to be responsible for their actions, we know from clinical experience that such finds are questionable. In most of these cases it is usually possible to verify the epileptic condition through recordings of brainwaves.

ANOTHER CONDITION that often leads to homicidal frenzy is the paranoid form of Schizophrenia.

This mental disorder is characterized by systematic delusions and a disorganization of ideas that can result in fanatically motivated grievances against certain persons or interests. Here, too, normal feeling is suspended or distorted, and the dramatic delusion that justifies violent means of serving some absurd end.

A notorious example of this form of dementia was the case of a young man who went to the roof of a building with a rifle and killed eight or nine persons unknown to him but who happened to be nearby. His delusion led him to express a monstrous hatred of mankind that possessed him.

These paranoid schizophrenics are sometimes relieved of their symptoms by mental therapy when they are brought to professional attention, but there is a high probability of relapse.

Recent research has indicated that schizophrenia, formerly regarded as of psychological origin, may yet be traced to disturbances of physical or chemical processes of minute agents, which promote or retard the interaction of biological changes necessary to maintain balanced functioning of the mind.

Clinical experience has shown

that many of the disorders that lead to abnormal behavior such as murder are often traceable to the complications of childhood diseases, like measles, chickenpox and scarlet fever. These may cause obscure but serious changes in the cerebro-nervous system and thereby affect one's capacity for rational control of the emotions. Such abnormalities, especially children in puberty and adolescence, are capable of sudden, seemingly inexplicable outbursts ending in murder.

Homosexuality often appears as a direct or contributing factor in homicidal attacks. There is always the possibility of exploitation or blackmail of the homosexual, leading to situations of hostility and retribution. Furthermore, many homosexuals are paranoid, with occasional or sustained ideas of persecution which may actuate impulsive or deliberate violence.

It is significantly enlightening that in the subconscious mind, the gun, the knife and other weapons are symbolically associated with the sexual organs.

NOT ONE of these men showed any unusual appearance; in fact, they were in decidedly better physical condition than the average prison inmate. Just as many came from comfortable or good homes as from needy ones.

Nearly all had a previous criminal history and roughly half of them were of borderline intelligence and nearly half had been excessive alcoholics. On the average they fell far below the intellectual, educational and occupational standards of the general prison population.

As I have said, the recording and collation of crime statistics are so rudimentary that there is no precise knowledge of the complete anatomy of homicide. However, piecemeal compilations indicate that men murder more often than women, although murders by women often are notable for their cold ferocity.

On the other hand, there

ILLUSTRATION BY

I RECALL HERE the case of two young hunters who were crouched expectantly in a duck blind with an impulse that he could not rationally explain. One of the men suddenly plunged a knife in the body of his companion lying prone before him.

In another case, a man with evident homosexual tendencies invited his employer, against whom he harbored deep grievances, to go deer hunting. While they were in the woods he deliberately emptied lead from the other's back.

In murder, as in other crime, alcohol is more often a contributing cause than a direct cause. Where a murderer is committed by an intoxicated person, it is usually found that the alcohol was a precipitating agent of an inclination already present.

Nevertheless, many people commit murder while intoxicated and some appear to have no recollection of the crime. And it is a fact that many murderers would not have been committed if the killer had not verified his courage or dulled his inhibitions by drinking.

Students of murder are struck by a suicidal element that often enters into the act of killing. Besides those cases in which a person kills another and then destroys himself, the case histories of suicides often reveal those in which the killing was preceded by a vanquished decision as to whether the slayer would take the victim's life or commit suicide.

There are also what have be-

come known as victim-precipitated murders, in which the victim goaded their adversaries to the point of homicide. One commentator has called such victims invited offenders.

If once made a study of 22 men in one prison who had been convicted of murder, first degree. It showed, among other things, that the so-called mark of Cain — the notion that the hardened killer is a Dracula or Frankenstein whose depravity is reflected in his appearance — is sheer fiction.

Fear of punishment or thought of other consequences seldom enters the mind of the murderer preceding the crime. It has often been noted in prisons that hardly any of the murderers who reach the death house ever had dreamed that he would some day arrive at that dead end.

Save by complete methodical examination of children in school and by similar examination of adults here practicable, one can conceive of no means by which persons leaning toward violence could be preventively identified. Yet application of the knowledge and techniques already available and their steady expansion by further research and education would in time greatly reduce the incidence of these tragic lapses and redeem the two or three lives involved in each crime.

TOMORROW: Has musing on murder become a popular sport?

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**Queens Offers Writing Course**

The Queens College program of continuing education for men and women starts its spring semester Monday, with course offerings mornings, afternoons, and evenings. Also, for the first time, courses are scheduled for Friday nights.

A new course meeting Friday from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. will be a workshop for writers taught by Julian Scheer. It is designed especially for persons now writing professionally or as a hobby who want to benefit from the experience of group participation.

Well-known authors in the field about Charlotte will be invited to serve as resource persons during the course.

Another new offering is a course in voice mechanics, taught by Myron Duncan, meeting mornings from 7:30 to 8:30.

Other morning courses are History of Art on Wednesday (from 10 to 11 a.m.), and How to Understand Music Through the Composers, Tuesdays, from 10 a.m. to noon.

An afternoon course, Great Books Round Table, meets every other Tuesday from 2 to 4 p.m. It is taught by Stuart Currie.

First-time offerings include Business English on Friday evenings; a secretarial refresher course, Monday evenings; Sculpturing, Wednesdays; Genetics, Thursdays; A B O R M A L Psychology, Mondays; and Industrial Sociology, Fridays.

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FIFTH AND TRYON

**Sharon Residents Plan For Fire Department**

Residents of the Sharon community will meet Sunday afternoon to lay plans for a new volunteer fire department.

The meeting will be at 9:30 p.m. at the Sharon School.

The decision to call residents in the community together for the Sunday meeting stemmed from a luncheon yesterday attended by county officials, volunteer fire department officers and other interested persons.

R. K. Arnold of Highview Rd. is spearheading the drive for a new fire department in the Sharon community.

Most of the valuable property in the area is several miles from the nearest fire station. Fires leading into the community are narrow and twisting.

LONG TRIP

The incident that actually touched off the drive for the new department came when it took firemen from Woodlawn 20 minutes to answer a recent fire call on Highview Rd. Delay came not because of the slowness of the Woodman Dept. but because of the distance involved and the roads the firemen had to travel.

After the fire Mr. Arnold and other residents in the Sharon Community discussed the possibility of setting up a new fire department in their area. Discussions were met with enthusiastic response.

Residents at the Sunday meeting will hear why the department is needed and how a station may be established. They will be asked to support the new department.

Attending yesterday's planning session were Mr. Arnold, County Fire Marshal Sigby Tadlock, County Police Chief Joe D. Whittier, County Fire Commissioner John Auten, County Radio Engineer Tom Brandon, public relations officer Malcolm Glendinning, and Tyler Garris, president of the Mecklenburg County Volunteer Firemen's Association.

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