

# The Texas Tower Shooter: An Analysis of Charles Whitman

By Ghazal Sajeev

## Author Bio

Ghazal Sajeev is a student at American High School in California. At the time of writing she was Vice President of the Psychology club. She hopes to pursue the field of Psychology or Criminology in the future. She wants to continue to write about neuroscience and criminology while doing further research throughout her education.

## Abstract

This application paper will examine common attributes of serial killers, such as biological impairments in their brains and other aggravating factors: experiencing child abuse, having violent fantasies, and fitting into the categorization of organized/disorganized killing. These factors will be analyzed to determine how accurately they apply to serial killer Charles Whitman and to what extent they influenced his decision to commit a mass shooting. Information from empirical studies on serial killers, review articles on neurological defects concerning violence, and book chapters were assessed to establish what aspects relate to Charles Whitman. The results indicate that Charles Whitman had common traits of a serial killer, such as undergoing an abusive childhood, being classified as an organized killer, and having violent thoughts. The research supports the fact that Whitman had a neurological defect, a tumor on his amygdala that could have contributed to his actions. The overall findings suggest that further neurological research on how biological elements impact violent actions can contribute to a better understanding of preventive measures regarding violence in serial killers.

*Keywords:* Charles Whitman, serial killer, neuroscience, brain tumor, amygdala, biological, school shooting, murderer

## Introduction

The study of the most dangerous and feared criminals, serial killers, is a prevalent topic of interest today. Whether it is by criminologists or the general public, most people want to know the why behind a serial killer's actions; what causes a human being—like them—to be able to commit such atrocious and unimaginable acts to others without any evident empathy? Research on serial killers is necessary for society as it can provide more information on understanding them and offer insight into the question of how their actions can be prevented. Unfortunately, understanding the motives behind a serial killer's actions is not a straightforward process due to the complexity of their behavior. However, many different theories exist to attempt to explain their behavior. Investigating a serial killer's childhood, mindset, environmental influences, and/or biological processes of their brain are different approaches that can help further analyze the actions of a serial killer.

There are specific proven factors in all of these theories that certain serial killers exhibit. Crime and the brain are linked because there is evidence that certain parts of the brain can be linked to aggression and violence, like the amygdala and prefrontal cortex. Along with neurological influences, research has shown that the environment a serial killer grew up in could affect their future actions. Suffering from child abuse and witnessing domestic violence are examples of harmful childhood experiences that could increase the likelihood of violence in the future. While identifying risk factors is essential, acknowledging existing traits in a serial killer's personality is also necessary. A distinguishable factor of serial killers is their type of killing being labeled as organized or disorganized. Another feature attributed to serial killers is fantasizing about violent thoughts. This paper will discuss how these factors are present in serial murderer Charles Whitman and how they can be applied to his actions. Moreover, various research findings on these topics will be utilized to comprehensively explain specific characteristics of serial killers and how advancing neuroscience knowledge can contribute to a better understanding of biological impacts.

### Charles J. Whitman and the Murders

Charles J. Whitman would be described as

a mass murderer, someone who has killed four or more victims at one location on a single occasion. He committed a mass school shooting at the University of Texas in 1966 by shooting and killing 14 people while wounding 32 others. Earlier on the day of the shooting, Charles Whitman murdered his mother and wife as well.

Charles Whitman's childhood consisted of being raised in a middle-class home in Florida by his mother and father, Margaret and C.A. Whitman. He was described as a healthy young boy who regularly attended Mass with his mother and two brothers and did well in school. He joined the Boy Scouts of America and enjoyed playing piano and hunting. However, his father was abusive to him, his brothers, and his mother. He suffered from harsh expectations his father set for him to succeed in all aspects of life, like his extracurriculars and school. Additionally, he continually witnessed and experienced the violence his father inflicted on the family (Lavergne, 1997).

Two weeks after he turned eighteen, Charles Whitman left his home, joined the Marines, and eventually went to college at the University of Texas where he met his future wife, Kathy Leissner. As the years progressed, he began complaining about headaches and stress. He was referred to a psychiatrist, and had a session with him in which he discussed his frustrations with how his father treated him in his childhood, his attempts to treat Kathy well, and his fantasy of going up the clock tower at the university and shooting people (Lavergne, 1997).

The day before the murders, he wrote a note and again admitted to having violent fantasies by stating that he was a "victim of many unusual and irrational thoughts," even though he was "supposed to be an average reasonable and intelligent young man." He wrote about his plan to kill Kathy and his mother and discussed how he was prepared to die. Whitman explained that he could not pinpoint "any specific reasons" for his actions. He then requested an autopsy after his death to reveal if there was anything physically wrong with him due to the severe headaches he had been having. Whitman briefly mentioned seeing the doctor for what he called his "overwhelming violent impulses" but believed it didn't help as he stated he was left to fight his "mental turmoil alone" (Lavergne, 1997).

Around midnight on August 1, 1966, Charles Whitman went to his mother's apartment and murdered her. Right after her death, he wrote a note stating that he had taken his mother's life and believed he had relieved her of her suffering on Earth. He mentioned his hatred of his father and how his mother had suffered because of his father for far too long. Then around 2:30 AM, he returned to his apartment where his wife Kathy was asleep. He stabbed her five times in her sleep. In his previous note, he mentioned that he planned to kill Kathy as "painlessly as possible" and that he loved her a lot. Then he wrote a note requesting that if his life insurance policy was valid, to pay off his debts and "donate the rest anonymously to a mental health foundation," proposing that "maybe research could help prevent tragedies of this type" (Lavergne, 1997).

After the murder of his wife and mother, Whitman carefully planned the shooting that would take place that very same day. It was clear the shooting was organized and carefully planned. Charles Whitman had the intent to murder as many people as possible. He entered the clock tower at the University of Texas by posing as a janitor and brought along several different guns, ammunition, and other supplies. Once he reached the top, he shot at victims near the observation deck and barricaded himself inside, beginning the mass shooting. His experience in the Marines undoubtedly assisted with his ability to shoot individuals from the tower that rose over 300 ft above the campus. He shot at anyone in his view, including students, a pregnant woman, and young teenagers. He ultimately killed an unborn child and thirteen people that day, the fourteenth victim dying a week later from their injuries. Charles Whitman had injured 32 other people in the shooting as well. Eventually, he was shot and killed in the tower by the officers of the Austin Police Department. Upon his request, an autopsy of his death was performed, and a tumor was found in his brain. This tumor caused speculation about what impact it could have had on his actions (Lavergne, 1997).

### **Analysis of the Murders and Tumor**

The murders Charles Whitman committed were surprising to his friends and family. His father believed he had lost his mind and other close relatives attributed his actions solely to the tumor. He was said to have a good relationship with his mother and wife.

He was also described as an ordinary young man by people who knew him. There is a lot of speculation about what ultimately motivated his actions.

Approaching the study of Whitman's actions from a biological approach can help to scientifically analyze what he was experiencing. Several parts of the brain, such as the prefrontal cortex and amygdala, have been proven to be associated with violence upon damage.

In Charles Whitman's case, he had a tumor called a glioblastoma which was in a region of his brain beneath the thalamus, on the hypothalamus, and in a position that caused it to compress and over-stimulate the amygdala (Eagleman, 2011). The amygdala is a small almond shaped part of the brain that is associated with emotion regulation. It is activated in humans, especially in situations regarding fear and aggression (Eagleman, 2011). A University of Baltimore Law Review Article examined the role of Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging and how it can be used in a court of law (Donahue, 2013). Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging, or fMRI, is a process researchers use to monitor a human brain and identify impairments. The research done on fMRI does not fully support it being utilized for lie detection; however, the article proposes that fMRI should be considered to be eventually taken into account in court hearings by the jury and judge because it can provide evidence displaying how specific impairments of the brain are linked to violence and aggression. The article analyzes fMRI studies and presents the findings that support the claim that the amygdala functions in the brain directly increase or enhance anger and aggression. Several fMRI studies examined the role of fMRI with the prefrontal cortex and amygdala, regions of the brain that can affect how well an individual can fully understand the culpability of their actions. The article claims that since these neurological impairments can be identified from fMRI, they should be considered when assessing a criminal's actions in court. Based on the article, present evidence from fMRI can demonstrate that in Charles Whitman's case, his seemingly unexplainable actions could be due to the overstimulation of his amygdala that he was experiencing. Findings show that over-stimulation of the amygdala would result in "uncontrollable violent behavior" and an inability to comprehend this criminal behavior.

The information presented in the Law Review Article simply recognizes the link between Charles

Whitman's brain tumor on his amygdala and how that could have led to increased violence and aggression. However, neuroscience research and how accurately it can be used to explain criminals' actions is still advancing. Whitman's tumor could provide a potential explanation for the motives behind the murders. Still, there is evident uncertainty in this research about the extent to which he was personally responsible for his actions. The tumor affecting his amygdala did not necessarily indicate he had no control over his actions. Additionally, other aggravating factors would need to be considered as it would not be realistic to identify one sole cause. Charles Whitman had risk factors and experiences that have also been identified in other serial killers, such as experiencing child abuse.

A systematic review was conducted by Allely et al (2014) in which mass and serial killers were studied to analyze the number of serial murderers with neurodevelopmental disorders like autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or a head injury. The study investigated psychosocial risk factors in relation to these disorders as well. The research was conducted by searching for studies and books on internet-based biological databases related to associations between mass/serial killers and brain injury or ASD. 239 serial killers were finalized to use for the study. The analysis displayed that 21.34% (N = 51) had had a definite or suspected head injury, and 28.03% (N = 67) had definite, highly probable, or possible ASD. Out of the 106 killers with ASD and/or head injury, 55% (N = 58) had experienced psychosocial stressors such as physical, psychological, or sexual childhood abuse. Additionally, a definite head injury was defined as a situation where a brain scan revealed damage to the brain or head trauma (Allely et al., 2014).

These findings suggest that there could be a relation to head injury and psychosocial stressors in serial killers, which applies to Whitman. The autopsy suggests there was damage to the amygdala in his brain because of his tumor. Moreover, during the time he spent in the marines, there was also an incident in which he and his friend fought with other marines, and he was kicked in the head, leading him to be treated for headaches and dizziness. The systematic review indicates that over 55% of eligible killers in the study had experienced psychosocial stressors. Charles Whitman experienced the psychosocial stressor of child abuse. He was physically abused by his father growing up, who had admitted to

spanking his kids, using a belt, his fists, or a paddle to instill his sense of discipline. When Whitman was almost 18 years old, he arrived home intoxicated. In anger, his father threw him into the swimming pool, causing Whitman to almost drown. Whitman's father physically abused Whitman's mother frequently. His family was very broken, and Whitman witnessed his mother's abuse while growing up. He also had a lot of pressure placed on him by his father; his good grades, activities, and sports throughout his childhood were generally a result of force from his father, who he lived in fear from. Whitman suffered from both psychological and physical abuse from his father. The review acknowledges that in several studies and reports, psychological and/or physical abuse was a pervasive characteristic of serial killers' childhoods (Allely et al., 2014). Overall, the child abuse Whitman suffered related to the findings indicating that a high percentage of mass/serial killers with a head injury had psychosocial stressors like child abuse.

The child abuse that Whitman suffered manifested itself in some of Whitman's own explanations for the murders. In a note he wrote after killing his mother, he discussed that she experienced his father's abuse for too long, and by killing her, he was "relieving her suffering" (Laverne, 1999). Similarly, he claimed that since he was ready to die, he killed Kathy because he did not want her to suffer alone (Laverne, 1997). While his words do not explain the mass shooting, it displays how witnessing abuse growing up led him to offer it as a reason behind one of his many murders.

## Organized and Disorganized Killers

Whitman's actions can be analyzed and studied to learn what type of killer he was. Organized and disorganized are two common characteristics employed to describe murderers based on their behavior before, during, and after the crime. A study from the National University of Public Service, Hungary, analyzes several cases of serial killers to identify and cluster the most common traits of serial killers. The study looked at their general attributes, psychological risk factors, biological effects, and common ways serial killers can be clustered. It identified several specific characteristics that applied to organized serial killers, such as having a rough family history involving abuse and being of above-average intelligence. The description of being methodological,

socially adequate, and a white male was also included. Other characteristics were employment struggles and several suicide attempts (Simon, 2015).

In contrast, the study explained that the disorganized serial killer would have a low IQ and murder impulsively and without a plan. They would generally lack friends or significant others, live alone, and be described as having odd personalities. These killers were also typically sexually perverted and would deform the corpses of their victims. While these categories have several other factors, those listed summarize the general idea of what an organized or disorganized serial killer would be (Simon, 2015).

Based on the study, many factors regarding the “organized killer” section would apply to Whitman, whereas many of the characteristics related to the “disorganized killer” do not apply to Whitman. Whitman reportedly had an IQ of 138, suggesting that he had above-average intelligence, similar to organized killers. The shooting he committed could be described as methodological and premeditated. He had planned how to get into the tower by pretending he was a janitor. He also created a way to hide the several guns and ammunition he carried with him by using a trolley. It was well thought out and not an impulsive decision—which would have been a trait of a disorganized killer. Whitman was also socially adequate because he had a wife and many friends. He experienced abuse and had an unstable family history, both experiences that were described as typical characteristics of organized killers. Additionally, there was no evidence that he was sexually perverted or that he deformed the corpses of his mother or wife, indicating that the disorganized characteristics did not apply to him.

While Whitman did not have every single trait listed under the organized category, his actions identified mainly with being an organized killer compared to a disorganized one. Whitman was intelligent and had a detailed plan to conduct the shooting. He was socially adequate because he was known as friendly and had built relationships with people in his life. Of the two most common ways of identifying a killer, Whitman was an organized killer.

Along with experiencing child abuse and being classified as an organized or disorganized killer, another general characteristic of a serial killer

is experiencing violent fantasies. A study analyzing a typical serial killer’s thought process, from having a fantasy of murder to committing murder, explains how experiencing violent thoughts is a component that leads to the ultimate murder of the serial killer’s victims. While it is unclear how the data was collected, the article compiles information from several articles related to serial killing. Eventually, it identifies serial homicide behavior as being characterized by socio-environmental, relational, and individual factors. An essential aspect of an individual factor of a serial killer is listed as “Imaginative Life (fantasies),” which indicates that one of the factors involved in serial homicide is having fantasies of murder, such as wanting “destruction of other people” for “personal gratification” (Malizia, 2017). The article explains that typically before the killing, the serial killer will fantasize about it in his imagination and eventually feel obliged to satisfy the fantasy by actually murdering the victims. The article reviews all aspects of the killer’s mindset and attributes childhood, biological predispositions, and personality as factors that strengthen the role fantasy plays in the murders (Malizia, 2017).

Whitman discussed his own frustration with violent fantasies he experienced in the notes he wrote before his death. He explained that he did not understand himself and experienced uncontrollable violent urges and unusual thoughts. He also spoke of the shooting fantasy beforehand. During his first and only session with the psychiatrist, he sometimes thought about “going up on the Tower with a deer rifle and shooting people” (Laverne, 1997, 71). Whitman’s own college dorm residents recalled him mentioning how he would like to go on top of the University of Texas clock tower and shoot people (Laverne, 1997). The psychiatrist and residents never suspected that Whitman could be serious about such an idea. Like the serial killers discussed in the article, Whitman experienced violent thoughts and eventually acted on them by turning them into reality and becoming a serial killer.

## Conclusion

Charles Whitman—the Texas Tower Shooter—committed one of the first school shootings in American history on August 1st, 1966, at the University of Texas. He took the lives of fourteen



people that day, including his own mother and wife. He wounded 32 more and was finally shot to death by police. Whitman's impact on the University of Texas and the United States understanding of school shootings was dire. Rarely had the American public been exposed to such a violent crime inflicted by an individual in a mass murder spree. The victims' families suffered greatly, and the injured civilians, students, and staff at the university were horrified by the event they had gone through.

Perhaps the most perplexing part of Whitman's killings was his motivation behind them. Many people could not understand why a former university student and an intelligent, seemingly happy man would want to go on a murder spree. Despite being the most favored theory, the uncertainty regarding the impact of Whitman's tumor reveals the necessity of modern neurological research; it could help researchers understand current cases similar to Whitman's. A review of research on biological connections to violence by Ling et al. (2019) examined the brain mechanisms discovered in serial killers and psychopaths in comparison to the rest of the population. It was determined that the amygdala in serial killers generally had stimulated hyper or hypoactivity. A maldevelopment involving the amygdala defers it from its typical role of detecting distress or threat cues; and it no longer discourages criminal behavior. With continuing analysis of the brains of serial killers, several differences are being identified in the limbic system of the brain, prefrontal cortex, and striatum region. (Ling et al., 2019). Existing studies involving fMRI, PET scans, and analysis of brain autopsies help to inform society about a definite understanding on neurological aspects in violence. A clearer understanding of the perpetrators self control may be revealed, thus assisting with the application of legal policy in murder cases. Additionally, with more attention on analysis through a biological lens, the proper treatments and prevention methods may eventually be discovered and implemented correctly.

The purpose of this paper was to analyze several aspects of serial killers and demonstrate how they could be applied to Charles Whitman. Studying his case has proved the significance in focusing on advancing studies, research, and biological findings that will allow the public to better comprehend the mindset of serial killers. With an increase in the

knowledge of the neurological influences behind murder, there will be highly probable prevention of violence, pain, and fear of victims that serial killers cause worldwide.

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