Copycat Killers

Lei-lani Maiden
Forensic Psychology
Justice, Period 2
Why Did I Select this Topic?

I selected copycat murderers as my topic because it is something that we were unable to discuss in class, and it seemed very interesting. I had some minimal knowledge prior to my research, but I didn’t know very much about the psychologic connection in regards to the motives of copycat killers. So, my main research question for my project was: “What are the motives of someone who commits a copycat murder, and are there any constants?”
Various Motives of Copycat Killers

■ Heriberto Seda (the zodiac copycat killer) said that he became a copycat killer because he wanted the media to believe that the original zodiac killer had made a return.

■ Mark Andrew Twitchell (the Dexter copycat killer) became a copycat killer because he wanted to make a movie out of his murderous escapades.

■ John Hinckley (the Taxi Driver copycat killer) became a copycat killer (though he was unsuccessful) because he believed it would impress actress Jodie Foster.

■ There are over thirteen copycat killers inspired by the film, Natural Born Killers (the most famous being Sarah Edmonson and Ben Darras).
Mental Illness in Copycat Killers

- Sarah Edmonson’s exact mental issues are unknown to the public, however she was in and out of mental rehabilitation clinics throughout her teenage years. Ben Darras has an unnamed learning disability. He also had a severely alcoholic father who abused his children and wife. His father (and older brother) eventually committed suicide. Both Sarah and Ben were on LSD at the time of the murders.

- During the time of the attempted murder, John Hinckley was diagnosed with a major depressive disorder and an unspecified psychotic disorder. He has been more recently diagnosed (as of 2012) with narcissistic and schizoid personality disorders.

- Heriberto Seda was diagnosed with atypical schizophrenia and was noted to have an ‘extreme emotional disturbance.’

- Mark Andrew Twitchell self-diagnosed himself as a psychopath (professional confirmation pending).

- It is worth noting that those who commit copycat killings are on average, in late adolescence or early adulthood, which is the age when the typical onset of a psychotic disorder occurs.
Depersonalization: A Possible Cause

- Depersonalization is when one (purposefully or uncontrollably) detaches themselves from their identity (emotionally and sometimes even psychically), and in some cases creates their own persona.

- This explains why people (who would normally be unable to commit such crimes) are able to commit murder under the identity/inspiration of someone else.

- “There is a natural human inhibition against killing that can be reduced by adopting a persona. The idea is that the character provides a vehicle through which the atrocity is committed,” – Nigel Barber Ph.D.
Does the Glorification of Murderers in the Media Create Copycat Killers?

- The United States is the only country that handles the media in the manner in we do (specifically in the lack of guidelines). Other countries have protocol that gives their citizens complete coverage without sensationalizing the event.

- For example, Italy handles copycat suicides under these rules: “Don't refer to the word suicide in the headline. Don't report the method of the suicide. Don't present it as an inexplicable act of an otherwise healthy person.”

- It is evident that the media does play a significant role (seen in the motives of copycat criminals alone). Modifications to the way we present issues such as these could cause a downtrend in copycat crimes. Simple things as pulling the offender’s social media accounts, withholding the method of murder, and withholding the name of the offender, could greatly improve the situation.
The Contagion Effect

- The contagion effect describes a form of sudden shock that rapidly spreads throughout a society. In relativity, to this topic, the shock is not the actual murder, but the huge blow up in the media. Through this, people become infected with an idea. Most copycat criminals want that publicity, and the media gives it to them.

- When dealing with the recent Oregon school shooting (in which the perpetrator was inspired by Vester Flanagan) Sheriff John Hanlin pleaded with the media to stop reporting the way they were. He stated that: “I don't want to glorify the shooter, I don't want to glorify his name, I don't want to glorify his cause, You won't hear his name from me or this investigation...It would only serve to encourage future shooters.”
Copycat Suicide

- In a study done by Dr. Madelyn Gould of the New York State Psychiatric Institute, she found that: “the more sensational the reporting, the more details provided, and the more prominent the story’s placement, the more likely it was that additional suicides would follow.”

- In her research she also found that the group that is most effected by this is young adults, and as of late is up four times higher than any other age group.

- In her research ("cluster-suicide" research), she also shadowed a town that had eleven suicides over a period of time, and after each suicide, another occurred within three months, in a similar fashion of the original.

- However, she also found that there was more coverage for the original, and not as much for the copycat suicides.

- "Pact Suicides" (committing suicide in a group) are also an issue common in young adults.
Accounts by Copycat Killers

■ One other event that lead to Heriberto Seda’s murders was that he studied military maneuvers, weaponry, etc. However, he failed his entrance exam into the Special Forces. He stated in an interview with his girlfriend: “I thought, ‘What am I going to do with all this information I have?’” After watching a PBS documentary on the original zodiac killer he said that: “Holy smokes! This guy terrorized a whole city and never got caught. I got nothing to live for. I don’t got no job. I already got those skills. I could be famous. I could do that.”

■ “Jodie Foster may continue to outwardly ignore me for the rest of my life, but I have made her one of the most famous actresses in the world.” – John Hinckley
Other Facts

- In 1982, “Tylenol Copycat Killers” were common when a news report detailed people who had been killed because their Tylenol had been laced with cyanide.

- Theirry Jardin (24 at the time) killed his neighbor (a 15 year old girl) when she refused his romantic advances. He donned a *Scream* costume and stabbed her in the fashion of the movies.

- Derek Brown, the Jack the Ripper copycat killer, targeted women in the Whitechapel area of East London. He killed two prostitutes, but was caught soon after.
Key Terms and Test Questions

■ Short-Answer Questions:
  – Does the media have an important influence in copycat murders? Explain your opinion.
  – Is mental illness common in copycat killers? What are some examples of prevalent mental illness in known copycat killers?

■ Key Terms:
  – Copycat Killers
  – Depersonalization
  – The Contagion Effect
THANK YOU