BTK: A New Breed of Serial Killer

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By

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Abstract

From 1974 until 2004 the citizens of Wichita, Kansas were plagued by a serial killer nightmare. A man by the name of Dennis Rader was caught and convicted of the murders of ten people during that period. This may seem like a tightly wrapped mystery, but the truth is that the case of the BTK serial killer is far from closed. This paper is meant to investigate the ways in which Dennis Rader deviated from the standard serial killer profile. The facts of the case, empirical evidence, notes from an expert, and Rader’s own confession will be used to frame the portrait of an entirely new breed of serial killer.
Two words from the millions in the human lexicon can stir up strong, and often terrible, emotions: serial killer. Murder is the most unsettling of human interactions. But more unsettling still is the idea that this violent, horrifying exchange can occur randomly with seemingly no motive. Human beings tend to rationalize murders by attributing them either to the area in which they occurred or the people involved; the common denominators allow us make sense of brutality (Fisher, 1997). For example, it is easy to blame a drug deal gone awry in a lower economic neighborhood or to assume the perpetrator knew the victims and was somehow connected to them. But it is when innocent people are brutally slain by those with whom they have no connection that we lose all feelings of safety and we feel more vulnerable to personal violence (Fisher, 1997).

Serial killers are incredibly difficult to explain because so much of their pathology simply exists without any notable cause. Fisher (1997) describes the motives of the killer as unknown, and “the unknown is feared most of all” (p. 15). Recent developments have suggested that biological variations could be the root of the phenomenon, but it is hard to garner much conclusive evidence since apprehended serial killers usually find themselves immediately on death row (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, April 26, 2007). But it is my opinion that is vital to strive to understand even the darkest aspects of humanity. Understanding the criminal brain is crucial if justice organizations ever hope to prevent serial murder.

Recently, the Wichita Police Department apprehended Dennis Rader in connection with the thirty-year-old murders of several women (Bardsley, Bell, & Lohr, 2007). Rader, working as a city compliance officer at the time of his arrest, later
confessed to ten murders in the Wichita area that began in 1974 (Bardsley et al., 2007). Rader was on trial for being the serial killer who gave himself the name BTK and terrorized residents for thirty years (Beattie, 2005). It is clear to me that Dennis Rader was involved in the killings in Kansas that threw the entire state into a panic. However, it is my firm belief that Dennis Rader is vastly different from any other serial killer that has ever been captured. The purpose of this paper is to describe the deviations Dennis Rader exhibited from the serial killer profile that has been in use in the United States for many years. With the information, I encourage further study and possible revisions of the profile.

My major is psychology, but my area of emphasis is forensic psychology. Forensic psychology is the application of psychology to any aspect of the law (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). I had the great fortune of studying forensic psychology under a truly remarkable professor at Ball State University: Ron Truelove. One of Ron’s specialties is serial crime pathology, and he is the person who ignited my passion for the area. Ron actually had the chance to review the evidence of this case at the request of a detective friend of his (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, April 26, 2007). From my research and my interview with Mr. Truelove, I have constructed my hypothesis about the new breed of serial killer.

To begin this task I feel it necessary to outline the particulars of the BTK case. The murders began in Wichita, Kansas on January 15th, 1974 (Beattie, 2005). On that day, police were called to a home on North Edgemoor Street by a phone call placed by some of the children who lived in that house who had just come home from school. When the police arrived, they beheld a horror that was unmatched in that community for
many years. The home belonged to the Otero family who had not lived in that particular house very long. The grisly scene involved the Otero parents dead and bound, the father on the floor at the foot of the bed and the mother on the bed, both were laying face down (Bardsley et al., 2007). The parents were both bound with Venetian blind chords that did not match any within the home (Beattie, 2005).

As if this were not enough carnage for one day, the Wichita police then found nine-year-old Joey Otero dead in his bedroom (Beattie, 2005). Joey had been bound much the same as the parents, but he was lying on his side, nearly on his back. The boy’s head was covered with several layers: first a pillowcase, then two plastic bags, and finally a T-shirt. But the macabre discoveries would not end there, as police then ventured into the Otero basement. The body of eleven-year-old Josie Otero was found hanging by the neck from a sewer pipe. Her hands and feet were heavily bound with more of the foreign Venetian blind chord and she was wearing only a sweatshirt. She was gagged with a towel and the police found semen on her leg.

News of the horrible crime shook the community of Wichita and police struggled to come up with an explanation (Beattie, 2005). Witnesses began to surface who had seen someone driving the Oteros’ car away from the home just about the time the police estimated the murders were concluded. Common description gave the driver as a man of Middle-Eastern decent with dark hair. That car was later discovered at a grocery store. Newspapers began offering rewards for information and a composite sketch of the suspect was made from four different eye-witness statements. Little did the police know that there would be no awakening from this nightmare for many years.
A second murder occurred just four months later on 13th Street, not far from the Otero murders (Beattie, 2005). Kathryn Bright returned home on April 4, 1974 accompanied, much to the killer’s surprise, by her brother Kevin. A man was waiting for them inside the house and emerged with a gun in his hand. He indicated he meant them no harm but was wanted by police and wanted Kathryn’s car keys and some money. When Kathryn refused, the man forced Kevin to tie his sister to a chair and then tied up Kevin in a separate bedroom. Kevin then heard the man rummaging through his sister’s home for several minutes. The man appeared to be calm and in control as he walked back and forth checking on Kathryn and Kevin. However, he then tried to strangle Kevin with a woman’s stocking.

Kevin grappled with the man, broke free, and got hold of the man’s gun (Beattie, 2005). Unfortunately the gun jammed when Kevin tried to shoot his attacker and the man retrieved it and shot Kevin in the forehead. The man returned to Kathryn’s bedroom thinking that Kevin was dead, but the bullet had not penetrated the skull and Kevin regained consciousness quickly. Kevin then heard what sounded like the man strangling his sister and he attacked the man again. During the struggle, Kevin was shot again in the face, not dying but feigning death. Kevin decided it was better to get out of the house and get help, so he snuck away. He found a passerby and reporting what had happened. Kathryn was later found stabbed three times in the abdomen with ligature marks around her neck.

A few days later, the Wichita police arrested a man—known to have mental problems—for the crime of child molestation (Beattie, 2005). While in custody, the man gave oddly accurate information regarding the Otero murders and subsequently confessed
to the killing, implicating two others in the process. Four days later, all three suspects were in custody and a phone call was placed to the *Wichita Eagle* newspaper, which had set up a hotline for anyone with information on the Otero case. The caller told the director of the hotline about a mechanical engineering book in the local library where he claimed the director would find a letter from the Oteros’ killer. The police recovered the letter, though it was not exactly where the caller had indicated.

The letter was typed and addressed to the *Wichita Eagle* Secret Witness Program (Beattie, 2005). The letter had several spelling and grammar mistakes and gave specific information about the positions of the bodies of the Oteros. From the text of the letter, including a statement about wasting the tax payers’ money by interrogating the wrong men, it was clear that this letter was intended to stake claim over the Otero crime. The letter also rambled on with pseudo-psychological terms as the killer attempted to describe his own mental state, and even apologized to society. Finally, the letter showed that the writer had knowledge of forensic psychology as it applied to serial killers: he claimed that his modus operandi (mo) would not change and he therefore gave himself a name: bind them, torture them, kill them (BTK). The police later released their three suspects.

BTK struck again three years later on March 17, 1977 at the home of Shirley Vian (Bardsley et al., 2007). He apparently forced his way inside the home where Shirley and her three children were residing (Beattie, 2005). He then produced a gun and began giving orders. The man instructed the woman to put some toys on a blanket in the bathroom and locked the children inside. Conflicting reports state that one or more of the children were able to catch a glimpse of the man while he was murdering their mother, but it would have been through a very small opening between the rooms. When one of
the children managed to escape the bathroom, BTK had gone and Shirley was dead.

Shirley’s hands and feet were bound and a plastic bag was placed over her head (Bardsley et al., 2007). A cord, similar to the type used on the Otero family, was wrapped tightly around her neck; the similarities between the crimes seemed to point to BTK as the killer (Bardsley et al, 2007).

BTK’s work continued on December 9, 1977. That morning, the police dispatcher received a call from a man claiming that there had been a home-icide (sic) at 843 South Pershing (Beattie, 2005). The voice on the phone even gave the name of the victim: Nancy Fox. When police arrived at the address, they found an all-too-familiar horror. Nancy Jo Fox, 25, was dead in her bedroom with a nylon stocking twisted around her throat (Bardsley et al., 2007). She was bound with other pairs of panty hose and gagged with still more pairs (Beattie, 2005). The unusual thing, as compared to other victims, was that Nancy was fully clothed (Bardsley et al., 2007). Upon more careful crime scene investigation than had been conducted on any of the previous victims, semen was discovered, although there was no evidence that Nancy had been sexually assaulted (Beattie, 2005). Nancy’s driver’s license was missing (Beattie, 2005).

Just over two months after this murder, as if on cue, BTK made contact with the press (Beattie, 2005). On February 10, 1978 the local television station KAKE-TV received a business envelope with no return address. Inside the envelope were copies of four pages; two of which were a letter, one was a poem, and one was a drawing of how Nancy Fox’s body was positioned when it was found. The letter not only took credit for Fox’s murder, but expressed the killer’s dissatisfaction that the newspaper had not reported on a poem he had written about Shirley Vian. The poem was later discovered
mistakenly rerouted to the advertising department and overlooked for some time. It was a take on the Appalachian folk song *Oh Death*, with new lyrics about Nancy Fox. The letter also indicated BTK’s desire for national attention and made reference to many other famous serial killers. Faced with this new evidence, the police of Wichita held a press conference to confirm the link between the Otero murders and the more recent brutal killings.

The city of Wichita, now aware that they had a serial killer on the loose, was overrun with panic (Bardsley et al., 2007). Women, upon returning home, would require their husbands to search the residence before they would enter (Beattie, 2005). A popular reassuring behavior amongst single women was to check to see if their phone line had been cut; BTK had indicated that this was part of his pattern in the letter to the news station (Beattie, 2005). These behaviors were understandable because human beings will alter their personal behavior in the face of a real or perceived threat (Fisher, 1997). The media continued to give a great deal of coverage to the case, which terrified the residents even more (Beattie, 2005). But the media was only reacting to the insatiable need for information regarding this threat. This symbiotic relationship is common in serial murder cases (Fisher, 1997). The question remained: who would be next?

Anna Williams, 63, was supposed to be BTK’s next victim, but he never got his chance to claim her (Beattie, 2005). On the night of April 28, 1979, BTK cut Anna’s phone line and broke into her home through a back window, neatly piling all the broken glass. He then hid, much as before, in the bedroom closet and waited for her to return. To the killer’s frustration, Anna never came home. BTK stole a scarf and other clothes from the bedroom along with some jewelry and some petty cash. When Anna returned
home later that night, after attending a dance, she discovered the broken glass and cut phone line. But what really motivated her to call the police was a length of rope tied around a broom handle near her bed as a macabre notice of how close she came to death.

It was theorized that it was actually Anna’s granddaughter whom BTK had been stalking, as she often stayed at the home (Beattie, 2005). However, Anna Williams shared her name with one of the victims of a famous serial killer BTK mentioned in his letter to KAKE-TV, so it was possible she was in fact the target. Two months later, Anna received a package containing many of her stolen items, along with another poem and some more grisly drawings. The poem indicated that BTK was upset that he did not get the chance to kill Anna and the drawings showed how her body would have been positioned. The police later received a similar package with more of Anna’s stolen belongings and a letter taking credit for the break-in.

Shortly thereafter, the killings and the communiqués from BTK stopped completely (Beattie, 2005). The case started to go cold as no more murders were connected to BTK and the letters and packages stopped arriving. The residents of Wichita were slowly starting to believe that the nightmare was finally over. One after another, new detectives came into office and the old guard that had worked on the BTK case retired. Evidence began to collect dust on a shelf in the cold case files. It was almost thirty years before BTK was heard from again (Bardsley et al., 2007).

The *Wichita Eagle* received a letter on March 19, 2004 from BTK himself (Bardsley et al., 2007). In the letter, BTK claimed that he had killed a woman named Vicki Wegerle on September 16, 1986. Until that moment, the death of Vicki Wegerle had been unsolved. Included in the letter were a photocopy of the victim’s driver’s
license and three photographs of her body. A detective who had worked on the original BTK case confirmed that the letter was authentic. It was thought that BTK was seeking media attention again and bragging about his crime, but no matter the motive, it was clear that Wichita’s worst nightmare was not yet over (Beattie, 2005).

It did not take long for BTK to contact the press again, this time with a more elaborate letter (Bardsley et al., 2007). The second letter arrived on May 5, 2004 at the KAKE-TV station which BTK had contacted previously (Beattie, 2005). The letter was three pages long and contained sections of the Court TV’s Crime Library story about BTK (Bardsley et al., 2007). He had rearranged some chapter titles and included his own chapter of word puzzles (Bardsley et al., 2007). The FBI authenticated the letter and hoped these new letters would allow them to identify the writer (Bardsley et al., 2007). Residents of Wichita began to wonder if the police would catch him before he killed again (Beattie, 2005).

Yet another letter turned up on October 22, 2004 in a UPS drop box outside a major downtown center (Bardsley et al., 2007). This letter was once again authenticated and confirmed as coming from BTK. In the letter, the contents of which were revealed to the press a month later, BTK gave several supposedly true facts about himself. He was clearly playing games with the police again, but the information was released on the chance that some of the facts were true and someone might be able to identify the perpetrator.

The list of characteristics proved to be the last communication with police (Beattie, 2005). On February 25, 2005 Wichita police arrested Dennis Rader, 59, and were convinced that he was the BTK serial killer (Beattie, 2005). The police were acting
on information that had been given to them by Rader’s own daughter (Bardsley et al., 2007). Rader was working as a compliance officer at the time and had been exhibiting strangely hostile and controlling behavior toward people in his community (Bardsley et al., 2007).

Rader had attended Wichita State University, where police had tracked the photocopy of one letter from BTK (Beattie, 2005). This connection was significant since Rader perverted two poems taught in a WSU literature course into taunting police letters. The police found out that Rader had in fact taken that course. Rader had been in the Air Force where he may have been part of the “Born to Kill” squadron. This squadron is most likely where Rader garnered his sinister name (BTK). It was here that he may have met Joseph Otero, an employee of the base’s health club. Rader also worked at the Coleman plant in Wichita, makers of camping products for both military and private use, alongside two BTK victims. He also lived very near some of the victims, even on the same street as one of them (Bardsley et al., 2007).

On June 27, 2005, after a media circus, Dennis Rader confessed to ten counts of murder (Bardsley et al., 2007). Not only did he confess to the murders of the known BTK victims, but also to the 1985 murder of Marine Hedge, 53, and the 1991 murder of Dolores Davis, 62, which were two unsolved Wichita murders. Rader stood stoic and cold as he gave the judge his account of the despicable acts that he had done. Physical evidence, such as Rader’s blood under victims’ fingernails, began to surface that tied Rader to all of his victims and he was found guilty of ten counts of first degree murder. On August 18, 2005, family members of the victims got the chance to deliver messages to Dennis Rader in which he was called a coward and a monster and the judge was asked
to give Rader the harshest possible sentence. Rader then delivered a speech in which he apologized to the victims’ families, shedding tears at points. He was finally sentenced to nine life sentences, 175 years, with no chance of parole. As there was no death penalty in Kansas after 1994, this was the harshest sentence Rader could have gotten (Bardsley et al., 2007).

While the police in Wichita are considering this case closed, I contend that this case demands more investigation. Dennis Rader, the BTK serial killer, is not the typical serial killer, if indeed one can say that any serial killer is typical. For many years, the FBI has been using a two fold model of profiling serial killers (Canter, Alison, Alison, & Wentink, 2004). This profile breaks serial killers into two groups: organized and disorganized (Canter et al., 2004). There is actually a third type known as mixed that I will refer to again, but critics of the profiling system argue that the existence of a third category only further shows the system’s inconsistencies (Vronsky, 2004).

I have studied the individual characteristics of each type of serial killer during my forensic psychology course with Mr. Truelove. His expertise, along with empirical information I have gathered, has equipped me to analyze Dennis Rader’s methodology. The fact is that Dennis Rader breaks the mold of everything we know about serial killers, and therefore represents a new breed.

Based on the facts of the Rader case, paired with the current standards, Rader qualifies as a serial killer. He meets the three criteria: he killed those he did not know, he killed at least three times, and there was down time or a “cooling-off” period in between the kills (Schechter, 2003). Rader, according to the FBI profile and other empirical sources, also qualifies as an organized serial killer (Canter et al., 2004). Rader
planned his crimes ahead of time and stalked his victims before killing them (Beattie, 2005). Premeditation is one of the defining attributes of an organized serial killer (Canter et al., 2004), but further organized serial killer traits were exhibited by Rader.

Rader gained control over his victims at the crime scene through a ruse, as opposed to the brute force attack of a disorganized killer (Canter et al., 2004; Vronsky, 2004). The ruse he used with the Oteros is not known, but there was no sign of forced entry indicating that he was allowed inside the home (Beattie, 2005). With Shirley Vian, Rader pretended to be looking for a lost dog on the street when he spoke to one of her children; this was how he knew she was home and why the children answered the door for him (Beattie, 2005). Rader was methodical in his crimes and brought his own weapons or murder kit (Vronsky, 2004). In fitting with the organized serial killer profile, he was also socially competent and employed at a regular job (Vronsky, 2004). Rader followed the media coverage of his own crimes and sent the media various communications (Godwin, 2005). The involvement with the media is something that characterizes all organized serial killers (Vronsky, 2004). He was obsessed with law enforcement and held jobs such as dogcatcher and city ordinance officer (Bardsley et al., 2007). This involvement/obsession with police-type activities is another mark of the organized serial killer (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005).

Another of the litmus tests for determining the typology of a serial killer is whether he lives with a long-term partner (Newton, 2000). Disorganized serial killers will live alone and have adaptive problems or mental disabilities (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005; Vronsky, 2004). However, the organized offender is often found to be married with children (Vronsky, 2004). Denis Rader was in fact
married, and had children, during his reign of terror (Beattie, 2005). Organized serial killers can live normal lives apart from their crimes without their partners suspecting (Newton, 2000). This ability to lead a double life without suspicion is referred to as the mask of sanity (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). Many other organized serial killers have had this mask including Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy, the latter living with his unsuspecting mother (Newton, 2000). Beyond that, however, Rader deviates in several areas from the organized serial killer profile.

The biggest deviation I found is that Rader took, at one point, a thirteen year break from killing (Beattie, 2005). No other organized serial killer has taken such a long break (Newton, 2000). The FBI agents working on the BTK case in Kansas even remarked that this lengthy break set Rader apart (Bardsley et al., 2007). Serial killers, especially organized serial killers, cannot stop killing (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). They are hardwired to keep doing what they are doing because it is the only thing that gives them sexual satisfaction (Douglas & Olshaker, 1999). It defies their very nature to stop and it would be easier for a human being to fly from a rooftop than it would be for a serial killer to stop killing (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, April 26, 2007).

The only thing that will keep a serial killer from killing is death or imprisonment (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, April 26, 2007). But Dennis Rader was neither dead nor incarcerated during his hiatus (Bardsley et al., 2007). Nor did Rader move to a different killing location as did Ted Bundy in the 1970’s (Newton, 2000). Rader, for whatever reason, simply decided not to kill anymore from 1991 until 2004 nor did he contact police from 1979 until 2004 (Bardsley et al., 2007). We know he was not out of
the area or in jail because he was living with his wife and children at the time of the break (Bardsley et al., 2007). So while his mask of sanity falls right in line with the organized profile, the fact that he simply chose not to kill for thirteen years sets him vastly apart from other organized killers. For this reason alone, Rader should be studied further by forensic psychologists, but there are many other inconsistencies with his profile.

Organized serial killers exhibit what is known as escalation (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). In other words, their crimes become more refined as they persist (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). FBI profiler John Douglas refers to this process as evolution (Douglas & Olshaker, 1999). Usually the escalation starts at a young age with cruelty to animals and works its way up to voyeurism (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). Ted Bundy was arrested at a young age for voyeurism before graduating to murder (Newton, 2000). I have found in my research that once the perpetrator has set his mind on murder the next step is usually home invasion of the intended victim and theft of their clothing (Douglas & Olshaker, 1999). Douglas actually states that he worked a case in which a woman’s home had been burglarized and her underwear was missing (Douglas & Olshaker, 1999). He became the only person to believe that there was the potential for a serial killer presence; he was subsequently right.

The organized serial killer’s first murder is usually messy and does not go exactly as planned (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). The crime scenes will become neater and less evidence will be left as the culprit becomes more aware of forensic practices (Godwin, 2005). This tidiness is also the result of the organized offender being a perfectionist who will keep making improvements to his technique with
each kill (Vronsky, 2004). Again drawing on the example of the most prolific serial killer of the twentieth century, Ted Bundy, his first murder scene included blood stained sheets and the victim’s bloody night gown (Newton, 2000). Later on, Bundy became so proficient at killing that he was able to lead a woman from the beach to his killing site, murder her, dump her body, and come back for a second victim the same day (Newton, 2000). But Rader once again defies the categorization of an organized serial killer in this respect.

Dennis Rader’s first murder occurred at the home of the Otero family (Beattie, 2005). Joseph Otero was not only an employee of the United States Air Force, but also trained and skilled in martial arts. Rader was not only able to subdue Mr. Otero but also his wife and two children. He was able to kill the family in different locations in the house and even hang young Josie from a pipe in the basement without a struggle. It is said that Rader carried a firearm with him, which may explain how he was able to keep control over the family while he killed them all. Still, his very first murder went off without a hitch and he was able to escape.

This proficiency with the first kill may not seem to be much of a deviation upon first glance, but when paired with other facts of the BTK case it paints a very odd portrait of this serial killer. With the first murder under his belt, all reasonable forensic psychology would suggest that Rader’s second murder would have been just as easy, if not easier (Vronsky, 2004). But the murder of Kathryn Bright, Rader’s second victim was anything but simple (Beattie, 2005). As mentioned previously, there were a pair of struggles with Kathryn’s brother Kevin that could have easily cost Rader his life if his gun had not jammed (Beattie, 2005). Not only that, but Kevin was the only Rader victim
who was able to escape, forcing Rader to flee the scene of the crime without realizing his full sexual satisfaction. Unfortunately, Kathryn did die (Godwin, 2005).

Rader once again had his gun, but was unable to control two people during this murder (Beattie, 2005). This fact is unbelievable when paired with the fact that he killed an entire family of four prior to this with absolutely no struggle. Rader’s third murder of Shirley Vian was just as poorly executed. Rader did not expect so many children to be at home and had to lock them in the bathroom to keep them out of the way. And, despite the fact that he again had a gun, Shirley apparently fought against him so hard that she scratched his face; this according to one of her children’s eyewitness account. Again, Rader was forced to flee the scene without killing the children as he expressed a desire to do in a later letter to police.

Where is the escalation that had prior characterized organized serial killers? With Dennis Rader what we actually see is a de-escalation in which the murders started out clean and easy and then became messy and haphazard. In fact this pattern appears to repeat itself in Rader’s later crimes. The murder of Nancy Jo Fox went precisely as Rader had intended, indicating that he was escalating from there (Beattie, 2005). However he botched the murder attempt of his next intended victim Anna Williams; waiting in her home for her without knowing when she would return and then leaving unfulfilled (Beattie, 2005). The de-escalation actually happened twice in a sort of wave pattern. In my discussions with Mr. Truelove, I have learned that no other serial killer, to his knowledge, as ever exhibited this kind of high to low slope in murder proficiency (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, April 26, 2007). Again it seems obvious that Rader’s behavior challenges our profile of organized serial killers.
Further challenging the organized profile, Rader exhibited drastic fluctuations in his modus operandi, his M.O. There is a common misconception that serial killers are unable to change their M.O., but the truth is that they can change it to a degree (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). The M.O. is simply how the crime is committed, but the reason for doing it is called the signature; every serial criminal has one (Douglas, 1999). The signature does not change because many times the criminal does not know what it is or why he is doing it (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). Ted Bundy, now a favorite reference point, killed women who looked like the fiancée who had rejected him. His signature was that he killed his fiancée over and over again. BTK, with his limited knowledge of forensic psychology, referred to something he called “factor X” that made him kill although he could not identify it (Beattie, 2005); this X-factor was his signature.

But Rader’s changes in M.O. were so great that they make recognizing his X-factor even more difficult. Rader killed all of his previously known victims in their homes, leaving their bodies bound and positioned in the house when he left (Beattie, 2005). But the two previously unsolved murders to which Rader confessed once he was caught displayed wildly different tactics. Marine Hedge, who was murdered in 1985, was abducted from her home, taken out to the woods, murdered, and her body hidden in a ditch. Marine was not bound and was strangled by hand despite the police finding a stocking near her. Delores Davis, murdered in 1991, was abducted from her home, strangled by indeterminate means, and then dumped under a bridge.

Rader completely changed the way in which he was killing his victims. Many people believed the home invasion angle that he had been using prior to these killings
was part of his fantasy, so why had this changed? One could make the argument that this was evidence of Rader once again escalating, because killing women in their homes was no longer good enough for him. This would be a reasonable argument except that Rader killed another woman, Vicki Wegerle, in her home between these two especially deviant murders (Beattie, 2005). Vicki Wegerle had been killed by a man who forced his way into her home by posing as a telephone repair man. That man strangled her with a nylon she had in her room and left her for dead. Rader not only confessed to this killing but police found photos of Vicki’s dead body in his home, so it was clear this was not fabrication.

The changes in Rader’s style of killing are perplexing. On the one hand, killing and dumping the bodies in places apart from the victims’ homes seems to put another hash mark in the organized killer classification (Vronsky, 2004). However this item of classification is not uncommonly absent and a serial killer can be categorized as organized without it. But what defies the classification system is that Rader becomes more organized about where he kills, and then repeats his old habits before returning to more organized methods. In essence, he is going back and forth between more and less organized patterns. The FBI does recognize a third typography of serial killers: mixed serial killers. However the factors that cause the mixture of styles are not things the killer anticipates, and are often attributed to the young age of the killer. However, Rader’s changes defy his classification as a mixed serial killer because he chose to change. It is as if Rader were trying on styles to see which he liked best.

Further evidence of Rader’s sampling of styles can be found in other M.O. variations he exhibited throughout his crime career. For the Otero murders, Rader
brought a murder kit with him that contained not only the cord used on the family but even one of the pillow cases used on the young boy (Godwin, 2005; R.S. Truelove, personal communication, April 26, 2007). One of the principal characteristics of an organized serial killer, as opposed to a disorganized serial killer, is that the instruments of death are brought to the scene by the killer (Vronsky, 2004). Rader brought his own rope to the Kathryn Bright murder and his own cord to the Shirley Vian murder. However, he disposed of the former in a nearby truck bed and ended up stabbing Kathryn instead of using his own tools (Beattie, 2005).

Nancy Jo Fox had been bound, strangled, and gagged with her own panty hose (Beattie, 2005). It is as if Rader simply forgot his murder kit on this night. Although this suggests an impromptu decision to kill her, he had in fact been stalking Nancy before killing her. In the letter he sent to KAKE-TV after Nancy’s murder, he claims to have done a little pre-planning before killing her. He waited in her closet for just the right moment and even turned up the heat to hide the breeze coming in from the broken window through which he entered. I believe BTK was again playing with the typologies of serial killers by planning the murder as an organized serial killer would do (Vronsky, 2004), but then deliberately using weapons from inside the house to mimic a disorganized serial killer’s method (Vronsky, 2004).

As if the modus operandi variations were not perplexing enough, Rader’s communications with the police suggest even more duality in his methods. Letters written to the Wichita police—via the newspapers and television stations—were fraught with spelling and grammar errors (Godwin, 2005). However these same letters typically had very complicated words spelled correctly (Godwin, 2005). For example, the first
letter used sentences such as: “those three dude you have in custody” and “it a big complicated [sic] game my friend” (Beattie, 2005, 41; 43). But the letter also correctly spells “psychotic with sexual perversion” (Beattie, 2005, 43). It is almost as if two people wrote this letter: an educated man and someone with a learning disability.

It could be assumed that this duality in writing suggests Rader has DID (disassociative identity disorder). I made this assumption myself after reading a line in the letter in which Rader claims a monster in his head makes him kill and that it needed to be stopped (Beattie, 2005). This line would suggest DID because Rader makes it seem as if he has an external locus of control by claiming someone outside himself is controlling him. However, serial killing, especially if the murder method is strangulation, indicates a high internal locus of control because the person is playing God (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, April 26, 2007). My research into DID led me to understand that people who have this disorder most likely do not share the same memories as the other selves that reside in the shared mind (Spanos, 1994). In other words, if Rader really did have DID it is not likely that he would have any memory of what “the monster” had done and could not apologize for it (Spanos, 1994). Not only that but when Rader was captured he made no attempt to use this disorder as a means to avoid a stricter sentence, indicating that he did not in fact have the disorder (Bardsley et al., 2007).

So why would Rader pretend to have a mental deficiency by indicating in his letters that a monster made him kill when in fact he did not have DID? My answer: Rader was switching between organized and disorganized typologies in order to play games with the police. I base this on several points within his communications. The ruse
about the monster in his mind was meant to imply a mental disorder, and mental disorders in serial killers are tantamount to a disorganized typology (Vronsky, 2004). But Rader neither had nor currently has any mental disorders and I believe that the inclusion of the correctly spelled psychological terms suggest his knowledge of criminal psychology. Rader wanted to toy with the police by making them think that they were looking for a degenerate, psychotic drifter. In fact, after this letter was received, several of the suspects investigated by the Wichita police were men with mental disorders (Beattie, 2005).

The misspelled words and very poorly constructed sentences would also suggest someone with little education. Again, the typology of the disorganized serial killer includes that the person is of low intelligence (Vronsky, 2004). But the correctly spelled words and the later inclusion of lines from a poem by James Joyce (Beattie, 2005) would indicate that Rader was very well educated. The fact that Rader attended Wichita State University would support this claim (Beattie, 2005). Again we see Rader trying on styles in order to toy with the police; something never before attempted by a serial killer nor since.

Rader's new tactic of switching between organized and disorganized methodologies may be the only possible explanation for another big mystery surrounding the BTK case: why did Rader confess so willingly once arrested? As I mentioned previously, serial killers cannot stop killing (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). So whenever a serial killer is apprehended, they often concoct a scheme for getting out of long term jail time. After all, what could impede their killing more than being behind bars? When our boy Ted Bundy was first arrested, he
schmoozed the guards into liking him so they would give him library detail. Ted then was trusted enough to be left alone for a moment in the library, from which he promptly escaped. Several more victims followed before he was caught again. Kenneth Bianchi, the famed Hillside Strangler, also tried to avoid real jail time by pretending to have multiple identity disorder, but his ploy was discovered by psychologists and he was given two life terms (Newton, 2000).

But Dennis Rader did nothing to avoid a lengthy sentence; quite the opposite actually (Beattie, 2005). Although apparently laying the groundwork decades before in his letter, Rader made no attempt to push for an insanity defense or one that relied on supposed multiple identity disorder (Bardsley et al., 2007). Rader did not even bother to address the fact that when the Wichita police went on national television and triumphantly claimed to have captured BTK (Beattie, 2005), they made it impossible for him to have a trial by an impartial jury because everyone in America now believed he was guilty (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). Instead, Rader confessed not only to all the murders attributed to BTK, but also two unsolved murders that had never been tied to him: Marine Hedge and Delores Davis (Bardsley et al., 2007).

The fact that Rader confessed so willingly confounds me and what I know of forensic psychology. But what I could not understand was why he confessed to murders for which he was not being charged, nor to which he was even connected? I thought back to the letters BTK began sending police again in 2004 and I realized that he had taken credit for only one of the three unsolved murders to which he later confessed (Beattie, 2005). It seemed odd that a person who was once so adamant about receiving credit for his crimes would only let the police know about one of his three new accomplishments.
Rader’s first letter to police had, after all, been a denouncement of their current suspects in which he bragged of his own guilt (Beattie, 2005).

Then it hit me: Rader’s victims whom he had not claimed in his new letters had been his most experimental. Rader killed Marine Hedge and Delores Davis in an entirely new manner in order to keep alive his pattern of switching styles, but the experimental nature of the crimes could have made those victims more likely to link Rader to them. The fact that they were transported, killed outdoors, and moved again to be dumped would have made them more susceptible to contain physical trace evidence from Rader under Locard’s theory, which states that victim and perpetrator will often exchange materials that can lead to identification of the perpetrator (Gebeth, 2007). If Rader was out in the woods killing and moving a body it would have been difficult for him to control the environment and clean up all traces of the act. Rader did get satisfaction out of these kills, but he did not claim them until he was already caught because he worried that if a connection was made between BTK and these bodies, that he would be captured. After his arrest, Rader knew the police would find the photographs of Marine in his home (Bardsley et al., 2007), so he merely beat them to the punch and took credit for his work by confessing in court.

Another of Rader’s largest deviations from the current profile of any type of serial killer came at his sentencing. While the family members of Rader’s victims told him how much they loathed him and how much he had destroyed their lives, he had tears in his eyes (Bardsley et al., 2007). Not only that, but he wept as he openly apologized to the family members for what he had done. Later, in a police van after being sentenced, Rader heard a recording of the mother of one his victims on the radio speaking about how
her life had changed and again he cried. Rader was showing remorse for what he had done at all three points.

The fact is that serial killers, as we know them today, have never shown remorse for their crimes (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005). It goes along with the difference in the way their minds are wired to never stop killing. They have no sympathy for their victims. They see their crimes as works of art or see their victims as objects for their own sexual release, which is how they can brutalize them in the first place. Some have argued that the tears were Rader’s way of getting a lesser sentence, but he cried even after sentencing (Bardsley et al., 2007). Not only that, but he covered the head of young Joey Otero with a pillow case that was not in fact used to strangle him (Beattie, 2005), indicating a regret that he had killed Joey. I learned that Joey was actually a member of a Boy Scout troop with whom Rader, a former scout leader, had gone to camp (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, April 26, 2007). It is therefore likely that if he was showing remorse, though still highly irregular for serial killers, it was due to that relationship.

In conclusion, Dennis Rader is the BTK serial killer; of that I have no doubt. He had photographs of some of his victims’ dead bodies in his home and DNA tied him to others (Bardsley et al., 2007). But he is definitely a serial killer who breaks the mold as far as what forensic psychologists know about serial killers. Most noticeably he deviates from the typology of any serial killer, organized or disorganized, in that he took a thirteen year break from killing (Beattie, 2005). The cardinal rule of serial killer profiling is that serial killers cannot stop (R.S. Truelove, personal communication, March 17, 2005), and yet he did. While Rader does fit the profile of an organized serial killer in many
undeniable respects, he also strays into disorganized territory for what appear to be deliberate reasons (Vronsny, 2004). His strange escalation patterns, modus operandi changes, perplexing communications, confounding confessions, and display of remorse at his sentencing do not fit the profile of an organized serial killer.

Rader has been playing both sides of the typology fence for thirty years. It is my firm belief that Rader’s refusal to adopt one pattern over the other is what makes him part of a new breed of serial killer. It may be that this new type of serial killer is actually able to go on killing hiatuses such as the one Rader took, and that would explain his unusually long break. But if this is true, then we must renovate the classification system for serial killers.

It is entirely possible that I am mistaken. But even if I am wrong, I hope that this paper may get the ball rolling on investigating the BTK case more closely. We cannot allow ourselves to stagnate in the comforting thought that a killer is behind bars. Whether or not my theory is correct, Rader still deviates greatly from the known serial killer profile and that is well worth a second glance. His thirteen year break and display of remorse alone should be enough for any investigator to think twice before filing this case away.

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