Killing for Love:
Evaluating the Female’s Participation in Male-Female Serial Killer Teams

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Abstract

The following is a comprehensive study of male-female serial killer teams. The primary concern is to determine what factors influence the females' participation in such partnerships. This study begins by reviewing literature which discusses the differences between male and female serial killers. Then, the focus turns to male-female serial killer teams. Here, literature is again reviewed in order to explain the dynamics of these teams and the traits which are commonly found in the female members of these teams. This study closes with three case studies of some of the most infamous male-female serial killer teams: Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka, and Alton Coleman and Debra Denise Brown. These case studies focus primarily on the female partners and the events which led to their participation in the murders.

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In addition to being rational creatures who are guided by intellect and reason, humans are thought to be social creatures who crave intimate relationships. These two qualities do not always coincide, however. At times, emotions can overcome intellect, and the individual may completely disregard their sense of reason in order to please their significant other. In the most extreme cases, this can result in the most destructive criminal act – murder.

Though the majority of serial killers act alone, research shows that nearly a quarter of all serial killers are involved in a male-female killing team (Ramsland, 2010), and nearly one-third of all female serial killers are members of a male-female killing team (McCloskey & Ramos-Grenier, 2006). Though research on this subject is limited due to the rarity of the occurrence in the grand scheme of violent crime, experts often theorize that the female members of these male-female serial killer teams would not have been so vicious and cruel had they been in a romantic relationship with another man, one who did not wish to participate in violent acts (Ramsland, 2010). This is to say that these females let their emotions - their infatuation with their significant other - overcome their reason. Though they were not violent by nature, these women’s extreme desire to satisfy their significant other prevailed over their desire for harmony. In turn, these females slowly become accomplices and co-conspirators to serial murder.

The following is a comprehensive examination of male-female serial killer teams. In particular, the focus is on the characteristics of the women who participate in these teams and the reasoning behind their participation. Some of the issues of focus include the differences between male and female serial killers, characteristics of male-female killing teams, and possible factors which lead females to join a male in team killing. Additionally, there are in-depth case studies of
History’s most infamous male-female serial killer teams: Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka, and Alton Coleman and Debra Brown.

**Literature Review**

When people think “serial killer”, a term which the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Special Agent Robert Ressler has defined as someone who kills three or more people with sufficient time intervals in between each (Gilbert, Thone, Mouton, & Millien, 2003), they instinctively picture males. This is due in part to the fact that the majority of known serial killers are males, and violent crime offenders, in general, are predominately male. Female serial killers do exist however, even if they are not nearly as common as male serial killers, and society must be particularly cautious of these women, as criminologists have reported that female serial killers are generally more strategic and efficient killers than their male counterparts (Pawlik-Kienlen, 2008). This statement coincides with data which shows that the average killing spree of females is almost twice as long as the average killing spree for males: female serial killers average eight years killing sprees, while male killing sprees rarely last longer than four years (Pawlik-Kienlen, 2007).

If female serial killers are more efficient, one must ask why male serial killers flood the media. The answer is two parts. First, male serial killers are much more common than female serial killers. As with single homicides, only 12 to 17 percent of multiple homicides are committed by female offenders (Scott, 1996). This means that of the 15,241 estimated murders that occurred in the United States in 2009 (Disaster Center, 2010), less than 2,600 of these murders were committed by female assailants. While this is still a devastating figure, it does not begin to compare to the numbers produced by male assailants.
The methods used by male serial killers are more heinous than those of female serial killers. Males are much more likely to seek attention for their crimes and, in order to gain this attention, they emphasize the shock value when killing. They brutally attack their victims and desecrate their bodies, and they do not try to hide the deceased once they are finished with them. Male serial killers are much more likely to use torture and mutilation during their killings (Gilbert, et al., 2003) and, in general, the preferred killing methods of males are much more violent and gruesome than the preferred methods of female serial killers. Male killers, for instance, are more likely to shoot, strangle, stab, suffocate, or bludgeon their victims than female serial killers (Hinch, 1998).

Female serial killers, on the other hand, are much less detectable, as they use less brutal techniques to kill their victims. While male serial killers only use poison about five percent of the time (Hinch, 1998), poison is the preferred method of female killings nearly 80 percent of the time (Newton, 2000). Various methods are used to explain this occurrence. Many researchers believe that this statistic is due to the social-learning perspective and the social roles that have been traditionally assigned to males and females (Hale & Bolin, 1998). To explain, children in the United States are consistently taught that aggression is tolerated more for men than women and poisoning is not a physically aggressive act.

Whether it is through the media repeatedly showing men fighting rather than women or parents buying toy weapons for their sons rather than daughters, children are socialized to believe that males should be aggressive and females should not. As children mature, these values are instilled in them. Men are more likely to approve of aggression as a way to gain control. Females are more aware of the consequences that result from aggressive behavior, and they are quicker to think of the possible outcomes of using violence. With these negative outcomes in
mind, it is thought that females are more likely to restrain from acting upon their aggressive inclinations (Hale & Bolin, 1998).

Another theory of why females choose less violent killing methods is biologically based and focuses on the hormone known as testosterone. This sex hormone, which is produced by the male testes, is considered to be the most powerful of the androgens, which are the group of hormones responsible for the development of male characteristics. These hormones are responsible for the development of the male sex organs and secondary male sex characteristics, such as facial hair and the deepening of the voice (MedicineNet, 2010).

Studies have indicated that men with high testosterone levels have higher tendencies of aggressive behavior than males with lower testosterone levels. Because of this, it is thought that females, who on average have significantly lower levels of testosterone than males, are much less likely to have aggressive tendencies (MedicineNet, 2010). This leads biological theorists to hypothesize that the differences in the preferred method of killing between male and female serial killers has a hormonal influence (Hale & Bolin, 1998). This is to say that female serial killers choose poison as their primary method of killing, a much less violent method than those chosen by males, because male serial killers have higher levels of testosterone.

Besides poison, the killing methods chosen by females include: shooting, bludgeoning, suffocation, stabbing, and drowning (Gilbert, et al., 2003). Though these are the same methods used by male serial killers, these are rarely associated with female serial killers since they utilize these methods less than 20 percent of the time. This is not the case for female killers with a male killing partner, however. Females with male killing partners are much more likely to use beating and firearms as their chosen killing method (Hale & Bolin, 1998). This fact will be examined in greater detail below.
Besides the differences between the methods of male and female serial killers, the motivation behind the killing is generally quite different as well. Sexual deviance and control have been found to be the two primary motivating factors causing males to kill (Newton, 2000). Research shows that these are the two motivating factors for male killers in 78 percent of cases. Other motivating factors for male serial killers include: attention, enjoyment, racism, anger, mental disabilities, and money (Gilbert, et al., 2003).

Females’ motives for serial killing are generally more intricate and often focus on greed. While males generally only kill for money around 17 percent of the time, 74 percent of the murders committed by female serial killers cite money as the primary motivating factor (Gilbert, et al., 2003). Other motivating factors for female serial killers include: control, feelings of inadequacy, revenge, acting out from a history of abuse, to cover for another crime, and attention. Many female serial killers have been diagnosed with disorders such as Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (Gilbert, et al., 2003). Individuals diagnosed with this disorder fabricate medical symptoms or inflict injuries on individuals who are dependent on them, such as their children, in order to acquire sympathy and attention from others (BehaveNet, 2009). In an attempt to gain this sympathy and attention, females have been driven to kill a number of their loved ones. This sort of killing is common amongst females than males.

Another reason females are motivated to kill is to please their male companions. Rather than acting alone, 33 percent of all female serial killers are a member of a male-female serial killing team (Gilbert, et al., 2003). In these situations, the male partners dominate their female accomplices approximately 67 percent of the time (Scott, 1996) and, in many situations, the male partakes in violent acts prior to the enlistment of the female accomplice (Schlesinger, 2000). In these cases, the violence escalates and the victim count rises once the female is enlisted to help.
The extent of the female accomplices’ involvement has a wide range of variance. Some female participants in these male-female serial killer teams are simply conscious of their male partners’ murderous behavior. While these females never actually participate in any part of the murders, they are still considered to be accomplices because they refuse to turn their partner into the authorities. Other female participants in male-female killing teams are more involved. At this end of the spectrum, female accomplices actively participate in abducting, torturing, and killing the victims.

In looking at male-female serial killer teams, it is necessary to understand how these teams are formed. Typically, the relationship begins when the two individuals meet and are strongly attracted to one another. Once they establish an intimate familiarity as a couple, the two individuals are able to start sharing their fantasies, as any standard couple would. The difference, however, is in the substance of the fantasies which are divulged. In these unique relationships, the dominant partner will begin to share violent fantasies with the submissive partner. Eventually, the dominant individual will seduce the submissive partner into sharing his violent fantasy and, with time, he will require his submissive female partner to act out his fantasy with him. If they succeed the first time they act out a fantasy, the dominant partners tend to get bolder and more arrogant, and the urge to kill becomes an obsession for these individuals as they continue to determine the couples’ next actions. As these actions escalate, the submissive partners generally experience guilt, but they will typically become more submissive the more they fear their dominant partner (Ramsland, 2010).

Now that there is a basic understanding of male-female serial killer teams, it is time to focus specifically on the female members of these teams. Since females are consistently labeled as the accomplices rather than the instigator of serial murders, it is necessary to study the factors
that affect these females' decision to participate. In doing so, we must center our attention on common experiences and traits held by female members of killing teams in order to gain insight as to why these females are so easily persuaded.

The majority of women who agree to participate in male-female serial killer teams have been found to be exceedingly insecure and have low self-esteem (Schlesinger, 2000). It is believed that these traits develop in response to the fact that many of these women were reared in underprivileged and abusive home environments, which combine to determine their current behaviors and values. Many of these females did not receive a high-quality education due to a lack of financial resources (Schlesinger, 2000), and this lack of education and money in turn led these individuals to depend on others in order to survive. In most cases, the female would turn to immediate family members for help, but this becomes problematic because the majority of these women report that they were physically and sexually abused throughout their childhood by their immediate family members (Schlesinger, 2000).

From a young age then, these females were taught that violence was a natural part of life, and that compliance was necessary for survival since they were unable to provide for themselves. Women reared in such environments have a tendency to develop extreme levels of submissiveness and emotional dependence which ends up being directed towards their intimate male partners (Schlesinger, 2000). As with abusive relationships, this emotional dependence becomes the central dynamic of male-female serial killer teams. These relationships are built upon the abusers developing a cycle in which they alternate the expression of love with abuse and withdrawal, and this cycle appears to hold incredible power over the abused persons as it deprives them of their ability to escape the relationship. More importantly than denying their freedom to leave, this cycle creates a pathological desire to please within the abused persons.
This forces the abused partner into a state of absolute dependency (Furio, 2001), which the dominant partner can then cleverly exploit by getting the dependent person to participate in criminal activity. Consequently, emotional dependence has been found to be the most predictive factor in determining whether a female will agree to join a violent male partner in team serial killing (Schlesinger, 2000). While the sole possession of this trait in no way establishes that a female will participate in violent acts at the request of a male companion, females with extreme cases of emotional dependence are significantly more likely to comply if the situation arises (Schlesinger, 2000).

Although these females are exceedingly submissive, they are initially reluctant to participate in the extremely violent actions suggested by their dominant male partners (Schlesinger, 2000). Though reluctant, these submissive and emotionally dependent females choose to comply because they fear that their male partner will either beat them into compliance or leave them for not participating in the violent actions (Schlesinger, 2000). To clarify, these two fears can lead females to comply with violent behavior in general.

When the violent behavior escalates to murder, however, females are much less likely to comply solely due to the fear of being beaten. After interviewing convicted female members of male-female serial killer teams and studying their cases extensively, researchers now believe that the fear of the male partner leaving is the primary factor in the females' compliance to murder, especially serial murder (Schlesinger, 2000). This implies that submissiveness, in itself, is not enough to make a female join their male partner in such violent and murderous behaviors. Instead, emotional dependence on the dominant male partner is the primary motivating factor for females who participate in serial team killing.
Once the emotionally dependent female partners agree to participate in fulfilling the male partners’ violent fantasies, the aggressive and murderous behavior will initially cause them to experience feelings of guilt and shame. The female partners will eventually become accustomed to this behavior though, and it is possible that they may be able to begin rationalizing their behavior in order to nullify these negative feelings (Schlesinger, 2000). The females who progress to this state can become content in their roles; some even become enthusiastic about the idea of killing.

In the most extreme cases, the submissive females can become so comfortable with violence that they begin to experience emotional and sexual gratification after participating in such acts (Schlesinger, 2000). These women begin to assume a more aggressive role within the team, and they start to actively engage in the violent acts directed towards victims. Their aggressive behavior may even advance to the point in which these women are pursuing and procuring victims for their partners (Schlesinger, 2000).

In those rare cases in which the female begins to actively engage in the violence, the killing methods of these women differ quite drastically from the killing methods of female serial killers who act alone. As was previously noted, the majority of independent female serial killers have been found to use less violent means to commit murder, such as poison (Newton, 2000). Female members of male-female serial killer teams, on the other hand, are much more brutal in their methods, as they have been found to be significantly more likely to shoot or beat their victims to death (Hale & Bolin, 1998).

Though there is currently no empirical evidence as to why this phenomenon occurs, one can speculate that this sway towards more violent killing methods is due to the fact that these women have become so well-adjusted to violence that it has become second-nature for them to
use more aggressive methods when killing. In addition to becoming accustomed to violence, these women may resort to more aggressive killing methods as a result of being praised by their male companion for engaging in these violent acts. While many females learn from a young age that they should not display aggression (Hale & Bolin, 1998), the dominant male partners in these killing teams have the ability to condition the dependent female partners into behaving in more aggressive manners.

As the female partner assumes a more aggressive role within the team, it is possible that she will come to be viewed as an equal to her male partner. Such partnerships have the potential to become more dangerous than traditional male-female serial killer teams in which the female is quite passive (Schlesinger, 2000). The main reason this belief is thought to be true is that the team now has the influence of male serial killers and female serial killers. While male serial killers are more violent and have larger numbers of victims, female serial killers are more meticulous and are able to cover up their crimes better than their male counterparts (Pawlik-Kienlen, 2007). The combination of these two persons could potentially create a vicious, sexually driven serial killing team that is able to attack a larger number of victims while still managing to keep their identities a secret.

Though a more aggressive female partner may cause the male-female serial killing team to be more dangerous initially, this change in the team dynamic is often the beginning of the end for the team as the number of murders rises much more quickly. This increase in the number of murders may lead to an increase in the amount of evidence left at the crime scene. It may also be the case that two offenders could leave more evidence than a single offender. The combination of these two factors generally causes the evidence to build up quickly.
One may argue that the offenders are so meticulous and will ensure that any evidence linking them to the crime will be destroyed. Regardless of how experienced and careful the team believes themselves to be however, violence can become overpowering. Though the two individuals are required to have a large degree of self-control in order continue living their double lives, they are prone to becoming overwhelmed and losing control while acting out their violent fantasies. Even if the team regains their composure while attempting to conceal the evidence, there is a much greater chance that valuable evidence will be left at the scene. The apprehension of these teams is often a direct result of the teams own carelessness or arrogance (Lerner & Lerner, 2006).

Methodology

Quantitative research methods are sometimes unable to provide full and in-depth analyses of social and behavioral science research topics. This limitation is, in part, the result of a deductive approach which requires the formulation of clearly stated propositions and hypothesis testing. Qualitative research methods allow researchers to understand the naturally occurring aspects of life as participants experience them (Zainal, 2007). Qualitative methods use inductive reasoning and include participant observation, intensive interviewing, focus groups, life histories and case studies (Law Library – American Law and Legal Information, 2010). Specifically, case studies are an example of variable-oriented research, which means that the research is based on in-depth examinations of one or a few cases on many dimensions (Maxfield & Babbie, 2006). While single case studies are especially vulnerable to threats to external validity, multiple case studies can reduce this vulnerability because they show replication of findings and allow researchers to accumulate evidence to support their claims (Maxfield & Babbie, 2006).
While the case study method remains a controversial approach to data collection because it is difficult to generalize due to its subjective nature (Tellis, 1997), this method provides rich, detailed information and allows researchers to examine and understand complex issues that they may otherwise not be able to study. For this reason, case studies are sometimes utilized by sociological and criminological researchers, especially when they are attempting to explain covert and clandestine forms of social behavior (Zainal, 2007). As a result, some of the most important, baseline information in the field of criminology has been developed through the use of case studies. For example, in *The Professional Thief*, Edwin Sutherland’s informant described the world of a professional thief and Clifford Shaw’s *The Jack-Roller* tells the story of a delinquent’s experiences, influences, attitudes, and values, from the perspective of the delinquent (Law Library, 2010).

Building on the tradition of using case studies in criminological research, this study examined three serial killer teams in order to better understand this phenomenon. The three serial killer teams examined here are Caril Ann Fugate and Charles Starkweather, Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka, and Alton Coleman and Debra Denise Brown. These three cases were chosen for a number of reasons. As the study wished to show the wide range of involvement of the female accomplices, a number of male-female serial killer teams were studied. These three cases were chosen because they clearly exhibit a wide variation in the participation of the females as well as their behaviors after they were apprehended. Additionally, these cases received a great deal of attention in the media and by past researchers. Because many independent researchers have focused on these teams and have come to the same conclusions regarding the facts of these cases, there is general consensus about the accuracy of the information that was used in this study. The available information on these cases provided life
histories of the participants and a detailed description of how their relationships evolved. As many measures of variables over time strengthen internal validity (Maxfield & Babbie, 2006), it was believed that these particular cases would be best for this study.

Various forms of case studies are available for research. Zainal (2007) notes three main categories: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. This study will utilize the explanatory method as it will examine the information at a surface-level as well as a much deeper level in order to better understand male-serial killer teams (Zainal, 2007). This study begins by examining the basic factors which are believed to influence female participation in male-female serial killer teams. The life histories of each member of the serial killer teams are then examined as well as the dynamics of each team in order to determine whether these individuals fit the general description of male-female serial killer team members. The life histories and the descriptions of the teams' dynamic relationships are then used to compare and contrast the level of involvement and participation of the three females. Findings from this analysis will be compared with common sociological and biological explanations for violent crime. That is, theories which explain the differences between the socialization of females and males and theories that explain differences in testosterone levels between males and females.

Case Studies

Case Study #1: Caril Ann Fugate and Charles Starkweather

The names of Charles Raymond Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate hold a place in history as Nebraska's most notorious serial killer team. Though the killing spree of these two
individuals may appear to be mild compared with some of the serial killers who have followed in subsequent years, this particular case was highly publicized at the time, and it inspired three fictionalized films (*Badlands*, *True Romance*, and *Natural Born Killers*), a television mini-series (*Murder in the Heartland*), a bestselling novel (*Outside Valentine*), and even a hit song (“Nebraska”) (Bardsley, 2010a). Along with being popular in the media, criminal and psychological researchers have also been incredibly interested in this case. Still today, experts refer to this case in order to demonstrate how persuasive the dominant male partner can be.

This case begins with Charles, commonly known as Chuck or Charlie, Starkweather who was born on November 24, 1938. He was the third of seven children born into a poor, uneducated, yet hardworking and loving family in Lincoln, Nebraska (Gale, 2006). Though Charles had the support of his family and was of average intelligence, he failed to apply himself and was deemed a slow learner by his teachers. Consequently, he began being teased by other boys in school for lacking intelligence and money. Charles was well coordinated and strong however, and he chose to use these traits as an advantage in fights with bullies at school. Such disputes became more regular for Charles as he grew older and became more isolated and rebellious (Bardsley, 2010a).

At the age of 17, Charles dropped out of high school and became a full-time garbage man in order to financially support himself. This job did not pay well however, and Starkweather quickly became jealous of the wealthy individuals whose trash he collected. It was around this time that Charles really began to display peculiar and antisocial behaviors in public. At times, he would shout profanities from his garbage truck at total strangers, and even pull out a rifle and pretend to shoot them (Gale, 2006). There was one exception to Starkweather’s cynical attitude however, and that exception was Caril Ann Fugate. In 1956, Charles was introduced to Caril Ann
Fugate, and the two quickly began dating though Caril Ann was only 13-years-old at the time, four years younger than Charles (Bardsley, 2010a).

Caril Ann Fugate was born on July 21, 1944 in Lincoln, Nebraska. She had no history of violence until she became involved with Charles Starkweather. Up to that point, Caril Ann had maintained an average grade point average at school and participated in the typical social activities of a 13-year-old girl. She was described by friends as being an attractive, happy, girl with a bright smile (Furio, 2001). Though there were differences between the two, Caril Ann was similar to Starkweather in a number of ways as well. Like Charles, Caril Ann came from a poor, uneducated family. She was often described as having a bit of a temper, and she was known to be a bit rebellious (Bardsley, 2010a). As a result, Caril Ann was in search of something more thrilling than her peers and family could provide, and she turned to the town’s rebel, Charles Starkweather, to fulfill that need.

When asked about her relationship with Charles, Caril Ann later described to interviewers (Furio, 2001):

He was the most handsome creature [I had] ever laid eyes on. He was volatile at times. He carried a rifle. I was aware of these things, but with me, he was different. There was very little rage directed toward me. At most, [he was] perhaps moody (p. 60).

This quote shows that while Caril Ann was aware of Charles’ violent behavior, she did not judge him. She was infatuated with Charles from the very start of their relationship.

Up to this point in his life, Charles Stark had continually been made to feel inferior. Caril Ann’s unconditional admiration for him was a welcomed change, and Charles quickly became as attached to Caril Ann as she was to him. This attachment drove Charles to crave money all the more. He knew that his lack of intellect and experience in the real workforce would make it
nearly impossible for him to find a worthwhile job that would give him the wealth that he was after, and he began to see himself trapped in a life of poverty (Bardsley, 2010a).

Charles felt the only way to deter this fate was to get rich quickly, and he soon came to the dramatic conclusion that he was going to have to steal the money. One day Charles tried to buy a stuffed toy dog for Caril Ann at a local gas station, but he did not have enough money on him to buy it. He tried to buy the toy on credit, but the gas station attendant would allow it. The following morning, Charles took a shotgun to the gas station where the same attendant was working. He made 21-year-old Robert Colvert give him all the money that was in the cash register, which ended up being just over 100 dollars, and then Charles drove Colvert around town and shot him in the head (Bardsley, 2010a).

Killing Robert Colvert gave Starkweather a feeling of euphoria. He now had the money and the girl, and this gave him an incredible sense of power. But once the euphoria wore off, Charles was forced to face the facts that he had just been fired from his job, his landlady had locked him out of his home for not paying his rent, and neither his nor Caril Ann's family supported their relationship (Bardsley, 2010a). He also knew that he would not be able to lie to Caril Ann about where he had gotten the money he now possessed. So, the following day, Charles admitted to Caril Ann that he had robbed the gas station, but he lied and said that someone else had killed the attendant. Caril Ann never questioned his statement, but Starkweather later testified that he knew Caril Ann had not been deceived by his lies. He claimed
that she knew all along that he had killed Colvert after robbing the station (Bardsley, 2010a).

Though Caril Ann later admitted to being shocked by Charles’ actions, she did not break off their relationship.

On January 21, 1958, Charles Starkweather went to the home of Caril Ann Fugate’s parents. He claims that the visit was made in order to repair his relationship with Caril Ann’s parents, but this story is difficult to believe seeing as how he arrived carrying a concealed rifle that he had borrowed from a friend (Bardsley, 2010a). At some point during the visit an argument broke out, which ended with Charles killing Caril Ann’s mother and stepfather, Velda and Marion Bartlett, as well as her two-year-old half sister, Betty Jean. Charles then dragged the bodies into an unused building that was located on the property (Ramsland, 2010).

At this point the testimonies of Caril Ann Fugate and Charles Starkweather vary slightly. Caril Ann later claimed that she was not in the house during the killings, but rather that Charles told her about the killings when she came home later that night. Charles, on the other hand, claims that Caril Ann actually witnessed the killings (Bardsley, 2010a). Either way, Caril Ann knew about the killings that day and chose not to turn Charles into the authorities and she again decided to stay in the relationship with Starkweather, even remaining in her parents’ house for nearly six days after the murders and calling into her father’s place of employment to tell them that he would not be in for a few days due to illness (Gale, 2006).
Caril Ann also spoke with visitors when they came to the door to ask for her parents. She claimed that her parents were deathly ill and could not have any visitors (Ramsland, 2010). While most visitors believed the lie, Caril Ann’s brother-in-law did not. Six days after the murder, he convinced local police to search the property where they discovered the bodies of Caril Ann’s parents and sister. While the police immediately put up a bulletin for the capture of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, it was too late. The couple had left town (Gale, 2006) to seek refuge at the home of August Meyer, a close family friend. The couple killed Meyer almost immediately after their arrival, after which they stole a gun, money, and food from his home (Crime & Investigation Network, 2010).

The couple then hitched a ride from 17-year old Robert Jenson and 15-year-old Carol King. Within moments of being picked up, Starkweather put the stolen gun to Jensen’s head and demanded any money that he or King had on them. Next, he forced the couple into an abandoned storm cellar on August Meyer’s property. He shot the couple a total of seven times: King once in the head, Jensen six times in the head (Crime & Investigation Network, 2010). During the
shootings, Caril Ann was allegedly sitting in the car, but when Carol King’s body was discovered, she was found to have been mutilated post-mortem. Her jeans and panties were found pulled down around her ankles, and she had been stabbed numerous times in the stomach and vaginal area. There was no evidence of semen in or near her vagina. Charles Starkweather later claimed that Caril Ann had been very angry with Carol King due to the fact that Charles found her sexually attractive. Charles went on to say that Caril Ann viciously mutilated King’s dead body out of jealousy (Bardsley, 2010a).

The murder spree continued, as Charles used his experience with the wealthy parts of town as a garbage man to force his way into the home of industrialist C. Lauer Ward. There, Charles ate, broke the neck of the family dog, and then shot and killed Mr. and Mrs. Ward, their maid, Lilyan Fencl, all while Caril Ann allegedly slept (Gale, 2006). The couple proceeded to ransack the home and take anything that that appeared to be of value. They then fled and attempted to return to the home of Caril Ann’s murdered parents but were derailed when they saw that someone else was at the home. As a result, the couple was forced to drive around Wyoming all night. During this time, Charles and Caril Ann came across a travelling show salesman, Merle Collison, sleeping in his car. The couple woke Collison to tell him that they were going to trade vehicles, but Collison did not agree. Charles then proceeded to shoot and kill him. He later claimed that Caril Ann was the one who actually shot Collison, but that she had been forced to shoot him out of self-defense (Bardsley, 2010a).
After what would end up being the final murder committed by the couple, they tried to drive away in Collison’s car. Charles could not figure out how to release the emergency brake, however. A few minutes later, a young man stopped to see if the couple needed help. Charles quickly pointed his gun at him and demanded that he help release the emergency brake. The young man realized that his survival depended on getting the gun away from Charles. As the two men were struggling to win possession of the gun, a Wyoming deputy sheriff, William Romer, pulled up to the scene (Bardsley, 2010a).

Caril Ann jumped out of the car and ran to Romer telling him that Charles had killed a man. Charles immediately ran to the Packard that he had originally been driving, and sped away (Furio, 2001). This led to a high speed chase which ended when Charles stopped his car, believing that he had been shot. In reality, he was bleeding from a minor cut around his ear which resulted from broken glass hitting him when an officer shot out his back window (Bardsley, 2010a).

Once apprehended, Charles initially told authorities that Caril Ann did not have anything to do with the crimes, and Caril Ann maintained that she was a hostage throughout the entire murder spree. She claimed that she continued to go along with Charles Starkweather because she feared that he would kill her and her family if she refused (Bardsley, 2010a). Since Caril Ann had admitted to being present when Charles murdered her parents and half-sister and even helping to hide the bodies and the evidence, this story was quickly discredited. And once Charles
realized that Caril Ann was claiming to be an unwilling hostage rather than his girlfriend, he quickly changed his story. He told the courts that he had left Caril Ann alone many times with access to all of his guns. He argued that she could have gotten out at any time. This is when he claimed that Caril Ann had been responsible for the molestation of Carol King’s body. He also began to suggest that she was personally responsible for several of the murders (Bardsley, 2010a).

At Caril Ann Fugate’s trial, her defense was built upon her being a hostage who was forced by Charles Starkweather to go along with all of the murders (Bardsley, 2010a). Since her story had been discredited and the jury saw many opportunities where she could have escaped however, this was not a very credible defense, and like Charles, she was found guilty of murder. Nevertheless, she was only 14-years-old at the time. Because of this, her punishment differed from Charles quite dramatically. While Charles received the death penalty, Caril Ann was given a life sentence. She was sent to the Nebraska Center for Women were she served part of her sentence until she was awarded parole in 1976. Caril Ann Fugate is now a retired medical aide who never married, and to this day, she still maintains her total innocence (Furio, 2001).

Case Study #2: Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka

Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka’s partnership is quite different from that of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate. While it is debatable whether Caril Ann Fugate ever progressed to the point of active participation in the violence, Karla Homolka is known to have
reached this level of involvement. However, she is unique in the fact that she managed to get out of the violent relationship, even pressing charges against her dominant partner, Paul Bernardo.

This story begins with an interesting family history. Paul Bernardo’s mother, Marilyn Bernardo, was adopted at an early age by an affluent and loving family. At a young age, Marilyn fell in love, but her father forbid their relationship since the man was not well-educated (Bardsley, 2010b). Instead, Marilyn married Kenneth Bernardo, a well-to-do accountant. The couple produced a son and a daughter, but Kenneth was allegedly physically abusive. As a result, Marilyn found refuge in the arms of her previous suitor, and Paul Bernardo was conceived illegitimately (Bardsley, 2010b).

Though Kenneth knew of the infidelity, his name was still listed on Paul’s birth certificate, and he raised him as his own (Bardsley, 2010b). This proved to be problematic for Paul, however. Kenneth’s abusive tendencies began to mutate. He started lurking around town, peeping into the windows of young girls and, worst yet, Kenneth began sexually abusing his daughter. As a result of this abuse, Marilyn became severely depressed and she withdrew from her children, forcing them to care for themselves (Bardsley, 2010b).

The children felt the effects of the physical, mental, and emotional turmoil in the household, but Paul appeared to overcome it. Onlookers often described him as being a well-mannered, polite, intelligent, hardworking, and sweet boy (Bardsley, 2010b), but all of this changed after he got into an argument with his mother at the age of sixteen. During this argument, Marilyn told Paul about his real father and showed him a picture (Bardsley, 2010b). This significantly affected Paul’s behavior. After the incident, his attitude towards women changed dramatically for the worse. In the next two years, Paul became quite violent and his sexual fantasies reflected that brutality. His preferred means of pleasure was forceful anal sex,
and he began to search out submissive women, whom he could physically abuse and humiliate publicly (Bardsley, 2010b).

On October 17, 1987, 23-year-old Paul Bernardo met 17-year-old Karla Homolka (CBS News, 2010). Karla was known to be attractive, smart, well-adjusted, and quite popular (Pron, 1996), and Paul quickly saw all of these traits in her. He introduced himself to Karla and the two had instant chemistry, even having intercourse the first night they met (Bardsley, 2010b). That chemistry increased rapidly as Paul discovered that, unlike the other women he had dated, Karla encouraged his sadistic sexual behavior. Accordingly, Paul quickly fell into the dominating master position, and Karla, who became obsessed with fulfilling Paul’s every wish, was happy to take the role of the slave (Montaldo, n.d.).

Just two years after they met, the couple was engaged (CBS News, 2010). As the two were doing well financially and enjoyed their wild sexual encounters, they appeared to be deeply in love and in a stable, happy relationship. But unbeknownst to others, Paul had one issue with their relationship: Karla was not a virgin when the couple got together (Montaldo, n.d.). Since it was Karla’s fault that she was no longer a virgin, Paul felt that it was Karla’s responsibility to make it up to him. He felt that she could do this by making it possible for him to take the virginity of Karla’s attractive younger sister, Tammy, and he quickly became obsessed with this idea. This obsession would result in Paul and Karla’s first murder victim: Tammy Homolka (Bardsley, 2010b).
As Karla was devoted to making Paul happy, it did not take much persuasion for her to accept his logic and agree to help him accomplish this task. Using her basic knowledge of animal tranquilizers – which she obtained through working at a veterinary clinic – Karla mixed sedatives into Tammy’s drinks one night in order to sedate her and give her virginity to Paul as a Christmas present (Montaldo, n.d.). Once Tammy was unconscious, Karla held a halothane-laden rag over her face while Paul proceeded to rape her. He then had Karla make sexual advances toward Tammy, all of which the couple videotaped (Pron, 1996). During this attack, Tammy began to vomit, ultimately choking to death on her own vomit. Karla attempted to revive her, but her amateur attempts failed (Pron, 1996).

Once the couple realized that Tammy could not be resuscitated, they redressed her, hid the drugs and camera, and called an ambulance (Montaldo, n.d.). Paul and Karla told the paramedics that Tammy had fallen asleep and when they went in to check on her, she was laying in her own vomit, unconscious. Though Tammy had a larger red chemical burn on the side of her face from the halothane-laden rag, the local police saw no reason to question the couple’s report, and Tammy’s death was ruled an accident and never investigated any further (Pron, 1996).

After Tammy’s death, Karla rarely showed remorse over the loss of her sister. She even went as far as to admit to dressing up as Tammy and performing oral sex on Paul while they videotaped it less than three weeks after Tammy’s death (Pron, 1996). Paul became quite upset that Tammy was no longer available to fulfill his sexual desires, and he blamed Karla for Tammy’s death. In order to express his resentment, Paul picked up a young female hitchhiker less than a month after Tammy’s death (CBS News, 2010). He took her home and raped her in Karla’s bed before dropping her off on a back street (Bardsley, 2010b). The fact that Paul had intentionally tried to hurt Karla really upset her. She was afraid that she was going to lose Paul if
she did not make him happy soon. This dependence led Karla to seek out a victim to give to Paul as a wedding present. She needed a young, virgin who could replace Tammy in order to ensure that Paul would marry her and never leave.

Less than six months after Tammy’s death, Karla invited in a young girl who saw Karla as a role model and closely resembled Tammy. Karla used the same sedatives to drug the girl as she had used for Tammy (Bardsley, 2010b). This time, however, she had learned to limit the dosage. Once the girl had passed out, Karla called Paul in to show him his wedding present. She proceeded to make sexual overtures toward the girl while Paul videotaped it. He then took control and took the young girl’s virginity. Once they were finished with her, the couple cleaned her up and put her to bed. Though the young girl was sore the next morning, she did not recall any of the events from the previous night (Bardsley, 2010b).

Two weeks after this incident, Paul began increasing his income by smuggling cigarettes across the border but, for him to remain undetected by authorities, Paul needed stolen license plates to disguise his frequent visits across the American-Canadian border. On the night of June 14, 1991 (Mardley, 2010b), while stealing license plates, Paul encountered 14-year-old Leslie Mahaffy who had been locked out of her house for breaking curfew (Pron, 1996). Paul pulled a knife on Leslie and forced her to get into his car. He took her to his home, undressed her, and blindfolded her. He then woke Karla and instructed her to make sexual advances towards Leslie while he videotaped it. He then handed the camera to Karla while he brutally raped Leslie multiple times (Pron, 2996).
Once Paul had climaxed for the last time, he exited the room, giving Karla some time alone with their victim. Leslie began begging Karla to let her go. Karla responded by saying that Paul would beat her if she freed her. Leslie then asked Karla to leave with her, saying that she would tell the police that Paul had forced Karla to participate, but Karla ignored her request. Instead she gave the girl two sleeping pills, saying that they would make her feel better (Pron, 1996). Once the girl had fallen asleep, Paul returned with black electrical cord which he used to strangle the girl to death due to the fear that she had seen his face at one point during the rape. Though Karla later claimed that she could not watch as Paul viciously tightened the rope around the girl’s neck, she admitted to helping him drag the girl’s lifeless body to their cellar where it remained until the following morning when Paul used a power saw to dismember the body. He poured cement overtop the body parts, making cement blocks that could easily be transported and, once the cement dried, he threw them into a local lake (Pron, 1996).

Upon receiving Karla’s wedding present and seeing that Karla was willing to help cover Leslie’s murder, Paul decided to go through with the marriage so long as he was able to maintain total control over the event, requiring that Karla’s parents pay for the majority of the wedding (Pron, 1996). Karla, again, was happy to oblige, allowing Paul to plan every detail of the wedding. Along with choosing Karla’s wedding dress and hairstyle, Paul controlled what was said in the vows, requiring Karla’s vows to include her promise to “love, honor, and obey” him. He also required that the minister pronounce them “man and wife” rather than “husband and
wife” (Bardsley, 2010b). Through the entire ordeal, Karla never once complained or argued with her dominant partner (Bardsley, 2010b). She was happy enough knowing that she would be spending the rest of her life with the man upon which she had become dependent.

The couple went nearly 10 months before their next murder, but Paul continued to rape random women in their Toronto suburb, a behavior he initiated in Scarborough nearly four years prior to the wedding (CBS News, 2010). Over the years, Paul continued to abduct and rape each of his victims in a similar fashion. When they got off a bus, Paul would grab them from behind and pull them to the ground. He would force anal sex and fellatio on his victims, talking to them the entire time. Then, he would let them go (Bardsley, 2010b).

Not surprisingly, Karla supported this behavior in her hopeless attempt to keep Paul happy. Because of this, Paul was very honest with Karla about his behaviors. He would come home afterwards, describe his victims to Karla, and excitedly illustrate every detail of the rape. He would even incorporate details of the rapes into his and Karla’s sadistic sexual encounters, which Karla eagerly accepted. In her desperate effort to please all of Paul’s desires, she would encourage Paul as he talked about wanting to rape again. Interestingly, one of the victims even mentioned to the police that she recalled seeing a blonde woman with the rapist who appeared to have a video camera in her hands, but the police discredited this statement claiming that the memory derived from hysteria due to the trauma of being raped (Bardsley, 2010b).

As there were many similarities among the testimonies of the victims and the crimes all occurred within a short radius of Scarborough’s Guildwood Village, police concluded that they were looking for only one perpetrator. There were coincidences which tied Paul to the rapes – the rapist and Paul each drove a white Capri, Paul lived in the vicinity of where the rapes took place, and one of Paul’s old girlfriends had gone to the police numerous times about Paul
brutally raping and abusing her in fashions similar to those of the rapist – which led one of the assigned detectives, Detective Steve Irwin, to question Paul. Even though Detective Irwin did not feel that Paul had the kind of personality to be a serial rapist, he took blood, saliva, and hair samples from Paul (Bardsley, 2010b). Once Paul and Karla relocated, the “Scarborough Rapist” mysteriously ended his attacks. As the case was no longer a priority for the Scarborough police, Paul’s samples were stored away for the time being, allowing him and Karla more time to victimize young women (Bardsley, 2010b).

After 10 months of marriage, Paul again became bored with Karla. In another of her desperate attempts to keep him happy, she assisted Paul with the abduction of 15-year-old Kristen French on April 16, 1992 (CBS News, 2010), luring the girl to the car on the pretense of asking directions so that Paul could force her into the backseat with a knife (Montaldo, n.d.). Since the couple had grown anxious and abducted the girl in broad daylight, they knew from the start that they would have to kill her given that she had clearly seen them, but they did not want Kristen to know this as she would be less likely to cooperate (Bardsley, 2010b).

The Bernardos kept Kristen locked in their home for approximately three days. During her confinement, Kristen was beaten, tortured, and sexually assaulted almost constantly. As Easter approached, the couple had to get rid of Kristen’s body so that she could not escape while they were visiting family (Pron, 1996). Here, the couple’s stories vary. Karla claimed that Paul strangled Kristen to death as he had done with Leslie. Paul, however, stated that Karla beat...
Kristen with a mallet as she attempted to escape, forcing her to be strangled to death by the noose which was tied around her neck, securing her to a chest in the couple’s bedroom (Bardsley, 2010b). Regardless of who dealt the final blow, Paul and Karla returned from their Easter dinner and worked together to cut off Kristen’s hair and wash her body before dumping it in a ditch less than a mile from the spot where Leslie’s body was dumped (Bardsley, 2010b).

After Kristen’s body was found, the Ontario government formed the Green Ribbon Task Force and began aggressively searching for the perpetrator (Montaldo, n.d.). One woman called in to the task force informing them that she had seen what appeared to be a struggle going on in a car at the church where Kristen French had been abducted, on the same day she had been abducted. While the woman was not incredibly familiar with different makes of cars, she believed that it had been a Camaro (Bardsley, 2010b).

Along with this bit of information, a great number of tips were received by the police and Paul’s name surfaced numerous times. As a result, two officers visited the Bernardos for questioning. Paul was very polite during the interview, even admitting to the officers that he had been a suspect in the Scarborough rapes because he closely resembled a composite sketch that was developed with the help of one of the victims. The police noted that Paul was incredibly cooperative, intelligent, and orderly. They also noted that he drove a Nissan which looked nothing like a Camaro. As a result, they disregarded the idea that Paul could be involved in the rapes and murders (Bardsley, 2010b).

Soon after Kristen’s death, Paul’s abusive habits intensified. While he had always been aggressive and emotionally abusive towards Karla, physically abusing her finally pushed her to her limit. In January of 1993, Karla sought out the help of her parents after Paul left her with two black eyes and serious bruising all over her body (CBS News, 2010). Her parents helped her
escape her home while Paul was out. They then notified the Niagara police who took Karla to the hospital. Paul’s anger and lack of control soon led to the couple’s demise (Bardsley, 2010b).

By early February, the Green Ribbon Task Force had redirected their focus on Paul, and they wanted to interview Karla. After being interviewed for nearly five hours, Karla had figured out that the police had tied together the Scarborough rapes with the rapes and murders in their new home of St. Catharine’s. Understandably, she became nervous and admitted to her uncle that Paul was responsible for the serial rapes and the murders of Leslie Mahaffy and Kristen French (Bardsley, 2010b), and on February 19, 1993, police executed a search warrant for Paul and Karla’s house (CBS News, 2010). The police found enough evidence to convict both Karla and Paul, including Paul’s written description of each of the Scarborough rapes as well as one of the couple’s brief homemade videos which indicated that Karla enjoyed sexually deviance as much as her husband (Bardsley, 2010b). The couple’s fate was sealed when Paul gave his lawyer all of the videotapes of their victims. His lawyer was eventually put under pressure and forced to turn the tapes over to the prosecution who became aware of the tapes’ existence after speaking with Karla (Bardsley, 2010b).

The jury found Paul guilty all nine charges against him, including the kidnapping, rapes, and murders or Leslie Mahaffy and Kristen French. He was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole for 25 years (CBS News, 2010). Though it caused a great deal of public anger, Karla made a deal with the prosecution. In order to receive leniency, she agreed to tell the
police everything she knew about the crimes. In exchange for her cooperation and her
willingness to testify against her husband, Karla was only sentenced to a 12-year-prison sentence
(Bardsley, 2010b). She was released on July 4, 2005 (CBS News, 2010).

Though Karla always portrayed herself as a victim, a number of experts disagree. After
interviewing Karla and studying the evidence, many experts believe that Karla thoroughly
enjoyed herself with their victims and that she cleverly manipulated police and the prosecution
into granting her leniency for her crimes. However, those experts who were able to watch the
couple’s homemade videos before they were destroyed agree that Karla would never have acted
against a victim without Paul’s permission. Though Karla may have enjoyed the deviant sexual
encounters, the footage clearly shows that Paul was in control at all times and that Karla’s
enjoyment depended heavily on whether Paul was happy with the situation. While Karla may
have enjoyed aggressive sexual encounters prior to her relationship with Paul Bernardo, this in
no way shows evidence that she was a violent person before this relationship. In fact, there is no
evidence whatsoever that would support that claim (Bardsley, 2010b).

Case Study #3: Alton Coleman and Debra Denise Brown

The male-female serial killing team made up of Alton Coleman and Debra Denise Brown
is arguably one of the most unique partnerships that the criminal world has ever seen. While
some female partners, such as Karla Homolka, do advance to the point where they actively
participate in the violence, it is incredibly rare for these women to ever reach a level of equality
with their dominant male partner. One could argue that Debra Brown was able to reach this rare
state as she was proud of her significant role in the couple’s sexually motivated killing spree. In fact, she passed a note to one of the judges during her final sentencing which read, “I killed the bitch, and I don’t give a damn. I had fun out of it…” (Hickey, 2010, p. 231).

Debra was not always this vicious. Her violent behavior did not start until she became involved with Alton Coleman. Alton was born on November 6, 1955 to a prostitute in Illinois and was raised by his elderly grandmother with the occasional assistance of his mother after his father rejected him when he was only an infant, and he was often teased by other schoolchildren for occasionally wetting his pants in class (Hickey, 2010). While his grandmother was believed to have taken good care of him, his parents’ abandonment and the constant teasing led Alton to become an unhappy and bitter child who generally kept to himself and was slow to show emotion (Gribben, 2010). By the time he reached the ninth grade, Alton had dropped out of school and became well-known by local police as he had been picked up for a number of petty crimes (Gribben, 2010).

By the age of 18, Alton’s criminal activity had become increasingly more dangerous. He was believed to have kidnapped, robbed, and raped an elderly woman who refused to testify. As a result, Coleman served only two years on the robbery charge. Only three months after his release, he was again arrested for another rape. He was acquitted of this rape charge as well as five other rape charges over the next few years, including the rape of his niece in 1983 (Gribben, 2010). Prosecutors believed that Alton was able to constantly escape charges because he was good at manipulating jurors into believing that he was a decent person and that police were misinformed. When deception did not work, Alton would resort to intimidating witnesses (Gribben, 2010).
Alton used his ability to manipulate others in order to control 21-year-old Debra Brown when they met in 1984. Debra was born in 1963 into a family of 11 children (Hickey, 2010). She was raised in extreme poverty and was uneducated after dropping out of high school (Hickey, 2010). Alton Coleman seemed to be the answer to her prayers. He was able to make her laugh and always seemed to have enough money to please her. Not knowing that Alton was only in town because he was jumping bail for rape charges, Debra broke off her engagement to another man and moved in with Alton within weeks of their introduction. She became aware of his propensity for vicious sex and his abusive behavior almost immediately after moving in with him as she quickly became the center of his attention (Hickey, 2010).

The couple’s dynamic quickly evolved into a master/slave relationship with Alton often beating Debra and requiring that she partake in demeaning sexual acts which often included bondage (Hickey, 2010). Though Debra was not enthusiastic about Alton’s violent sexual tendencies, she had begun to depend on Alton’s financial resources in order to survive as she lacked the education needed to achieve such resources (Hickey, 2010). This dependence led Debra to comply with Alton’s sadistic requests, continuing the abusive cycle in which Alton would alternate apologies and expressions of love with intense physical and emotional abuse. Combined with her financial dependence, the constant rotation between affection and abuse caused Debra to enter a state of absolute dependence on Alton Coleman. (Furio, 2001). Once this emotional dependence was produced, Alton informed Debra that they needed to leave town because he was wanted for the rape and murder of nine-year-old Vernita Wheat whose mother was a friend of his (Hickey, 2010). As she feared her own survival without Alton, Debra agreed to flee, and the couple left town on June 5, 1984 (Gribben, 2010).
Alton and Debra remained in hiding 70 miles south in Gary, Indiana until June 18, 1984 when they led seven-year-old Tamika Turks and her nine-year-old niece Annie into a nearby wooded area on the pretense of playing a game (Furio, 2001). Once they were concealed by the trees, the couple removed Tamika’s shirt and ripped it into small strips which they used to bound and gag the two girls. When Tamika began to cry, Debra held her hands over the young girl’s mouth and nose while Alton kicked her in the face and stomped her chest until her ribs had fractured and punctured her vital organs. Alton then strangled Tamika to death with elastic he had taken from a bedsheets, making Annie watch the entire ordeal (Montaldo, 2010b).

Once Tamika’s body was carried a short distance away, the couple turned their attention to Annie who was forced to perform oral sex on Alton and Debra. She was then raped by Alton and then beaten and choked until she was unconscious (Montaldo, 2010b). The girls were found later that day, and though Annie was able to describe the couple vividly to police, Alton and Debra had already moved on to Indianapolis, Indiana where they broke into the home of 77-year-old Eugene Scott and shot her to death. Her body was found in a ditch just outside of town (Furio, 2001).

While still in Gary, however, Alton and Debra abducted another victim before fleeing to Detroit, Michigan in her car (Furio, 2001). Though she had only known Alton and Debra for a short time, Donna Williams and her car were reported missing by her parents on the evening of June 18, 1984 (Montaldo, 2010b). On July 11, 1984, she was found strangled to death in Detroit, Michigan only four blocks away from the home of Alton’s grandmother. Her abandoned car was found parked close to her body. Inside, there was a forged identification card featuring Debra’s picture. Residents from the area reported that the car had been parked in that spot since June 19 – one day after her abduction (Montaldo, 2010b).
During their short stay in Detroit, the couple managed to cause quite the uproar. Besides murdering Donna Williams, the two kidnapped and robbed a 28-year-old woman who managed to escape by the killers by swerving in to oncoming traffic. They also robbed and beat an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Palmer Jones, from Dearborn Heights and robbed two men. By the time they left Detroit, Alton Coleman and Debra Brown were wanted by federal authorities as well as police in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan (Gribben, 2010).

From Detroit, the couple continued traveled to Toledo, Ohio. Here, they knocked on the door of Virginia Temple and her 10-year-old daughter, Rochelle. They pretended to be impoverished hitchhikers who were in need of a place to stay the night (Furio, 2001). Once they had gained Virginia’s trust, the couple raped, beat, and strangled her and Rochelle. They left the two bodies in a basement crawl space and continued on their killing spree (Montaldo, 2010b).

That same morning, Alton and Debra entered the home of Frank and Dorothy Duvendack. They tied up the couple with appliance and phone cords and then took money and the Duvendack’s car which they used to escape town (Montaldo, 2010b).

Alton and Debra then moved on to Cincinnati, Ohio where they abducted 15-year-old Tonnie Storey while she was on her way home from school on July 11, 1984 (Montaldo, 2010b). Alton grabbed her and forced her into a stolen vehicle. He proceeded to beat, rape, and strangle her. Her body was found eight days later in an abandoned building. One of her classmates testified that she saw Tonnie talking to Alton Coleman the day that she disappeared. As corroborating evidence, Alton’s fingerprint was found on a bracelet underneath Tonnie’s body. The bracelet was later identified as one missing from Virginia Temple’s home (Montaldo, 2010b).
Two days after Tonnie’s death Alton and Debra had bicycled to Norwood, Ohio. They left Norwood almost immediately after they arrived but made one stop before their departure. Harry and Marlene Walter were attempting to sell a travel trailer that they had parked outside of their home (Montaldo, 2010b). Alton and Debra visited the Walters under the pretense of being interested in buying the trailer. Once inside their home, Alton struck Harry and Marlene with a candlestick and bound them before proceeding to beat them further with an assortment of devices including a crowbar, vise grip pliers, and a knife (Hickey, 2010). Marlene received the worst of the beatings, as she was struck up to 25 times and mutilated with a pair of vice grips on her face and scalp. Harry survived the attack but suffered brain damage as part of his skull had splintered and drove against his brain (Montaldo, 2010b). Reports claim that this was one of the worst of the couples’ attacks as the basement walls were splattered with blood and the floor was covered with bloody shoeprints, made from two different types of shoes. Strands of Marlene’s hair were also found on a magazine rack located in the upstairs living room (Furio, 2001).

Continuing on in their travels, Alton and Debra made it to Williamsburg, Kentucky. Here, they kidnapped Cumberland, Kentucky’s college associate professor Oline Carmichael. They forced him into the trunk of his car and then drove his car to Dayton, Ohio. Authorities later found Carmichael still alive in the trunk (Montaldo, 2010b). After deserting Carmichael, the couple moved on to beat and rob an elderly couple, Millard and Katheryn Gay. Though Alton shot at Katheryn during his escape, his gun misfired and her life was spared (Montaldo, 2010b). That same day the couple met Dallas and Flossie Davis, whom they bound and robbed before leaving town (Montaldo, 2010b).

The couple’s 53-day crime spree from Wisconsin to Kentucky (Investigation Discovery, 2010) finally ended on July 20, 1984 when they were arrested in Evanston, Illinois after being
recognized from a “Wanted” program on television (Elza, Burgh, Davis, & Deering, 2006). Local police were on watch, as Alton and Debra had relatives in Evanston. It was believed that they may try to return (Hickey, 2010). Upon their arrest, Alton was carrying two knives which were stained with blood and Debra was in possession of a .38 caliber pistol (Furio, 2001). In total, they are believed to have committed at least eight homicides, three kidnappings, seven rapes, and 14 armed robberies (Investigation Discovery, 2010).

Unlike Caril Ann Fugate and Karla Homolka, Debra Brown never turned on her partner, not even in an attempt to save herself. Though they were separated by police and faced charges in various counties within six states, Debra remained loyal to Alton. She immediately invoked her right her to remain silent and asked to speak to an attorney (Griffen, 2010). She went on to legalize a common-law marriage with Alton so that she would not have to testify against him, and it is believed that the statement she made in court – admitted to killing one of the victims and enjoying it – was in efforts to save Alton from the death penalty (Hickey, 2010). If this is the case, her efforts were unsuccessful as Alton eventually received four separate death sentences and more than 100 years in prison. He was executed by lethal injection on April 26, 2002 (Hickey, 2010).

It was not until she had received two separate death sentences, life in prison, and two consecutive 40 year terms in prison that Debra finally apologized for her part in the killing spree, implying that she helped him find other victims because she “couldn’t be the target of [Alton’s] violence” anymore (Furio, 2001, p. 48) and that she was a “more kind and understandable and lovable person” than people would think (Hickey, 2010, p. 231). Her death sentence in Ohio was later reduced to a life sentence due to her low IQ scores, her non-violent history prior to her relationship with Alton, and her dependent personality which made her susceptible to Alton’s
manipulation and control. She is currently serving her time in The Ohio Reformatory for Women, still facing the death penalty in Indiana (Montaldo, 2010c).

**Analysis**

In the years following the murder sprees of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka, and Alton Coleman and Debra Brown, experts have continued to debate the female partners’ level of guilt. While some argue these are all cases of mutual guilt, the extent of each of female’s level of guilt falls along a continuum which is based upon their upbringings, their personality types, their partners’ personality types, their relationships with their partners, and their actual level of involvement in the crimes. The variance between the degrees to which these women fall victim to their partners’ control and the degrees of their involvement is an important issue which should be looked into further.

Caril Ann Fugate would fall at the lowest end of the continuum of involvement and guilt. This argument is based upon various aspects of Caril Ann’s story. To begin with, Charles’ behaviors fit the profile of the dominant male partner in male-female serial killer teams, with the exception of the physical or mental abuse. Though it is not documented that Charles ever abused Caril Ann in any way, he initiated the destructive behavior prior to Caril Ann’s involvement, and once Caril Ann became aware of his actions, Charles made all of the couples’ decisions. Though he later argued that Caril Ann played a significant part in their decision-making, Charles continually contradicted himself by implying that he had chosen which locations to head towards and which individuals to kill. Similar contradictions also deface the value of his allegations that Caril Ann actively participated in some of the murders and that she mutilated the body of Carol King once Charles had murdered her. Instead, it is believed that Charles may have focused on King’s body due to the fact that he was sexually attracted to her (Furio, 2001).
Along with Charles’ behaviors being quite comparable to those of dominant male partners from other known male-female serial killer teams, Caril Ann’s upbringing and consequential personality traits coincides with those of previously studied submissive female partners from such teams. Though her peers never described Caril Ann as being insecure or having low self-esteem, her parents did not have much money, and they were uneducated (Gale, 2006). Additionally, some reports claim that Caril Ann was abused by her biological father prior to her mother remarrying (Bardsley, 2010a). This abuse could be incredibly influential in Caril Ann’s formation of emotional dependence in her future relationship with Charles Starkweather, but one must keep in mind that this abuse is not consistently mentioned in reports of Caril Ann’s life prior to meeting Charles Starkweather. Consequently, experts are unable to use this abuse as solid support for their theory that Caril Ann remained in her relationship with Charles due to emotional dependence.

Childhood abuse is not necessary for the formation of emotional dependence. In cases of abusive relationships, the abused person is forced into a state of dependency due to the expressions of love constantly being alternated with abuse and withdrawal (Furio, 2001). Charles Starkweather was known to be an angry and violent person. Though Caril Ann claimed that Charles never physically or mentally abused her, she did tell interviewers, “there was very little rage directed toward me” (Furio, 2001, p. 60). The fact that Caril Ann chose to say that there was very little rage directed towards her, rather than no rage directed towards her, could lead one to believe that there was at least some level of abuse in their relationship. Additionally, Caril Ann did admit that Charles became distant and withdrawn whenever he was upset by life events of which he had no control (Furio, 2001). Though these actions may not have been as prominent as the actions of the abusive members in significantly abusive relationships, they still have the
potential to produce emotional dependence, especially in cases where the victim is as young as Caril Ann Fugate was while she was in a relationship with Charles Starkweather.

Once emotional dependence has been established, the submissive partner may find herself participating in violent actions regardless of how hesitant she is to participate. This individual will often choose to comply with their dominant partner’s wishes in order to protect herself, as well as her relationship. This woman may fear that her failure to comply with her partner’s wishes could lead that partner to leave her or, worse yet, redirect his anger towards her (Schlesinger, 2000). In the case of Caril Ann Fugate, Caril Ann depended on Charles to take care of her since she was too young to take care of herself. Once Charles had murdered her family, Caril Ann had nowhere else to turn. Though she had depended on his before, Charles was now her only means of support, both emotionally and financially. In order to protect herself, Caril Ann felt that there was no other option but to continue helping Charles evade authorities.

Though the jurors in Caril Ann Fugate’s trial believed that Caril Ann actively and consciously participated in Charles Starkweather’s killing spree (Bardsley, 2010a), many experts have used the possibility of emotional dependence to question this conclusion. These experts claim that Caril Ann never actively participated in any of the killings, but rather, she was coerced into following Charles based on this emotional dependence which would have caused her to comply out of fear for her own safety (Furio, 2001). Had Caril Ann progressed to the point where she was willingly engaging in the violence, it is likely that experts would say that she could be seen as guilty. Further adding to the belief that Caril Ann Fugate would have never gone along with such violent acts were it not for her emotional dependence on Charles Starkweather, experts point out that Caril Ann attempted to turn Charles in to authorities, even though the couple still had the potential to evade authorities.
Caril Ann was unaware that William Romer was a deputy sheriff the day he pulled up to their car, and the couple was parked alongside a road which did not see a large number of travelers (Gale, 2006). In reality, she would not have felt the need to turn Charles into Romer in order to save herself, she could have instead tried to fight off Romer in some way. Had her participation in the murder spree truly been based on her own violent tendencies and desire to harm others, this would have been the route Fugate would have chosen. Instead, however, Caril Ann asked for Romer’s help in trying to stop Charles Starkweather. This decision is the final bit of evidence that experts use to justify their claim that Caril Ann Fugate was not a cold blooded killer. Alternatively, she was an abused and emotionally dependent little girl who got herself involved in a vicious cycle of violence of which she was unable to find her way out.

Though Karla Homolka also attempted to portray herself as a victim, she would be placed further along the continuum of guilt as she actively participated in the abduction, rape, and murder of her and Paul’s victims whereas Caril Ann did not. Additionally, many believe that Karla thoroughly enjoyed herself with their victims and that she cleverly manipulated police and the prosecution into granting her leniency for her crimes. However, those experts who were able to watch the couple’s homemade videos before they were destroyed agree that Karla would never have acted against a victim without Paul’s permission. Though Karla may have taken pleasure in the deviant sexual encounters, the footage clearly shows that Paul was in control at all times and that Karla’s enjoyment depended heavily on whether Paul was enjoying himself. Though Karla admits to seeking out aggressive sexual endeavors prior to her relationship with Paul Bernardo, this in no way shows evidence that she was a violent person before this relationship. In fact, there is no evidence whatsoever that would support that claim (Bardsley, 2010b).
Due to this evaluation, it is believed that Karla would not have participated in such violent acts had she been in a relationship with a less aggressive and manipulative man (Bardsley, 2010b). This claim is based a number of details. As with Charles Starkweather, Paul Bernardo fits the profile of a dominant partner in a male-female serial killing team. This is evident in the fact that he initiated his violent behavior prior to Karla’s involvement, as well as, the fact that he clearly controlled everything about the couple’s relationship. However, Paul fits the profile much more so than Charles as he gradually became mentally and physically abusive towards Karla (Pron, 1996). Additionally, Paul followed the basic guidelines of the formation of a male-female serial killing team as he shared his violent fantasies with Karla before she became aware of his criminal behavior. He then revealed his criminal acts to Karla before he requested that Karla participate in these violent acts (Ramsland, 2010; Pron, 1996).

As for Karla, her childhood does not necessarily show any evidence that she would become a victim of emotional dependence (Pron, 1996). However, this dependence could have easily developed through Paul’s skillful manipulation. Karla had finally found someone who enjoyed sexual experimentation as much as she did, and originally, Paul showered her with affection. She quickly fell head over heels in love and wanted desperately to keep hold of the man who was able to satisfy her every desire (Pron, 1996). As their relationship progressed, Paul slowly began to mentally abuse Karla, breaking down her self esteem and making her feel as though she was worthless without him, even forcing her to sleep on the floor at night if she upset him in any way. The next morning when she woke, Paul would apologize, telling her he could not live without her (Pron, 1996). Similar to other cases of abusive relationships, this constant wavering between abuse, withdrawal, and love could have forced Karla into an emotionally dependent state (Furio, 2001), and this dependence would have grown as Karla became more and
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more aware of how truly dangerous Paul was (Schlesinger, 2000). Out of fear for her own safety, one could easily argue that she could have grown dependent on pleasing him in order to survive.

Once Paul had conditioned Karla to accept his violent fantasies, and once emotional dependence was established within their relationship, Karla followed the pattern of the “typical” female member of a male-female serial killing team. Unlike Caril Ann Fugate, Karla became accustomed to the violent behavior and began to assume a more aggressive role within the team (Schlesinger, 2000). She began to pursue and procure victims for Paul, starting with her younger sister, Tammy. Though some may argue that there was no definitive evidence showing that Karla actively participated in the physical abuse of the couple’s victims, she willingly made sexual overtures towards these girls, forcing them to unwillingly partake. She also operated the video equipment for Paul and drugged their victims into sedation (Bardsley, 2010b). All of these actions are consistent with a female serial killing team member who has progressed to the point of active participation (Newton, 2000).

While Karla Homolka actively participated in the abductions, rapes, and murders of the couple’s victims, many experts argue that she would not have participated in such actions had she been in a romantic relationship with another man, regardless of how much she enjoyed the sexual deviance. This belief primarily stems from the fact that confessed to the police once she escaped from the abusive web she had been stuck in for more than five years (CBS News, 2010). Karla could have continued in her relationship with Paul or even escaped from him and authorities all together. Instead, she chose to confess and turn Paul over to the authorities (Barsley, 2010b). To some, this decision validates their belief that Karla Homolka may have been guilty of assisting with the rapes and murders of Leslie Mahaffy and Kristen French but that
this participation it was a direct result of the mental and physical abuse Paul Bernardo bestowed on her, as well as, the emotional dependence that she fell victim to.

Debra Brown would find herself even further along the continuum of involvement and guilt than Karla Homolka. As she openly admitted to actively participating and enjoying various abductions, rapes, and murders, the level of her guilt and involvement is not debated nearly as often as that of Caril Ann Fugate and Karla Homolka. She even acknowledged that she became so comfortable with the violence that she began to experience emotional and sexual gratification after participating (Furio, 2001). Though the jurors found her to be guilty, there are still a handful of individuals who argue that Debra was an unfortunate victim of emotional dependence who would not have participated in such acts if she had been with another, less violent male partner. As with the claims of innocence for Caril Ann Fugate and Karla Homolka, this argument is based on Alton and Debra's personality types and the dynamic of their relationship.

Alton Coleman, like Charles Starkweather and Paul Bernardo, fit the profile of the dominant male partner in a male-female serial killing team. He was known to have a violent criminal history, prior to meeting Debra, in which he was able to deceive, manipulate, and intimidate others into claiming his innocence (Gribben, 2010). Alton was also known to physically and mentally abuse Debra once they moved in with one another, and throughout their 53-day crime spree (Criminal Investigation, 2010), Alton was in control of the couple's every decision, from where they traveled to who they chose to kill (Furio, 2001).

Debra's upbringing and personality also coincide with those of other known females from male-female serial killer teams. Her parents did not have an excess of money as they had 11 children to care for, and she was uneducated, being diagnosed as mildly retarded and dropping out of highschool (Montaldo, 2010c; Hickey, 2010). Prior to her involvement with Alton
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Coleman, Debra Debra had no violent history, but she was known to have a dependent personality which would have made it very easy for her to fall under Alton's control (Hickey, 2010).

Comparable to the submissive female partners from other male-female serial killer teams, Debra's dependent personality was likely the product of her impoverished upbringing and her lack of education (Furio, 2001), and once she found a man who was able to give her the financial resources she desired, Debra quickly became dependent on Alton Coleman (Hickey, 2010). This dependence was then augmented by the abusive cycle which Alton forced upon her. As he would continually break her down with emotional abuse and then build her back up by showing her affection, Debra began to feel as though she could not survive without Alton by her side.

The physical abuse only caused the dependence to reach a new level as Debra now felt that she must comply with Alton's every wish so that his anger and abuse were never directed towards her. According to some individuals, the best way for Debra to avoid Alton's rage was to ensure that there was always another person who could take the abuse (Furio, 2001). As with other emotionally dependent female partners, Debra agreed to contribute to Alton's violent criminal behavior in order to protect herself and her relationship as she feared that he may leave her or kill her were she not to comply (Schlesinger, 2000). Those who maintain her victim status believe that her emotional dependence and fear for her own safety were the only reasons Debra Brown ever partook in such violent criminal behavior.

**Conclusion**

The most remarkable aspect about male-female serial killer teams is that many researchers believe that the submissive female partners would not have killed on their own. Though it is impossible to show scientific proof of this idea, it is theorized that the actions of
many the submissive females who were previously involved in male-female serial killer teams, such as Caril Ann Fugate, were based solely on the coercion or encouragement of the dominant male partners (Ramsland, 2010). This implies that these females would not have killed nor participated in such violent behaviors had they been in an intimate relationship with a different, less aggressive male. This suggestion forces one to look at what factors could drive these females to become so submissive to participate in such horrific behavior rather than discouraging the actions of their partners and turning to authority figures for assistance.

The intent of this study is not to excuse the actions of the female members of male-female serial killer teams in any way. Rather, the goal was to highlight the vicious, never ending cycle of abuse that can lead the victim to become the aggressor. Additionally, this study highlights the need for additional research of male-female serial killer teams in order to fully understand what can make nonaggressive females participate in such aggressive acts.

Additionally, this study highlights the need for additional research on the degrees of variance to which these women fall victim to their partners’ control and the degrees of their involvement. It is important that research looks at what makes the difference between whether a nonaggressive female participates in violent acts to the varying extents of Caril Ann Fugate, Karla Homolka, and Debra Brown. In order to understand and possibly prevent nonviolent females from succumbing to their violent male partner’s aggressive fantasies, it is critical that research begins to explore whether this variance is due to socialization, biological factors such as testosterone levels, or the level of abuse the female experiences within her relationship with her romantic partner.

While every case is unique, research is needed to more thoroughly examine the dynamic and complex relationships of male-female serial killer teams. Not only will a greater
understanding of these killing teams raise awareness of the risk factors associated with females entering into relationships with violent men, a better understanding of these rare occurrences may prove to be useful when determining the appropriate punishment and/or treatment of the female partners once they are apprehended. Greater understanding of these relationships could also be used to identify warning signs among women who are especially vulnerable to the manipulation that is common within male-female serial killer teams. As with the MacDonald Triad, which is used to recognize early warning signs of serial killers (Merz-Perez & Heide, 2004), discovering traits which are linked to females who become involved in male-female serial killer teams could help experts prevent such a relationship from occurring since they would be able to determine whether a female is at risk. Similar to the Macdonald Triad, these individual traits would not necessarily cause concern, but a combination of traits, such as low self-esteem combined with a history of abuse and an aggressive intimate partner, could lead psychiatric professionals to be considerably more attentive. But identifying females who are at risk is only half of the challenge. The other half of the challenge is determining how best to prevent a relationship that can become so volatile, especially if these women are predisposed to violent relationships because of their life experiences and psychological characteristics.
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