

## Part 5. What are the causes of serial murder? Psychopathy and Dominance

**Barrie J. Ritter, Ph.D. ©2016**



David Berkowitz  
*Serial Killers: whenthefreakscomeout.com*

There are two fundamental characteristics of serial murderers: a psychopathic personality and the characteristic of “dominance.” Neither is inevitably related to any form of criminality or to deviance. Contrary to the impression often given by the FBI and academics about psychopathy and serial murderers, this personality type is often the center of attention, appears to shine and is viewed as a “winner.” The World Health Organization (1960) found that [psychopaths](#) are frequently seen in positions of power. This is related to their superficial charm and intelligence, their glibness and ability to manipulate people, their lack of nervousness. There is also a lack of shame, guilt and empathy which is why they are willing to take devious routes or use illicit means to satisfy their ambitions or desires. In addition, psychopathy includes “unreliability, untruthfulness and insincerity, inadequately motivated antisocial behavior, poor judgment [with] failure to learn by experience, and . . . egocentricity” (Cleckley, 1982, p. 204).

It is a myth that serial killers lack self-esteem. Quite the opposite: they frequently exhibit high dominance-feeling. Explorers and naturalists have long recognized that a dominant minority of approximately five percent exists among all species and that this five percent is found at the highest levels of their respective pecking orders. (For instance, a British explorer at the turn of the century was asked how many men could lead his party if he became disabled and he replied “one in twenty” Hall, 1974). Among humans, the five percent includes leaders and those who have a “will to power.” In the 1930s, Abraham Maslow began studies of dominance among both animal and human groups. He found that high dominance-feeling empirically involves “good self-confidence, self-assurance, high evaluation of the self, feelings of general capability or

superiority, lack of shyness, timidity, self-consciousness or embarrassment” (Lowry, 1973, p. 74). They are also more prideful, tough-minded and less conventional.

People with the highest levels of dominance said they have no code of morals or ethics. They felt they could do anything to achieve their own ends, had never felt guilty and cared little about anyone else’s rules. The pecking order determines the direction of aggression: who is likely to attack and who is likely to be attacked. Mild electrical stimulation of a region of the hypothalamus is known to elicit “rage” responses in lower animals, but, among higher mammals, aggression is under cortical control. Monkeys establish a dominance hierarchy with one or two males acting as leaders and the remainder taking varying levels of subordination. When the dominant monkey receives electrical stimulation of the hypothalamus, he attacks lower-level males (not females), but the same treatment of a monkey at the lower level of the dominance hierarchy produces cowering and submission. Among monkeys – and humans – aggression is controlled by the cortex, by past experience and context. It does not occur entirely at random, is more likely to come from the top of the pecking order, to be directed downward, and is rarely directed upward by those who have no power. Psychopathic personality and high dominance-feeling are terms that exist independently of serial murderers, although they seem applicable to them.

It requires a closer reading of the material on individual killers to expand upon these terms and make them directly relevant to serial [murder](#), which I will begin to do in the next article, Part 6.

## **SUGGESTED LINKS**

- [Part 1. What are the causes of serial murder?](#)
- [Part 4. Early Criminality](#)
- [Part 3. Occupations and Aspirations](#)
- [Part 2. School, Social Life, Role Models](#)



**Barrie Ritter**

Crime & Justice Examiner