# Ted Bundy and the Gene-Environment Theory of Crime

## Introduction

Despite society’s substantial efforts in attempting to curb and eliminate criminal activity, such behavior is an indelible aspect of modern society. With the significant amount of criminal behavior continuing taking place in the world, a number of prominent theories have emerged that seek to provide causal explanations for the reasons people commit crimes. Within this spectrum of investigation, present research argues that the criminal behavior of serial killer Ted Bundy is explainable through the gene-environment theory of crime.

## Description of Offender

Theodor **“**Ted” Bundy is among the most seminal serial killers in American history. Bundy was born in Burlington, Vermont in 1946. While many serial killers have outward tendencies that set them apart from society, Bundy was highly unique in that for all appearances, he was a highly functional individual. In this respect, Bundy was successful academically and attended the University of Washington, where he graduated with a degree in psychology in 1972. Following graduation, Bundy was accepted to law school at the University of Utah. Bundy’s admission to the school was partially the product of a strong recommendation letter he received from the governor of Washington, as he worked on his campaign.

## Offenses Committed by Offender

During the time after Bundy graduated from college and after he moved to Utah, it is believed that he began committing murders. Although he had a number of methods, among his frequent approaches was that he would lure women to his car claiming to be injured and then murder them (LaBrode, 2007). In 1978, after escaping from prison, Bundy broke into the Chi Omega Sorority House in Tallahassee, Florida and attacked four residents, killing two. Although the total number of people Bundy killed is unknown, he confessed to at least 30 homicides. Among the atrocities include murder, rape, burglary, and even necrophilia (LaBrode, 2007).

## Gene-Environment Theory of Crime

The gene-environment theory of crime is a modern biological theory of criminal behavior. While historically biological theories of crime sought to link the criminality to an individual’s biological inferiority, the gene-environment theory of crime instead emphasizes that while some people may be more genetically susceptible to crime than others, it is at least partially the result of environmental influences that these genetic predispositions are triggered. Jones (2005) described this theory, indicating that it advances the notion that an individual can have certain genes that when triggered by certain environmental conditions can result in this person engaging in criminal activity.

## Application of Theory

When examining Ted Bundy’s life, it’s clear that the gene-environment approach to understanding his actions can explain a significant amount, if not all, of the factors that contributed to his horrific actions. Gene-environment theory is particularly applicable to Bundy because in many ways it is possible to strongly rule out other theoretical explanations for his behavior. In these regards, Bundy had ample opportunities to success and was even admitted to law school; these conditions would seem to eliminate strain theory and rational choice theory, which emphasize unequal opportunities or associated rewards, respectively, as motivating factors in criminal behavior. Similarly, social learning theory would appear to be eliminated, as Bundy acted alone. Rather, gene-environmental stands as both the obvious and only apparent causal condition in his life.

Among the important factors of Bundy’s life and one that a significant amount of theorists have focused on as an underlying factor to his later behavior was his unusual upbringing and family life. Bundy’s mother Eleanor was unmarried when she became pregnant with Ted. As she was deeply religious and part of a religious community she felt the need to conceal the fact that she had the child out of wedlock. Subsequently, Bundy was raised as the adopted son of his grandparents and told that his mother was his sister (LaBrode, 2007). Only much later in life did Bundy learn who is actual mother truly was. Such an unconventional family structure would stands strongly in support of the explanation that Bundy engaged in such crimes purely because of environmental factors. In this respect, his discovering this unusual family structure could be explained as alienating him from women, disrupting his reality, and contributing to violent behavior as a means of regaining control over his environment. While such environmental explanations may hold varying degrees of accuracy, they are not complete without understanding Bundy’s underlining genetic inclinations. In this respect, one considers Ferguson et al. (2003) who pointed out that while these circumstances were undeniably psychologically traumatizing, they were the same circumstances that famous guitar Eric Clapton experienced in his childhood. Subsequently, the unusual nature of this early family upbringing would seem to strongly suggest that it played a causal role in Bundy’s eventual behavior, but without the underlining genetic component it would not have triggered his criminal activity.

From a very early age -- even before recognizing the irregular nature of his family structure -- Bundy also exhibited behavior that would seem to portend his later killings. Winerman (2004) indicated that when Bundy was only three-years-old he went into his Aunt Julia’s bedroom one morning and placed butcher knives beneath the sheets of her bed. While such behavior alone would not necessarily designate a typical child as a later serial killer, they are troubling considering the later person he became. Moreover, as such a tendency towards violent behavior took place so early in Bundy’s childhood development – seemingly independent of an environmental stimulus – it would seem to strongly suggest that Bundy had a genetic predisposition towards violent behavior. Such a strong environmental factor is further supported by statements Bundy himself made. In these regards, Holmes, Tewksbury, and Holmes (1999, p. 5) stated that Bundy had indicated, “There was something deep inside of me, something I could not control.” While it is difficult to precisely articulate the psychological dimensions of what Bundy is referring to here, it would seem that he is strongly referencing a biological or genetic disorder, possibly schizophrenia. These factors establish Bundy’s genetic proclivity towards violence.

Still, there were also environmental factors that interacted with Bundy’s genetic predisposition towards estranged behavior that resulted in him becoming the person he became. Cameron (1990) noted that in interviews Bundy himself consistently claimed that pornography was a major factor that fueled his later behavior. Bundy discovered pornography at age 13 and claims that it had a tremendous impact on his life (Holmes, Tewksbury, & Holmes, 1999). Although Bundy made such confessions while in prison and may have been attempting to mitigate his culpability, his description of the impact that pornography had on his life is almost a textbook description of the gene-environment theoretical paradigm. In these regards, Bundy indicates that while he had deep-seated fantasies and inclinations towards violent and murderous behavior, it was through his environmental exposure to pornography that these fantasies developed to even greater levels, resulting in him eventually acting out these activities. Clearly, such environmental conditions combined with his underlining genetic character, and seem to have propelled his behavior.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the present research argues that the gene-environment theory of criminal behavior explains a substantial amount, if not all, of Ted Bundy’s criminal behavior. In these regards, Bundy was born with genetic factors that predisposed him towards violent behavior. However, strong environmental factors, including his irregular upbringing and his exposure to pornography created conditions that facilitated the developed of these genetic conditions in dangerous ways. Ultimately, through examining the interaction of Bundy’s genes and environment, one recognizes the person he became.

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