

The Contract Murderer: Patterns, Characteristics, and Dynamics

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ABSTRACT: A case of an independent professional contract murderer, who killed over 100 people, is reported. After eluding law enforcement for 30 years, the subject killed several associates who he believed could implicate him in various crimes. These homicides eventually led to his arrest, since the victims were individuals who could be linked to him. This hit man had a background of poverty and childhood abuse but, as an adult, had pursued a middle-class lifestyle and kept his family totally separate from his criminal career. In addition, he had a number of characteristics that helped him carry out his crimes in a highly planned, methodical, and organized manner: he had adept social judgment; personality traits of orderliness, control, and paranoid vigilance; useful defense mechanisms of rationalization and reframing; and an exceptional ability to encapsulate emotions. This case is discussed within the context of contract murder, a crime that occurs relatively frequently and is probably increasing; yet it often goes undetected, the arrest rate is low, and the offender is rarely studied.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, forensic psychiatry, forensic psychology, contract murder, hit man, third-party killing

The contract murderer is a person who is hired to take the life of another person, usually someone whom the hit man has never met. The motivation of the contractor (who hires the hit man) may be purely financial, personal, or a combination. Douglas et al. (1), in their description of contract murderers, note that such offenders usually spend a minimal amount of time at the crime scene, opting for a quick ambush style of attack and focusing the area of injury to the victim's vital organs, especially the head. Thus, there are few wounds and overkill is rare. The more sophisticated and experienced offender carries out his task in a systematic, organized manner and leaves little or no physical evidence at the crime scene.

Although there are no U.S. crime statistics on the number of contract murders, several factors suggest that this type of homicide occurs relatively frequently and may even be increasing. Since most contract murders remain unsolved (2,3), the dramatic rise in the overall number of unsolved homicides (from about 10% in the 1960s to 31% in 1998, according to the FBI *Uniform Crime Reports*) lends support to this contention—especially considering the increased technological sophistication in solving crimes and the greater number of police per capita during this period. The rise in the number of murders committed for unknown motives similarly might indicate such an increase, since many contract killings are never identified as such (4) and the motivation behind these murders

often remains undetermined. In 1976, for example, 8.5% of all homicides were grouped in the “unknown motive” category, while in 1998 this figure rose to 38%. These findings are probably not indicative of an increase in sexual homicide, as has been suggested (5), since the percent of female victims—the typical target in sexual murder—actually decreased by about 10% over this time period.

Examination of press accounts of identified cases of contract murder provides a gross estimate of its incidence. A 1995 report (6) which found that contract murder has been occurring more frequently, particularly in middle class-suburbs—cites a crime analyst who has tracked over 1000 such cases from 1988 to 1995; over half of these cases stemmed from domestic disputes. Similarly, Jones (7) has concluded that “more and more people are hiring strangers to dispose of their no-longer-loved ones” (p. 2). The publication of a “technical manual” that outlines steps to be taken by the hit man (8) is another indication of the intrusion of this form of murder into our culture.

As a consequence of the apparent increase in such homicides, a number of states have begun to use law enforcement officers as undercover agents to unmask such plots, and at least eight states have tightened laws against contract murder (6). A similar increase in contract killing has been noted in other countries. For example, the number of high-profile contract murders in the United Kingdom began to increase in the 1960s and rose steadily in the ensuing years (7). In Russia, there has been such a dramatic rise in the number of contract killings (500 documented cases in a single year alone) that many Russian teenagers now view contract murder as a viable career choice (9).

Although there have been hundreds of novels, short stories, essays, plays, and movies about the contract murderer—beginning perhaps with Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through the more contemporary literary subgenre exemplified by Hemingway's *The Killers*—there is virtually nothing in the psychiatric/psychological literature on this type of homicide. Wyden (2) has stated, “I know of no useful psychological or psychiatric interviews ever conducted with professional hired killers. They are, by trade, closed mouth fellows” (p. 19). Several other homicidologists (4,10) have noted that the psychological status of the hit man remains unknown, since this type of criminal is rarely seen by mental health professionals and shuns the idea of participating in such an evaluation.

Revitch and Schlesinger (11) have differentiated three general types of contract murderer: the professional, the semiprofessional, and the amateur. The professional contract murderer may be a direct member of organized crime, performing his job out of a loyalty to that organization (12); or he may be an independent contractor—essentially a freelance agent, not connected to any group, who hires himself out for a fee (3) and earns his living primarily through murder. The semiprofessional and amateur contract murderers earn

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TABLE 1—*Differentiating patterns and characteristics of the contract murderer.*

	Amateur	Semi-professional	Professional
Method of killing	Poorly planned; often impulsive and disorganized	Planned, orderly, systematic	Highly planned, orderly, systematic
Crime scene	Some physical evidence left	Little physical evidence left	Little physical evidence; elaborate body disposal, effective staging
Typical target	Spouse or intimate partner	Business associate or criminal	A criminal or a person associated with organized crime
Contractor's motive	Mostly personal	Business related	Business related and consistent with crime organization's goals
Personality organization	Unstable with marginal adjustment	Less instability	Minimal overt disturbance

their living primarily through other activities and engage in contract murder on a one-time (or two-time) basis. Table 1 lists various patterns and characteristics delineating the degree of professionalism of the three groups of offenders.

Most contract murders appear to be carried out by amateurs commonly hired to eliminate a spouse or an intimate partner. These novices typically have a history of criminal behavior; they also display considerably more psychopathology, instability, and marginal adjustment than the semiprofessionals. They act for a specific gainful purpose, but sometimes their behavior may be partly rationalized and serves as a vent for built-up aggression and hostility. An example is Luis Moya (2), whose unstable life was marked by poor school and work adjustment; a long criminal record, with numerous incarcerations; and only superficial fleeting relationships, mostly with other ex-convicts. For a small fee, Moya killed a woman and, because of his amateurish tactics, was quickly apprehended. Another amateurish contract murderer, described by Revitch and Schlesinger (11), was a 51-year-old unemployed man who met the intended victim's husband in a local bar. The offender had a history of alcoholism, impulsiveness, borderline adjustment, and criminal acts. He believed he was approached by the husband "because I am known not to be exactly a goody-goody." Shortly after killing the woman in her home, he entered an alcohol rehabilitation program and confessed to his therapist. Twelve other amateurish contract murderers, most of them hired by spouses contracting to kill their mates, have been described by Jones (7). Jones notes that amateurs are more often apprehended because of their ineptitude and a trail of witnesses that emerge as the contractor searches for someone to carry out the act.

The semiprofessional contract murderer has a more sophisticated homicidal technique than the amateur, but is less competent than the professional. Gibbons (13) found that semiprofessional offenders often eschew conventional values and hard work, and be-

lieve that they can achieve success only through criminal behavior. Semiprofessionals have less overall personality disturbance than the amateurs, but frequently display a disposition toward violence in their backgrounds. An example is Floyd "Lucky" Holzapfel (2), who had a lifelong dream of being important, influential, and powerful. Although well liked, bright, and flawlessly dressed, he was unable to maintain successful businesses. He glorified his criminal background, which included theft and bookmaking and an eighteen-month prison term for robbery. Holzapfel was hired by a judge to kill a rival judge. He killed the judge in such a clever way that the bodies were never found and it took five years to unmask the plot.

There have been some nonfictional accounts of professional contract murderers, most of whom were directly connected to organized crime (14,15). Such individuals often achieve adequate adjustment within the values of their group, and the murders that they carry out are logical, adaptive, and consistent with the purpose of the organization. These professionals kill because it is their job to do so. As Lindesmith (16) stated years ago, the gangster and the businessman are both in pursuit of material success and differ only in the services they render and the means they employ. Sammy Gravano, a hit man for organized crime (17), is a typical example. Raised in a stable working-class family, he quit school and joined local youth gangs both before and after serving several years in the army. Gravano became associated with a criminal syndicate and gradually worked his way up the organizational ladder. He described committing numerous murders as a logical means of achieving the goals of his group.

Unlike the hit man who is an established member of organized crime, the professional independent contract murderer is rarely described and is the least understood of all the types of contract murderers. The following case is noteworthy because it represents a rare in-depth psychological study of this subtype of contract murderer.

Criminal Offenses

A.A. was a professional independent contract murderer who worked for several organized crime groups and, over the course of 30 years, killed more than 100 people. Although he often used traditional methods of shooting, choking, and knifing, he became most noted for his proficiency in cyanide poisoning: lacing food with cyanide, accidentally spilling a drink laced with cyanide on the victim, or even spraying a cyanide mist in the target's face. His murders were carefully planned, and his techniques were methodical and disciplined, often involving elaborate staging that successfully misdirected law enforcement for many years.

As A.A. approached 50 years of age, he was slowing down and decided to use assistants to do much of the work. This change in method helped lead to his arrest, because over a period of several years he murdered four of his close associates because he was afraid that they could implicate him in various crimes. Law enforcement was able to connect A.A. to these homicides, because the victims were no longer strangers but were people whom he knew. An undercover agent (posing as a member of organized crime) gained A.A.'s confidence and hired him to kill a drug user. A.A. was arrested just prior to carrying out the act. Although eventually charged with the (capital) murders of his associates, he was never directly connected to any of the contract murders. He pled guilty to two (decapitalized) homicides after reaching an agreement with the prosecutor's office to drop a weapon's charge against his wife and son.

Relevant Background

A.A.'s father abandoned his wife and children when A.A. was about ten years old. (A.A.'s mother had also been abandoned as an infant and was raised in an orphanage). A.A. recalls his father drinking heavily and being unpredictably violent, often beating him with belts. After her husband left, Mrs. A. moved to an urban housing project and worked at a variety of jobs to support her children. She disciplined her children harshly, breaking broomsticks over A.A.'s back for minor infractions. He described his mother as "whipped cream and cancer—sweet on the outside, but she would dig at you with a little knife." A.A.'s sister became a "prostitute and trash" and left the family. His younger brother has been incarcerated in the psychiatric section of a state prison for the rape and murder of a young girl. Another brother died in an automobile accident just before the father left the family.

As a child, A.A. had recurrent dreams of falling and being crushed by a landslide. He also engaged in excessive daydreaming, as a means of escaping from a life that he described as "just an existence," without love, affection, or warmth. He often got into fights with others and sometimes was knocked unconscious; possibly as a result, he experienced severe headaches about once a week for several years. Having few friends, he was considered a loner and always felt on the outside of the crowd. After completing the eighth grade, he developed discipline problems the next year and quit.

During adolescence, A.A. worked at several jobs to help support the family. Although still somewhat of a loner, he was "street wise" and became involved with some local youth gangs. At age 18, he left home but continued to help his mother financially by working as a driver and truck loader. A.A. became an accomplished pool player and was known as a hustler, earning up to \$300 per game. He also gambled by playing cards, but he gave up this form of gambling after he lost his car because of a bet. As a juvenile, the only offenses he was charged with involved the receipt of stolen property and participation in a shooting; he served no time in prison for either of these alleged offenses. At 19, A.A. joined the army, but was given a dishonorable discharge for being absent without leave.

Over the next few years, A.A. worked as a construction laborer and truck driver, but was dissatisfied because of the low salary. He eventually obtained a job in a pornographic film lab and later started his own part-time film distribution business. In addition, he learned how to trade in foreign currency. He explained how he became successful in this line of work: "I psyched myself up for about an hour before going to meet with a lawyer or banker" in order to present a believable facade. "I acted sure of myself—like 'You need me.' I'd give them a general answer if I had to check something out, or I'd become aggressive on something I knew nothing about, and they'd believe me. If you project something, you put on your best clothes and jewelry and make yourself look like a hundred dollar bill. When you are down, people laugh at you and kick you. Never let people know you have a problem. It's the image."

Married at age 25, A.A. was described by his wife as attentive and caring, but also controlling and, at times, physically abusive to her and the children. He was extremely demanding of his wife's attention and was easily provoked, very jealous, and possessive. He had to know her whereabouts at all times and was suspicious whenever she talked to anyone else, even her closest male cousin. She understood, however, that he behaved as he did because he was emotionally dependent on her and frightened that he would lose her. A.A.'s son and two daughters all described their father as loving and caring, but explosive.

Throughout 26 years of marriage, A.A. tried to keep his family insulated "from the dirt and scum of the world." He viewed his home environment as a refuge, maintaining a totally separate life from his main source of income, which his family knew nothing about. He embraced typical middle-class values and was very proud of the middle-class lifestyle he was able to provide, including a suburban home and parochial school for his children. In fact, A.A. did not drink, smoke, gamble, or womanize. Mrs. A. knew of his film distribution business and trading in foreign currency, but she was unaware of his involvement with contract murder.

A.A. met members of organized crime through contacts he established in the sale of pornographic films. After working as a strong-man, collecting debts and killing a few individuals, he became comfortable with murder. He acknowledged that he had feelings of "power and control" when he was being brutal and intimidating to others; and he perfected this image. He then began to carry out contract murders and slowly developed his skill and reputation.

Clinical Findings

A.A., 52 years old at the time of the examination, was a very large man, somewhat overweight, balding, with a gray beard and moustache, and wearing a wedding ring. His demeanor was generally appropriate; he was superficially friendly, but throughout the interview he maintained a clear emotional distance and detachment, becoming tearful and overtly depressed only when he spoke of his family. Otherwise, he tried to appear cool and relaxed during the entire 15-h evaluation at the country jail while he awaited trial.

A.A.'s performance on the intelligence test revealed a full scale WAIS-R IQ of 101 (Verbal IQ = 101; Performance IQ = 104), with no evidence of significant organicity. Probably because he had only an eighth-grade education, he had accumulated a very poor fund of general information. Other verbal skills centered within average range, although he displayed superior functioning on the comprehension subtest, showing an acute awareness of societal principles, operations, and standards. His relatively weak performance on several nonverbal subtests (digit symbol and block design) probably reflected poor concentration. In general, A.A. functioned above his overall level of intelligence because of his exceptional social understanding and practical application of knowledge.

He responded to the projective tests in a slightly guarded manner. The line quality of his figure drawings suggested rigidity, control, and order, but no obvious peculiarities. Paranoid features were evident on the Rorschach by preoccupation with people. However, his thinking was logical, reality testing was very good, and there were no indications of a psychotic process. The various Rorschach perceptions were well elaborated and not bizarre, primitive, or regressive. The content of his responses were fairly conventional and uncomplicated ("two elephants," "bat," "animal skin," "butterfly," "crabs," "tweezers," "bra strap," etc.). Anxiety, tension, and somatic symptoms, associated with depression, were detected on the MMPI. No indications of impulsivity were found on any of the tests; instead, the findings reflect a man who behaves in a controlled and orderly manner and is able to tolerate emotional stimulation and stress most of the time. TAT stories contained repetitive themes of being separated from family members, with subsequent depression, and several references reflecting strong concerns about infidelity ("If his wife fools around, she'll do it again; he's a loser"). There was one theme of murder ("This man shot him; they had an argument; they were partners in business").

Discussion

In most cases, contract murder would not take place without a value system shaped by general environmental influences as well as specific subcultural standards. Sutherland's (18) concept of differential association (i.e., criminal behavior learned in interaction with others) would apply to all three types of contract murderers. Dietz (19) notes the major importance of group and subgroup influences: "It is particularly true in criminal subcultures that violence is recognized as an acceptable means of controlling and punishing others who violate group rules" (p. 186). . . . "Killing is seen as the ultimate masculine act and is associated with control, nerve and courage" (p. 190).

The vast majority of contract murderers are not psychotic, but they do have varying degrees of personality disturbance. There is more characterological dysfunction among the amateur offenders and less with the semiprofessionals and professionals. Psychopathic, sociopathic, and antisocial traits (20–22) dominate in all three groups, with less inner cohesiveness and more disorganization among the amateurs. Meloy (23) notes that "the psychopathic process is particularly suited to predation . . . it predisposes, precipitates, and perpetuates predatory violence" (p. 236). The psychopath, in Meloy's view, displays minimal or absent autonomic arousal and lacks a conscious experience of emotions; and these characteristics make planned murder relatively easy for the psychopath to commit. A.A. clearly has marked antisocial personality traits, as was evident by his conduct and behavior. Antisocial personality disorder alone, however, does not explain A.A.'s numerous homicides; in fact, most of the individuals with antisocial personality disorder never commit a murder (11,24).

Most individuals who have killed—from Nazi war criminals (25,26) to the person who kills once as a consequence of an angry domestic dispute—rationalize their behavior, at least on some level. A.A. rationalized his actions as necessary and the only means available for him to provide for his family: "It may not have been the right way, but for me it was the only way. What was I supposed to do, push a yarn truck for the rest of my life? I wouldn't have been able to afford one child, let alone three." A.A. also justified his behavior by insisting that "they [his victims] were all players" and deserved their fate. Dietz (19) has similarly observed contract murderers justifying their acts by claiming that they were doing a public service; by denigrating and depersonalizing the victims; and sometimes by glorifying the killing. Levi (3) believes that the contract murderer also rationalizes his behavior through a process of "reframing" (27), where the offender views the homicides in a business-like framework (28) and thereby can neutralize their emotional impact and deny their wrongfulness. When A.A. was asked in court why he had committed the murders he pled guilty to, he responded, "It was business."

In addition to his exceptional ability to rationalize his actions, A.A. was also able to encapsulate his emotions so that they did not interfere with his overall functioning: "I don't think about it. It doesn't bother me. Nothing haunts me—nothing. If I think about it, it would hurt me, so I don't think about it." Montefiore (29) interviewed a professional Russian contract murderer who similarly stated, "I don't feel anything. I don't think about these men [the victims] at all. I do not see their faces haunting me during the night" (p. 83). Levi (3) found that hit men "all seem capable of feeling ordinary human emotions. Their inhumanity, their coldness, seems narrowly restricted to their jobs . . . the cold heart of the hit man may be less a characteristic of the killer's personality than a feature of the professional framework of experi-

ence which the hit man has learned to adapt himself to, when he is on the job" (p. 60).

This case contains many of the elements described in other studies of hit men, including the influence of subcultural values obtained through association with criminals, the presence of psychopathic traits, and the use of defense mechanisms of rationalization and reframing. However, this case also provides additional insight into the dynamics of the professional contract murderer. Various aspects of A.A.'s background and personality contributed to his success in committing a large number of homicides while remaining undetected for many years. His experience of childhood physical and emotional abuse desensitized him to violence and enabled him to become an abuser (30–32). Personality characteristics such as a need for control and order, combining with hypervigilance, aided in the development of his methodical approach to the murders and subsequent thwarting of law enforcement. A.A.'s adept social comprehension and practical reasoning, as well as his ability to encapsulate his feelings, helped him carry out his crimes in an orderly manner without the interference of strong emotions that could lead to carelessness. Thus, multiple factors, in both his background and his personality, contributed to this unique criminal career.

Contract murderers—particularly the semiprofessional and the professional—frequently elude law enforcement. Those who are apprehended are rarely examined psychologically; thus, they remain poorly understood and in many ways enigmatic. Given the prevalence and likely increase in this type of homicide, a concerted effort needs to be made to study this group of offenders—their patterns, characteristics, and dynamics—with a goal toward increased detection and apprehension rates, and possibly even intervention and prevention in some cases.

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