

Psychology of Albert Fish

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ABSTRACT

Having reportedly victimized hundreds of children in the early 1900s, Albert Fish's abhorrent, paraphilic crimes have been the subject of research for the better part of a century. Presently, much conjecture exists as to whether Fish's crimes were the result of familial mental illness (nature) or environmental abuses suffered as a child (nurture). However, it is possible that the etiology of Fish's atrocities stem from both the biological and environmental factors outlined in this piece.

Keywords: Albert Fish, Paraphilia, Pedophilia, Sadomasochism, Serial Murder, Child Abuse

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Introduction

Albert Fish was a deeply troubled individual whose heinous actions bear witness to his disturbing, traumatic past. Among Fish's prolific crimes were the abduction, strangulation, and cannibalization of 12-year-old Grace Budd in 1928 (Bardsley, 2013; Ramsland & McGrain, 2010; Vronsky, 2004). It was the infamous letter Fish wrote to Grace's mother, Delia Budd, in 1934, which led to his capture and eventual execution (Bardsley, 2013; Reeder & Mayer, 2009; Schechter, 2003). The letter not only graphically depicted Fish's method of killing, preparing, and cannibalizing young Grace, but also detailed the murder and cannibalization of two boys, ages seven and eleven, in 1894 (Vronsky, 2004). After his arrest for the Grace Budd murder in 1935, Fish was asked why he had written the letter that led to his capture; Fish responded that while he did not know for sure, he had always possessed a "mania for writing" (Bardsley, 2013). While these actions were enough to solidify Fish's infamy, he committed many other crimes, which led to multiple villainous epithets.

In 1924, Fish was observed stalking two young boys both named Billy, whom he eventually murdered, earning him the moniker *Boogey Man*. (Bardsley, 2013; Reeder & Mayer, 2009). The title *Gray Man* came from the mother of a young boy named Francis that Fish abducted from a park and strangled in the woods nearby with a pair of suspenders (Bardsley, 2013). Francis' mother proclaimed that she saw an entirely gray looking man just before her child was abducted (Bardsley, 2013). Because of the absolute horror of his crimes, Fish received several additional titles (i.e., Moon Maniac and Vampire of Brooklyn) (Reeder & Mayer, 2009; Schechter, 2003). Despite much effort and continued research, the full extent of Fish's atrocities remained unconfirmed (Constantine, 2006; Newton, 2006; Philbin & Philbin, 2009; Smith, 2003; Wilson & Seaman 2004). One reason given for the inaccurate victim count may be found in Fish's confession. Fish explained that he targeted African-American children because he believed they were less likely to be noticed or searched for once they went missing (Constantine, 2006; Wilson & Seaman, 2004).

As his many monikers imply, Fish was a depraved individual who lacked over his grotesque sexual fantasies. Based on accusations during his trial and a candid pre-trial interview with Dr. Frederick Wertham of Bellevue Hospital, Fish either confessed or was implicated in the molestation of over 400 children, the torture and disfigurement of approximately 100 victims, and the murder of at least 15 children over a 20 year period (Bardsley, 2013; Reeder & Mayer, 2009; Schechter, 2003; Smith, 2003; Vronsky, 2004). In keeping with the views of the given era, Dr. Wertham's assessment of Fish asserted that Fish exhibited 18 different paraphilia, including: *anilingus, cannibalism, castration and self-castration, coprophagia, cunnilingus, exhibitionism, fellatio, fetishism, flagellation, homosexuality, hypererotism, infibulations, masochism, pedophilia, piqueurism, sadism, undinism, and voyeurism* (Hickey, 2013; Ramsland & McGrain, 2010; Schechter, 1990). During the trial, Wertham stated that Fish acted upon every recognized sexual abnormality of the day (Ramsland & McGrain, 2010).

Despite many diagnoses, Fish was deemed ‘sane’ (i.e., an individual knowing the difference between right and wrong). Fish was ultimately sentenced to death and executed in Sing Sing prison at the age of 66 (Constantine, 2006).

Childhood

The case of Albert Fish has drawn vast speculations for professionals interested in the “nature versus nurture” aspect of the etiology of the paraphilic serial murderer. As highlighted below, Fish’s history represents biological and environmental factors commonly associated with extreme behavior. Albert Fish was born Hamilton Fish on May 19, 1870, in Washington, D.C., to a 75-year-old Potomac River boat captain and a mother who suffered from auditory and visual hallucinations (Bardsley, 2013; Newton, 2006; Reeder & Mayer, 2009; Schechter, 1990; Schechter, 2003). At least seven of the Fish family members have been identified as suffering from severe mental illness and two of them reportedly died in asylums (Newton, 2006; Schechter, 2012). Soon after the death of his father, Fish’s mother placed him in the St. John’s Orphanage in Washington; he was only five years old (Bardsley, 2013; Schechter, 2003).

Orphan Life

While in the St. John’s Orphanage, Fish and the other students were reportedly relentlessly abused by their teacher (Bardsley, 2013; Reeder & Mayer, 2009; Schechter, 2003). It has been documented that the teacher would shred the children’s clothes off, severely beat them, whip them, and exacerbate the experience by forcing the other students to watch. Researchers have noted Fish’s treatment as a severe form of shame punishing (Ramsland & McGrain, 2010; Reeder & Mayer, 2009; Schechter, 2003). These experiences influenced Fish’s claims to have ‘always’ desired to inflict pain onto others, and in return, to have pain inflicted on him (Schechter, 2003). It was in the orphanage where Fish became sexually aroused when pain was inflicted on him. He was also said to have become aroused while watching other boys’ beatings (Wilson & Seaman, 2004). Later in life, Fish would indulge in the act known as piquerism, in which one shoves needles into the body around the area between the scrotum and the anus (Hickey, 2013; Ramsland & McGrain, 2010; Reeder & Mayer, 2009; Schechter, 2003).

Continued Behavior Problems

In 1880, Fish’s mother obtained a job with the government, which enabled her to retrieve Fish from St. John’s Orphanage (Bardsley, 2013; Wilson & Seaman, 2004). By this time, Fish was already known for running away from the home most Saturdays; in addition he was frequently wetting his bed until the age of eleven (Newton, 2006). At some point in his early life, a fall from a cherry tree gave Fish a concussion that led to subsequent headaches, dizzy spells, and a severe stutter (Wilson & Seaman, 2004). By 1882, Fish formed a relationship with a telegraph boy, who introduced him to urolagnia, (i.e., the drinking of urine) and to coprophagia, (i.e., the consumption of feces) (Wilson & Seaman, 2004). As a youth, Fish began visiting public bathrooms in order to watch other boys undress for sexual gratification, a behavior known as scopophilia (Wilson & Seaman, 2004). When Fish turned fifteen, he graduated from public school and in order to rid himself of some of the mockery he was subjected to by his classmates, including being called “Ham and Eggs,” he changed his name from Hamilton to Albert, which was the former name of one of his younger brothers that had died (Newton, 2006). By the age of seventeen, Fish was thought to be working as a house painter (Schechter, 2003; Smith, 2003).

Blame and Displacement

By 1903, Fish had begun to rack up a criminal record that included charges of grand larceny, petty theft, and the writing of obscene letters; however, he was only convicted for a single count of grand larceny (Bardsley, 2013; Douglas, 2006; Smith, 2003). Fish had also been in and out of mental institutions at various points in time, where doctors proclaimed that he had an “abnormal” and “psychopathic” personality (Bardsley, 2013; Schechter, 2012). Fish was even described as a religious fanatic who attempted to justify his horrendous actions through bible scripture. He believed God ordered him to torment and castrate little boys (Bardsley, 2013). Ramsland & McGrain (2010) attributed Fish’s crimes to a historical combination of psychiatric conditions and his over-obsessive attachment to religion. At the age of 28, Fish married a 19-year-old woman who bore him six children. She left Albert and the children for another man in 1910 (Reeder & Mayer, 2009; Schechter, 2003). Later, during the Wertham interview, Fish attempted to blame his sexual crimes on his wife’s infidelity (Ramsland & McGrain, 2010).

Sadomasochism

As asserted during the Wertham interview, and confirmed by X-ray exam, at the time of capture, Fish had lodged approximately 30 needles between his scrotum and anus (Bardsley, 2013; Reeder & Mayer, 2009; Schechter, 2003). Fish’s own children reportedly witnessed him spanking himself with a nail-studded paddle until he was shrouded in his own blood (Bardsley, 2013; Ramsland & McGrain, 2010). There are also accounts of him soaking rags or cotton balls in alcohol, inserting them into his anus then lighting them on fire (Constantine, 2006; Newton, 2006; Wilson & Seaman 2004). Learning to enjoy watching his childhood peers suffer, may partly explain Fish’s fascination with piquerism (i.e., penetrating the skin of others) in addition to castrating, sodomizing, and raping his victims (Bardsley, 2013; Ramsland & McGrain, 2010). It was noted that Fish derived great pleasure from hearing his victims’ cries of horror and agony (Ramsland & McGrain, 2010).

Conclusion

Given the multitude of negative biological and environmental factors noted in Fish’s life, there is no single determining factor that can adequately explain how he became an infamous, pedophilic individual (Schechter, 2012). While Fish’s early childhood experiences of torture, ridicule, and head trauma likely influenced the development of some of his behaviors, they cannot fully account for his crimes. Likewise, the familial history of serious mental illness cannot solely account for the extent of his heinous behaviors. Perhaps the answer to the question of what made Albert Fish commit such crimes lies in the interaction between biological and environmental factors. Advancements in research might provide an answer to this question and ultimately lead to interventions preventing such abhorrent behaviors. Regardless of the etiology of his behavior, Fish remains one of the most deviant serial murderers in American history who holds the record for the most documented number of paraphilia’s (Ramsland & McGrain, 2010; Schechter, 2012).

About the Authors:

Jerrod Brown, MA, MS, is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS), a forensic mental health training institute for professionals in the fields of criminal justice, mental health, and social services. Jerrod is also the Treatment Director for Pathways Counseling Center, Inc. located in St. Paul, Minnesota where he oversees a number of treatment programs for adults diagnosed with mental and chemical health disorders. He is the lead developer and program director of a forensic mental health online graduate program for Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota.

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Steve Daniels, graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh with both a Bachelors and Master's degree. Steve has attended hundreds of hours of training to include: gangs, both street and outlaw; domestic terrorism, homicide and crime scene analysis (psychological profiling). Steve belongs to a number of criminal justice associations including the, International Association of Homicide Investigators. He is also a charter member of the Wisconsin Association of Homicide Investigators, and has served three terms on their Board of Directors. He took over as President in 2007, and in 2008 served as Chairman of the Board. He was instrumental in developing a Cold Case Review Team for the homicide investigators association. He also coordinates an annual homicide conference for Northeast Wisconsin Technical College.

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Janina Wresh, has 19 years of experience in law enforcement working in forensics crime laboratories, courts, and adult detention centers. She has served as a deputy sheriff, police officer, domestic abuse response specialist, crisis intervention specialist, and crime scene technician. Janina also serves as AIAFS' Chief Operating Officer.

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