

Psychological Explanations: The Terri Lynne McClintic Case

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ABSTRACT Research about early- and mid-childhood factors that lead to criminality has been studied across many countries and demographics. However, the rare occurrence of a Canadian woman participating in a rape and murder of a child has not been explored. This article will address the 2009 kidnapping and murder of eight-year-old Victoria Elizabeth Stafford, committed by Terri-Lynne McClintic and Michael Rafferty, as well as a discussion around the nonconformist perspective on human nature and social control theory and a psychological discussion around the formative years of McClintic's youth. Within this paper, McClintic's psychology will be explored from a nonconformist perspective, where it is shown that she lacks the social controls to restrain her from committing crimes. Specifically, early- and mid-childhood factors offer insight into McClintic's antisocial and deadly behaviour. The peer rejection by those at the many schools McClintic attended and early exposure to substance abuse by her adoptive mother, Carol McClintic, led to a higher likelihood of criminal and antisocial behaviour, as well as mood and anxiety disorders. While the exact factors that caused Terri-Lynne McClintic to murder Stafford remain speculative, understanding her childhood risk factors and their psychological effects offers insight into a unique and rare occurrence of the rape and murder of Victoria Elizabeth Stafford by Terri-Lynne McClintic and Michael Rafferty.

INTRODUCTION

Many desire to understand why crimes are committed and the developmental factors surrounding criminal behaviour in the criminal justice field. Research into the stacking factors and potential causes of criminality is essential for developing resources and family support systems to foster success in the first years of a child's life and aids in the prevention of future crime; however, agreeing on the specific causes of criminality is complex (Bartol & Bartol, 2016). This multifaceted psychological puzzle is demonstrated in the case of Terri-Lynne Ruth McClintic, an 18-year-old woman who was a part of the duo that kidnapped and murdered eight-year-old Victoria Elizabeth Stafford. We will never know the exact reasons behind why McClintic participated in the murder of Stafford. However, examining her childhood may offer a glimpse into the past of a distraught girl who lacked societal and parental support leading to non-existent ties to society and drug abuse. While the instance of a criminal incident such as the rape and murder of a young girl by a couple is a rare occurrence, the factors that McClintic faced in her formative years of early childhood into adolescence are still of value to study as they grow the body of research around the formative years of childhood and also offer insight to the select few others who have committed such acts (see Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka, Judith and Alvin Neelley, and Charlene and Gerald Gallego). In this paper, the following topics will be explored: a case summary, a discussion on the nonconformist perspective on human nature and social control theory, and a psychological discussion around the formative years of Terri-Lynne McClintic's youth as it relates to the continued criminality that culminated in the murder of Victoria Stafford.

REVIEW

Case summary

On April 8, 2009 in Woodstock, Ontario, residents were shaken when eight-year-old Stafford did not arrive at her mother's house after walking a few blocks home from Oliver Stephens Public School by herself for the first time (R v McClintic, 2010). Stafford was reported missing later that evening at 6:04 p.m., and the search for Stafford commenced (R v McClintic, 2010). Police retrieved the surveillance video from College Avenue Secondary School on April 9 and later released the footage to Southwestern Ontario media (R v McClintic, 2010). The video's release resulted in multiple tips pertaining to McClintic from several people within the community (R v McClintic, 2010).

According to McClintic, in the early afternoon of April 8, 2009, Michael Thomas Christopher Stephen Rafferty – who was 28 years old at the time – picked up McClintic and proceeded to outline how Rafferty wanted McClintic to help "snatch a little girl" (R v Rafferty, 2012a). Rafferty

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dropped McClintic off near a public school where she proceeded to lure Stafford into a parking lot of a nursing home by telling Stafford that she had a Shih Tzu named 'Precious' that Stafford could see (R v McClintic, 2010; R v Rafferty, 2012a). McClintic and her boyfriend, Rafferty, took Stafford to a secluded wooded area outside of Guelph, Ontario, where Rafferty assaulted Stafford in his car and then stomped on and beat the girl with a hammer (Canadian Lawyer, 2012; R v McClintic, 2010; R v Rafferty, 2012a). Stafford died from blunt force trauma to her head and body, including a lacerated liver, fractured ribs, and skull fractures (Blatchford, 2012; R v McClintic, 2010; R v Rafferty, 2012b).

At the time that McClintic confessed to kidnapping Stafford, the girl's body was yet to be found (R v McClintic, 2010). Stafford's body and her mother's butterfly earring she had worn to school, which was used to identify her, were found on July 19, 2009 (Blatchford, 2012). The body was found in an advanced state of decomposition to the point where some skeletonization was seen (R v Rafferty, 2012b). For identification, Stafford's earring and clothing, as well as dental records, were used (R v McClintic, 2010). First-degree murder was added to McClintic's charges, and the kidnapping charge was dropped (R v McClintic, 2010). McClintic's boyfriend, Rafferty, at the time was also charged with sexual assault, first-degree murder, and kidnapping, to which he pled not guilty but was found guilty on all charges (R v Rafferty, 2016). McClintic pled guilty and was convicted of first-degree murder on April 30, 2010 (R v McClintic, 2010). Rafferty still asserts that he was not guilty of his charges, that McClintic was the one to orchestrate the attack and that he was, at most, an accessory after the fact of the murder (R v Rafferty, 2016). However, McClintic asserts that Rafferty was the one to beat the girl; in her testimony in R v Rafferty, McClintic claims that she walked away from the vehicle where Rafferty had Stafford and was called back to the car when the girl's body was gone (R v Rafferty, 2012a). From this it is unclear whether it was a joint decision to abduct and murder Stafford or if either offender led the other to commit the crimes. Regardless, McClintic has admitted to murdering Stafford (R v McClintic, 2010).

The nonconformist perspective on human nature and social control theory

Nonconformist perspectives follow the assumption that humans are unruly (Bartol & Bartol, 2016). This perspective argues that without social controls and rules and regulations to hold individuals in check, they would commit crimes without any regard for society (Bartol & Bartol, 2016). From this nonconformist perspective, Travis Hirschi's social control theory further perceives humans with weak or non-existent ties to society and attachment to society's normative standards as uncontrolled and more likely to commit a crime (Chriss, 2007; Church et al., 2009; Hirschi, 1969). As defined by Huebner and Betts (2002), societal bonds can come in the form of attachment and affection towards significant individuals and social institutions – such as parents, peers or schools – or investments an individual has to conventional lines of action or a goal common to society; the amount of time invested into conventional activities and buy-in to common or conventional values also creates stronger societal bonds (Huebner & Betts, 2002; see also Anderson et al., 1999; Chriss, 2007). Through these four elements of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, an individual's conformity to society is formed (Wiatrowski et al., 1981). Huebner and Betts (2002) found that within the four above mentioned main attachment bond variables, weak bonds between peers and adults, low quality of the paternal relationship and lack of time spent in the family, held a significant correlation to antisocial behaviour. Relationships with parents form a solid base for an individual's attachment as parents teach appropriate behaviour and act as role models (Wiatrowski et al., 1981).

Social control theory can be highlighted in the case of Terri-Lynne McClintic due to her difficult childhood and lack of positive parental influence, which arguably impacted her ties to society

and normative standards. McClintic lacked not only attachment but also commitment, involvement and belief in common societal functions, values, and goals. The court noted this disconnect in the *Vetrovec* warning proceedings in 2012 regarding McClintic's testimony against Rafferty (R v Rafferty, 2012c). Her childhood criminal background, letters written in detention centres, and musical choices expressed vicious imagery including an enchantment with death rap, which showed her extensive history of violence and pugnacious tendencies (R v Rafferty, 2012c). Anderson et al. (1999) found that the delinquent behaviour of young girls was reduced with greater attachments to school and friends. Due to the transient and high-risk nature of McClintic's adoptive mother and her mother's past career as a stripper, she faced bullying and alienation from her peers (The Canadian Press, 2012).

McClintic was known to consistently skip school and stopped attending school full time when she was roughly 13 (The Canadian Press, 2012), which may have pushed McClintic further towards a life of antisocial and risky behaviour. Further, Anderson et al. (1999) note that the strength of attachment to parental figures affects the attitudes towards and amount of alcohol that an adolescent may consume as the children would not have been taught to socialize appropriately and would increase recklessness. Forming strong familial ties became impossible for McClintic as her adoptive mother Carol McClintic as well as her mother's boyfriends engaged in drugs and alcoholism, and abused McClintic (The Canadian Press, 2012). Chriss (2007) found that weakened parental attachments in children are one of the most reliable predictors of future delinquency, as can be seen in McClintic's case by her use of alcohol and drugs at a young age (Wiatrowski et al., 1981). At the same time, this may be attributed to the added direct supervision given and time spent together when a parent and child have a strong bond (Chriss, 2007).

Rafferty was sent to live with his aunt and uncle in adolescence (The Canadian Press, 2012). This separation from his close family would indicate that he, like McClintic, did not have a strong parental relationship nor attachments. Like McClintic, Rafferty also had a drug problem and was known to take OxyContin and Percocet (The Canadian Press, 2012). Rafferty showed his violent tendencies through the sexual acts; during the trial 13 women reported that he would enjoy choking them during intercourse (The Canadian Press, 2012). Similarly, McClintic was known to fantasize about torturing of people, which was highlighted through her music tastes and the letters she wrote in which she detailed her fantasies (The Canadian Press, 2012). When McClintic's fantasies met Rafferty's aggressive and sexually violent tendencies, the antisocial and criminal activity of the two increased dramatically (The Canadian Press, 2012).

Rafferty and McClintic acted as catalysts to increase each other's delinquent behaviour. Herrera et al. (2010) found that intimate partners can facilitate and provide support for criminal behaviour and further reinforce antisocial tendencies. Many people enter relationships with other individuals who engage in similar activities and have shared characteristics (Carbone-Lopez & Kruttschnitt, 2010). For McClintic and Rafferty, these shared characteristics included criminality, drug use, and violent tendencies. Those involved in delinquent behaviour are more likely to be attracted to similar individuals and continue to increase their criminal actions with the escalation of the relationship (Carbone-Lopez & Kruttschnitt, 2010; Lee et al., 2020). This acceleration can be seen in McClintic's escalation from assault to murder with her relationship with Rafferty.

Terri McClintic's youth

When McClintic was born, she was given to her mother's best friend, Carol McClintic, for reasons unknown to the public (The Canadian Press, 2012). They moved around Ontario for most of McClintic's early and middle childhood years. McClintic also moved through several foster homes (The Canadian Press, 2012).

Carol McClintic was a stripper before she adopted McClintic, a profession known for its transient and unstable nature. Carol McClintic also had a history of drug and alcohol addiction that led her to have violent outbursts towards McClintic. Due to her adoptive mother's lack of appropriate parental support or guidance, McClintic lacked connections to her peers and was further alienated (The Canadian Press, 2012). A critical developmental factor within the social control theory is positive parental influence and modelling, which was not present for McClintic (Hirschi, 2002, as cited in Church et al., 2009). Herrenkohl et al. (2000) noted that in violent environments, children model the behaviour of their close family members, such as parents, as violence is normalized as acceptable behaviour (see also Mallet et al., 2013). Church et al. (2009) show that ineffective parenting also increases the likelihood of creating aberrant behaviour in children (see also Brannigan et al., 2002; Barnhart & Maguire-Jack, 2016; Benda & Tollett, 1999). At the age of seven, McClintic started her stays with the Children's Aid Societies, in the Ontario foster system, and detention homes, which continued into her teen years (The Canadian Press, 2012). Studies have shown that youth who are incarcerated tend to have higher recidivism rates in later years (Benda & Tollett, 1999; Corrado et al., 2015; Mallet et al., 2013);

Due to her lack of positive relationships and connections to society –which may have potentially furthered her aberrant behaviour (Church et al., 2009) – McClintic was alienated from a young age, which made her more susceptible to delinquency and drug use. These extreme familial and relational stressors directly affect criminality and delinquent behaviour (Barnhart & Maguire-Jack, 2016; Church et al., 2009;), and as such, may have led to many of McClintic's criminal actions. As a child, McClintic was also physically and sexually abused (The Canadian Press, 2012; Tryon et al., 2012;), which furthers the potential for childhood isolation and future substance abuse (Bartol & Bartol, 2016; Cohen et al., 2003). Violence in the family, along with specific family characteristics, such as a lack of emotional availability, can increase the risk of problems in childhood, and some children with several risk factors can become more prone to future violence (Rutter, 1994). Furthermore, substance abuse, personality disorders, partner violence, and developmental delays can come from a high-stress environment, such as an abusive household, which can alter biological, psychological, and neurological functioning (Margolin, 2005; Corrado et al., 2015). High-stress environments can also be created by avoidant attachment styles of parenting and neglect (Corrado et al., 2015). Exposure to violence has been noted to cause subtle changes that can lead to children being less able to understand social cues, resolve interpersonal problems and recognize emotions in others (Margolin, 2005). As research indicates, abuse, alienation from peers, and neglectful parenting were all very strong factors in McClintic's functioning and future behaviour.

The constant movement, isolation, and lack of parental support caused McClintic to face harsh peer rejection in her early school years. Peer rejection at an early age has been linked to adolescent substance abuse and antisocial behaviour (Mounts, 2001; Prinstein & La Greca, 2004). In their study, Higgins et al. (2011) note that youth who have been rejected by their peers may have reduced social skills, lack the ability to develop social networks and hold negative feelings of loss (see also DeRosier et al., 1994). Rejected children have an increased likelihood of responding in an antisocial and aggressive manner with less ability to use coping or de-escalation techniques when met with peer conflict (Chen et al., 2015; Coie et al., 1992). This aggressive response to conflict is seen in McClintic's many convictions for assault as a teenager (The Canadian Press, 2012). McClintic's first recorded incident with the police service was at the age of ten when she was caught stealing from a hardware store. Theft further increased into assault after

punching her adoptive mother in the face at the age of 15, where she fractured her adoptive mother's cheekbone (The Canadian Press, 2012). This escalated into four more assault charges, one in a youth residence and three more in the youth detention centre (The Canadian Press, 2012). Two years before McClintic and Rafferty murdered Stafford, McClintic mugged two men and stabbed one in the back; she then hit a police officer in the back of the head during her arrest (The Canadian Press, 2012). Unless countered, social rejection by peers can serve to be one of the leading causes for the start of criminal behaviour (Higgins et al., 2011). Youth who commit crimes between the ages of 7 and 12 are two to three times more likely to become chronic, violent offenders, than those with a later onset of their criminality (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). This can be seen in the increase in criminality in McClintic, from theft to assault to murder.

As noted by Mounts (2001), peer rejection can lead to adolescent substance abuse, which is seen in the case of McClintic, who started using marijuana at the age of eight and then advanced into harder drugs, such as OxyContin, ecstasy, morphine, and antidepressants (The Canadian Press, 2012). At the age of 13, McClintic lost a portion of her memory due to an overdose (The Canadian Press, 2012). Carol McClintic was also an alcoholic and drug user and introduced McClintic to many of the substances that she would grow to abuse in her teens (Tryon et al., 2012; The Canadian Press, 2012). These risk factors culminated after February of 2009 when McClintic met Rafferty, and the couple committed the horrific murder of Stafford on April 8, 2009 (The Canadian Press, 2012). Substance use is considered a disorder when the drug use interferes with a large portion of life, such as work, relationships, or education (Barlow et al., 2018); this is seen in McClintic's educational performance and lack of peer relationships. Substance use disorder is considered an addiction due to the physiological dependence and withdrawal symptoms that a user experiences (Barlow et al., 2018). McClintic's drug use interfered not only with her school attendance and grades but also with her relationship with her adoptive mother (The Canadian Press, 2012). Substance use disorders are highly comorbid with other psychological disorders such as mood and anxiety disorders (Barlow et al., 2018; Quello et al., 2005). Youth who use illicit substances are more likely to have poor academic performance and participate in high-risk and antisocial behaviours (Bartol & Bartol, 2016; Crowley & Riggs, 1995). The path to substance abuse can be started as young as in toddler years if behavioural problems are not corrected (Sitnick et al., 2013). In the case of McClintic, due to her adoptive mother's drug and alcohol addiction (Tryon et al., 2012), her behavioural problems were not corrected, and instead were encouraged through positive reinforcement of antisocial behaviour.

McClintic's vulnerability and escalation to criminality are caused by the stacking risk factors in her life. When looking at a child's vulnerabilities and resiliency to stressors in their life, the adaptations to functioning give markers for each of these variables and the child's success (Margolin, 2005). Being able to shield oneself from a stressor and to have a healthy recovery from a said stressor is thought of as resiliency (Margolin, 2005). McClintic's drug use and lack of positive peer influence is an indication that her coping skills and resilience to stressors did not work to protect her from the negative stressors in her life.

CONCLUSIONS

McClintic's motivation for antisocial behaviour that coalesced in the murder of eight-year-old Victoria Elizabeth Stafford is an intricate puzzle of a plethora of factors that make up McClintic's psychological state. Her lack of peer and parental support, non-existent ties to society and drug abuse demonstrate the risk factors stacked against McClintic. These extreme stressors have a direct effect on criminality and delinquent behaviour (Coie et al., 1992).

The McClintic case demonstrates how a lack of social controls can lead to criminality in adolescences. Implementing more social control mechanisms can assist in halting criminality before adolescence. While there is no way to know what would have happened to McClintic if her mother or adoptive mother were given the supports needed to provide a more nurturing life, reducing the many of the risks that she faced would have created more positive first years of life and, thus, would change the person whom McClintic would become.

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Conflicts of interest

This author declares no conflicts of interest

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