

#22 (ROBERT SCHUG)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Jerry Ratcliffe again with Reducing Crime, a Podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Robert Schug is a neuro criminologist, clinical psychologist, and professor at California State University, Long Beach. We talk about Mindhunters, the media, and the real science behind serial killer research. Find out more in this episode at reducingcrime.com and on Twitter @_ReducingCrime.

Dr. Robert Schug is a neuro criminologist specializing in the biology and psychology of the criminal mind. His research focuses on understanding the relationship between extreme forms of psychopathology, and antisocial criminal and violent behavior. He has a PhD in Psychology, and extensive clinical training as a forensic psychologist. He's worked with jail inmates, sex offenders, and forensic psychiatric inpatients. His many articles cover psychopathy, schizophrenia, and homicide offenders. And he's also published a leading textbook on mental illness and crime. His unique developmental timeline approach to the study of homicide offenders is the subject of this episode.

Robert's a Professor at California State University, Long Beach, a licensed clinical psychologist, and he is on the Los Angeles Superior Court's approved panel of psychiatrists and psychologists. We ran into each other in Salem, Oregon, of all places, where I was running some training, and he was doing some research. We caught up in a hotel bar, and over a few adult beverages he schooled me on the difference between serial spree and mass killers, and I found out just how close my nephew is to being a homicidal maniac.

You had this interest, you saw Silence of the Lambs.

Robert Schug:

Silence of the Lambs piqued the interest, but then I had to sort of let my rockstar career fizzle out, and get back into school because I dropped-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay, we very briefly have to touch on your rockstar career. Tell us a little bit about that. Come on, have you got a CD to sell?

Robert Schug:

No. The reason I'm out here is because I dropped out of Arizona State University three and a half years in, premed, full scholarship, to be a rockstar in 1990 in Los Angeles.

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

One, your parents must have loved you for that decision, and secondly, tell us about the rockstar career.

Robert Schug:

Right. So my parents were supportive. They didn't particularly care for the idea, but like any good parent, they let me make my own mistakes. I worked very hard at it, but I didn't achieve nearly the success I had hoped.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What were you doing, and what was the band name?

Robert Schug:

I shouldn't let any of that information out because there's a lot of Googling. I don't want pictures of me from that time period showing up when I'm being cross-examined on the witness stand for some sort of trial in Los Angeles, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So the rockstar career didn't pan out?

Robert Schug:

It did not but I gave it a solid go and-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No regrets.

Robert Schug:

No regrets, and it got me here. Well, not here. Well, no, it did get me here, because it got me to Los Angeles, and got me to thinking about being a responsible adult, not doing rockstar stuff. And got me back into school and got me connected with Adrian Raine, who was at USC at the time, and so I did my PhD with him and that opened up a bunch of opportunities. So doors opened for me, and allowed me opportunities along the way that led to this thing based on Silence of the Lambs.

But, I will say part of being a musician is you learn to deal with all sorts of people being on stage. I kind of take some of that with me, I think into most of my interactions with people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You never know when an unrelated skill set from one period of your life becomes useful somewhere along the line.

Robert Schug:

That's right, you never know when some serial murderer is going to ask you to play Free Bird by Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You were lead guitarist?

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Robert Schug:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Of course you were.

Robert Schug:

Yeah. Well, part of what I want to convey, is that this work is important. That there is a gap in the literature, a significant gap in the literature, that hasn't been really addressed really emphatically, I think since the FBI started it in the late '70s with their Criminal Profiling Project. If you watch the show *Mindhunter*, you sort of see the evolution of that. And then after that, nobody really picked up the ball and carried it on, in terms of the serial killer literature. There's some kind of cool books that came out in the '90s, and a few good journal articles, but most of the empirical literature at this point is still locked into case studies and psychological theory that is a bit vague, nebulous, and not really grounded in anything horribly scientific.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The psychologist is basically sitting there making shit up.

Robert Schug:

Kind of. I mean, because I do that all the time and I know.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're going to make your living, right?

Robert Schug:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. No, but that's kind of what psychologists did for decades in their publications. They would theorize, right? Psychology is a soft science and a lot of it has yet to be validated and proven with data.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it's not like there's a mass of serial killers out there.

Robert Schug:

Well, see that's the thing, the idea of a need for research on serial killers. I think people have to understand it needs to go beyond just it being interesting and cool and dark and sexy and those things. Even though those are wonderful reasons for doing research.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I think you've just described what every single 19 year old student who is studying criminal justice and psychology, that dual major. I know exactly what they want to do.

Robert Schug:

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Right, right. I want to be a criminal profiler or whatever.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes. They've all seen Silence of the Lambs. They want to be Clarice.

Robert Schug:

But To be fair, that was the movie that got me started in 1991.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You wanted to be Clarice?

Robert Schug:

Jodie Foster was actually quite attractive at that time [inaudible 00:05:48] I remember, and at that time I was doing something completely different with my life, but I remember walking out of that movie theater, it was in Glendale, California and thinking ... my head was spinning and I felt really weird inside. But the idea of using science to understand the quote unquote "criminal mind," that's where the seed was planted in me. And even though it took me a while to get back around to academia that's where this all started.

Problem is though, just like as you mentioned I'm not going to blame the media, but it's through the media that we have our ideas about serial killers and through all of the murder porn shows, right? So the Criminal Minds and Mindhunters, is actually quite good, but there's been a proliferation of these kinds of television shows. People are interested in this, but they don't know where to turn for real knowledge. They're relying on information that was gathered in the late seventies by the FBI and was never really validated to be honest, but never really expanded upon in a responsible way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And also I got the sense that the FBI's research methods back from the behavioral research unit were not empirically robust.

Robert Schug:

That FBI study is critical and it was starting point and any time you are on the cutting edge of something, there's lots of room for mistakes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's the problem with the cutting edge, there's often a lot of bleeding.

Robert Schug:

That's right. And this is an excellent example. They certainly uncovered a lot of really helpful and useful and interesting information, but it was a small sample size. It was only 36 guys. It was a heterogeneous sample. There were, I think they said, they described the sample as serial and sexual murderers. So it wasn't even 36 serial killers. It was a mix.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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Should they always be thought of as a separate group?

Robert Schug:

I think we can get into that because I think part of what we're doing with this is understanding that the value of studying a distinct group based on a distinct behavior probably is not as good as understanding it on a continuum of violence. What we're really doing is studying the most violent of the population, right? And what we learn about serial killers, we can certainly apply to single murderers and maybe violent criminals of other sorts. A lot of those same factors are probably in play. We shouldn't think about them as an isolated population. We should think of them as the extreme end of violent individuals [crosstalk 00:08:02].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So they don't have separate triggers or markers. It's an arbitrary line between a violent person and a serial killer.

Robert Schug:

I would assert yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're not a distinct group of people.

Robert Schug:

The reasons these people commit multiple homicides are often very understandable. They're often very contextually congruent, meaning given the situation they were in the choice they made to do, it makes sense. We can talk about people who commit murder and serial murder who have mental illness and that happens, as well. But when you're talking about people who kill over and over for sexual reasons, you're extending normative, human drives and behaviors and thoughts and feelings into this one particular type of behavior. They're not monsters. We'll talk about that, I suppose in a bit. They're humans that are engaging in behaviors that they're choosing to engage in and more often than not for reasons you and I would probably understand if we sat down and listened to them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. So you think that's a strong rationality behind this then?

Robert Schug:

Not always, but I'm saying that there are human needs being met. Lots of folks are interested in this, but there's very little science behind it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, in a way it's kind of fascinating because there's so much television programs about it. And honestly, I'll teach a hundred undergraduate students in doing Intro To Law Enforcement and half of them want to go to law school and half of them want to be criminal profilers. But in actual fact where the real work, in the terms of understanding that is in the science and the science is largely absent.

Robert Schug:

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Yes. Very few studies. It's almost uncanny what appears to be a complete lack of interest by some quote unquote "scientists" relative to the obsession of the American populous.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, you've just described policing research as well.

Robert Schug:

The same way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I mean, policing researchers have become a thing in the last 20 years, but we've had policing for 200 years and we've had cop shows since black and white television.

Robert Schug:

That's right. That's right. And that's unfortunate because I do believe in my heart of hearts that people are ready for an elevated understanding of serial murder and they can handle it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So the television side of things has really helped because that means that people are not horrified with the idea of saying that we're studying serial killers.

Robert Schug:

That's right. And I think the fact that we just see show after show after show, further underscores the point that there is an interest in this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's just no way, completely morbid by the way.

Robert Schug:

And that's just it and it's funny because what I will often get is the person who like, "So what do you do?" And here's what I do. And, "Oh my God, that's so fascinating. And I feel so guilty saying this, but I can't stop watching this show or that show, that other show. Does that make me a bad person."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I get a few listeners to this podcast, but nothing compared to the numbers that the true crime podcasts. Some of those are huge.

Robert Schug:

Well, I have theories about that. So I think it's important to understand violence and aggression. It's a very human experience of traits, they're drives, right? So the evolutionary biologist will tell you, we, as a species would not have survived without aggression and violence. Freud even talked about aggression and violence being inherent to our

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existence. That we spent our whole lives trying to fit into society without killing each other without, without acting on these drives. So when someone says, how can somebody possibly kill somebody? How can someone take the life of somebody? The real question should be, how is it the rest of us don't? Because we're all wired to do it, right. We all have these impulses.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, I'm this close to offering the person a few tables away that's talking too loudly.

Robert Schug:

Exactly. So we have the impulses, they're inherent, they're biological. We spend most of our lives dampening those impulses, not acting on them. That is probably why there's an interest in this. Where people might be sort of trying to distance themselves from their own aggression, which they find pulsive or sort of undesirable. So "I'm not like those guys on TV, but I need to keep watching to make sure."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So do you think it's, I don't want to get totally nerdy on you, but are we saying that serial killers probably are no different than the rest of us, except for in an R2D2 sense. They just don't have their restraining bolt.

Robert Schug:

I think that's part of it. I think if we're looking to answer the question why, the restraining bolt is very critical. Most of us do have the restraining bolt in the form of the prefrontal lobe, the prefrontal cortex in our brain. The part of our brain that was evolved most recently that keeps us from acting out on impulses, that is responsible for planning and organization.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Most recently?

Robert Schug:

In the evolutionary picture, right? That's the part of the brain that has come online the most recent. When you see the drawing at the National History Museum of the caveman, and he's getting more and more vertical and so here we are at the end, in our suits and our briefcases or whatever, but that's where the prefrontal cortex is the most developed. It's the thing that keeps us in line. It's sort of equivalent to what Freud called the superego. The morals and values of society that have been copied onto our hard drives so that we can go out and function in the world and not kill and have sex with everybody.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I miss those days.

Robert Schug:

Yeah. The nineties were great. Anyway, so the idea that violence and aggression is a normal human experience doesn't mean we should be acting on it, but the potential is there. Studying serial killers then, trying to unravel what are the

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things that lead up to a person not being able to dampen those impulses and in the criminal logical literature, we're still talking about all these things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So we're really in just like a nascent stage with this research. This is not a mature science?

Robert Schug:

No, not at all. I think if we just want to talk about even just the brain alone, which we would assume is the beginning and end of all behavior, we're still just at the beginning baby steps of understanding how the brain works.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So we're nowhere near any kind of practical application of this stuff.

Robert Schug:

Now see here's the thing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In terms of serial killer prevention course.

Robert Schug:

That's where we should be headed with this, but we do have a fair understanding of how the brain-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've got a problem with my pre frontal brelain, yeah.

Robert Schug:

I think Brelain was my senior prom date. Now the relationship between the brain and violent behavior, we're getting a handle on that. And there are studies that have shown this prefrontal area of our brain, either not functioning correctly or not having enough stuff there. It's funny because we can think about the gray matter of the brain is like brake pads. When your brake pads go out, when they thin out, it's harder to stop your car. So if for whatever reason there's less gray matter in a particular area of your brain, it's not going to function properly. We think.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The analogy here is basically a serial killer, we're all driving carefully and wearing our seat belts and the serial killer is just barreling down the highway going, "Fuck it."

Robert Schug:

It might be, or it might be that we're all barreling down the highway, except the rest of us can stop when we want to and the serial killer might have problems. Now that being said not a lot of good, solid scientific studies on serial killers. A lot of this is generalizing from maybe samples of one off murderers or violent individuals in general.

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, that's tricky because what differentiates a murderer from somebody who commits an aggravated assault and in many cities is how quickly the victim gets to hospital.

Robert Schug:

Right. Or what differentiates a single from a multiple murderer might be if you get arrested and in imprisoned before you're able to do it again.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Ah, yeah, didn't think about that.

Robert Schug:

So yeah. So I think even defining a serial killer for scientific study is inherently problematic.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But we love to call people monsters because they do something we haven't done.

Robert Schug:

Right. One of my favorite sayings nowadays is, "There's no such thing as monsters." And I get this anecdotally from the work that I do interviewing serial killers and doing brain testing on them. And again, with the idea of trying to figure all this out. I would bet that you ask any sort of beat cop, the same sort of question like, "Are there people you interact with on the course of your job that you can see the humanity in, even though they've done something really wrong and really harmed somebody. Can you still see them as a human, as a person?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So the best cops that I know are what I call natural police, and I stole that phrase from The Wire, because they're the people that can see the humanity even in very serious offenders. And what they're able to do is, not sympathize, but certainly empathize with their situation and their background and often get intelligence from them because they can build relationships. Instead of seeing people as black and white, as evil, everybody's a monster, everybody's good guy, they see everybody as a shade of gray. And well, "You know what? If I'd grown up in this neighborhood and this environment, I would be behaving like these people do."

Robert Schug:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And those cops tend to be the better ones in terms of gathering criminal intelligence because they can build relationships because they don't bring this judgmental streak with it.

Robert Schug:

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Right. You just hit on the point that I wanted to make dammit. I wanted to make that point. Are we allowed to say dammit on podcasts?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I say fuck all the time so I think you're in good shape.

Robert Schug:

The idea of getting information from somebody and you described it in terms of police work, and I think of getting information as a scientist and what's the best way to get information. The best way is to leave judgment at the door. To see everyone as a human and to connect with that humanity. I sit with people who have done some pretty awful things, but it's not hard to see the humanity in these people if you look. So going into it with that agenda, I think is more helpful than say what the FBI did. Just kind of going in, "We need you for information to help us with our investigations." And they have a completely different mandate. So while it worked in that era, back to the criminal profiling project, '70s and '80s, nowadays I don't think that they would have been as fruitful in terms of the information.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Tell me a little bit more about the job that you do then. You're traveling the country interviewing serial killers,

Robert Schug:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Why?

Robert Schug:

I have two really cool jobs. And so the first really cool job is the professor gig, right? It's through that job that I have to teach classes and I have to do research. I'm up here at a facility that I'm recruiting participants from for my serial killer project. This area is literally the serial killer Mecca. I think certainly of this part of the United States and maybe even the world. I can't say that with any authority, but I'm wondering.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The town is called Salem for crying out loud. You're interviewing serial killers in Salem. You are one upturn pentacle from being a horror movie. Come on.

Robert Schug:

I really am. And not just for those reasons, actually. So Jerome Brudo, the I5 killer, the Happy Face Killer. Ted Bundy operated in these parts. So there's something about this part of the world that lends itself.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So when serial killers go on vacation, they go through the Pacific Northwest.

Robert Schug:

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Yeah. And all I got was this lousy t-shirt. Yeah. So it's a great opportunity to come up here and talk to these guys. The other job I have back in LA County is as a forensic psychologist. I often do evaluations for the courts in Los Angeles. I come across certainly folks who have committed any number of variety of murders, but serial killers as well down there. It's uncommon for me to go several days in a row without talking to someone who has killed somebody.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That must mess with you a wee bit doesn't it? You know, we talk about troops coming from battle having PTSD. We talk about police officers having longterm exposure to all sorts of stuff. I saw stuff when I was a police officer that I can remember vividly to this day and it is decades ago, but I can still picture the entire scene, the whole situation. You are speaking to what popular media portrayals would have as the worst of the worst of our entire society.

Robert Schug:

That's true. But what I have at my disposal certainly is training and experience. And I would say, I think most importantly, going into the experience with the mindset of connecting with another human to hear a story versus going to interview a monster, who's done monstrous things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So maybe there's a lesson here for police officers for them then, which is to bring a mindset that this is a research project and I'm a scientist. I'm not bringing in the kind of righteous law enforcement judgment that comes to dealing and interviewing with people. Is there something in this? Is there a lesson here for broader interviewing skills?

Robert Schug:

I think anyone who is tasked with getting information from another human is better off connecting human to human, as opposed to whatever the dynamic is in terms of cop, crook or scientist. Because once you introduce that dynamic, you're introducing judgment. You may be introducing shame, fear. I think that affects the quality of information that you get, ultimately. And so this side of things is definitely rooted in developmental psychology and life course criminology.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

These words make me run for the hills.

Robert Schug:

Well, maybe they should.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Life course criminology. I mean, just starting to open the book on that. If I read every sentence going, so what? How can I use this in policing in a practical sense? And that's the part I struggle with.

Robert Schug:

Well maybe this'll be an epiphany for you. Maybe you'll change your mind.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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Yeah, probably not.

Robert Schug:

But maybe you'll dash her out of the plexiglass window. Okay. My supervisor trained me when working with patients with mental illness to come up with timelines to visually show a patient, the risk factors in their life and how they were connected with their crimes and with their symptoms. If you take a person's life, you take the time they're born and when they were arrested and we say, okay. I try to look at data in three ways. Biological data, meaning things that happened to your head, head injury, things that happened when you were in utero. Psychological data, signs of mental illness, emotions, thoughts, those kinds of things. And then what we would call in my neck of the woods, psychosocial data or environmental data. Things that happen to you based on where you live and how you're brought up and family things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've seen Carrie.

Robert Schug:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hey.

Speaker 3:

What is that?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You see the microphones?

Speaker 3:

Uh-huh (affirmative)

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're being recorded right now because he interviews serial killers.

Speaker 3:

How do you tell a sociopath or a psychopath?

Robert Schug:

Well, you don't say sociopath, that's a bad word.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But in the meantime, another Red Ale would be nice.

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Speaker 3:

Okay, I'll be right back. Would you like another glass?

Robert Schug:

I-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do it.

Robert Schug:

Yeah.

Speaker 3:

Yeah, come on dude. You just like talk to some crazy people, right?

Robert Schug:

They were completely sane. As normal as you and I.

Speaker 3:

Interesting.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They just killed slightly more people than you and I have.

Robert Schug:

As far as we know.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well slightly more people than you have.

Speaker 3:

Yeah, you don't know me at all.

Robert Schug:

Great. So anyway, biological, psychological and psychosocial is basically brain, mind, environment. And so they all coexist, but they're all different. Let's plot them on a timeline and see when they're happening. What's going on leading up to the first killing in a serial killer's life.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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Okay. But where's the counter factual then? I mean, do we take the rest of the general population because some of the rest of the general population will have climbed the rope or crosstalk 00:23:30].

Robert Schug:

Wait, you're stealing my thunder, which I don't mind necessarily, but let's talk about timelines.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You totally mind.

Robert Schug:

Timelines as a technique. So falling off of a rope from gym class plot it. Zinc poisoning, plot it. One of the problems with serial killer literature is that it's either earlier studies that may have descriptive statistics on serial killers or murderers, in general. I have a group of 50 murderers. Nine of them had experienced child abuse. 14 of them did drugs. Three of them have parents that were divorced. Not a lot of necessarily helpful information, or you have to read the true crime books.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And how do we know that they're not just experiencing the same things that people who don't turn out to be serial killers are?

Robert Schug:

We don't and that's the hypothesis we always need to be testing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because you've got in one case you've shown me, is somebody who's got knocked out boxing. And my nephew who is as far as I'm well aware, not a serial killer at this point, shout out to Peter and has been knocked out-

Robert Schug:

Don't do it Peter.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, he's been knocked out playing rugby. Okay. So the, the physiological effect is the same.

Robert Schug:

But you're talking about one risk factor, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is the assumption here that it's an amalgam, it's a concentration of risk factors?

Robert Schug:

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That's exactly it. It's not only a concentration, is there a pattern to the concentration? Do certain risk factors have to happen, maybe at or before a certain age? Do they have to happen in a certain combination with others? I started sequencing this data. So at age one, biological factor. Age, two psychosocial factor and psychological factor, and building these sequences to then compare to normal people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Don't look at me. Don't use me as a normal person because I'm very far from being a normal person,

Robert Schug:

You can build these sequences of risk factors and using genetic sequencing software to see, is there any difference? Not just in the presence of these risk factors, but in the sequencing of them and maybe that's the key and maybe it's not. But no one has looked yet.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So the bottom line is there's work taking place, but we're still at the embryonic stage of trying to figure out serial killers.

Robert Schug:

Absolutely. It's probably not going to happen in our lifetime, but like anything in science, if you can just nudge the ball forward a few yards down the field, you did a good job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Three yards and a cloud of dust.

Robert Schug:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So when these true crime podcasts and these true crime novels, so when they're articulating all of these things that happen in the history of these people, they're just winging it, basically. They have no idea whether those things have been contributory or not.

Robert Schug:

I don't necessarily agree with that. I think they're relying on research that is correlational, which is not horrible to do that, but you can't do cause and effect based on correlational research. And this allows you to get closer to clause and effect. It doesn't get you clause and effect. You don't want clause and effect but it doesn't get you cause and effect, but it allows you to see temporally. So in time things that happened before other things, and that might be equally, if not more important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you find a control group for this? What do you compare to?

Robert Schug:

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Yeah, well, so one of the things that I'm doing now is I actually have a sample of folks that I collected from a different project, but using the same materials and methods.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Part of your training, I know involved working with people with behavioral health issues.

Robert Schug:

The ability to do what I do hinges upon me having a doctoral degree in psychology, right, as a research psychologist and also being a licensed clinical psychologist. All of those things have to come together and be in place for me to be able to walk in the prison down the street and do this research project. Along with those things goes the extensive amount of training I've had with people with severe mental illnesses.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do serial killers have a mental illness?

Robert Schug:

Some do. You know, just sort of off the top of my head-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Some don't.

Robert Schug:

I would argue many do not. I think that is one of the most unfortunate misconceptions about serial killers, is that they're crazy. The waitress just sort of proved that. I've even experienced attorneys who have purported in the courtroom that just because you're a serial killer means you have a mental illness.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is that a technique to try and get them out of punishment?

Robert Schug:

Yeah. It's strategic. Purely strategic.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The notion that serial killers are not necessarily, don't necessarily have a mental illness, because that will be the first place that most people lead. "Clearly, there's something wrong with these people, for crying out loud. They kill lots of people."

Robert Schug:

If we're talking mental illness in the sense of a psychotic disorder, like schizophrenia, they're hearing voices or believing people are after them, many serial killers ... Well, no, again, we have to frame this within the idea that the science is not good.

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sure. Okay. Let's just put that caveat across the whole [crosstalk 00:28:23]

Robert Schug:

There needs to be more science, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes.

Robert Schug:

But there are plenty of serial killers who do not have mental illnesses in that sense. Now, if we're talking about someone who's a psychopath, who has no remorse, a lack of a conscience. These are personality issues, that might be possible. But mental illness, like anything else is a continuum. It's a spectrum. And so they might have little bits of it, or they might have a fair amount of it, or somewhere in the middle.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think there's a difference between people who commit what I would consider to be a kind of classic serial killer pattern. They pick up a hitchhiker in the Pacific Northwest and kill that person. And then a few months later do the same thing. And a few months later do it somewhere else. And spree killers who will walk into a church in Charleston or whatever, and shoot 27 people.

Robert Schug:

Well, that's actually the FBI would call it a mass murder. I think FBI got that right in their sense of classifying mass murderers versus spree murderers versus serial murderers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did I get that wrong? Spree killer's different than a mass murderer.

Robert Schug:

Well mass murderer is a bunch of victims in one location. Spree murders is a bunch of victims, but across a number of locations. So I stab you here in the restaurant. I drink your very expensive beer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a hotel bar. All the beers are expensive,

Robert Schug:

Right. I stab the cab driver. And then I go up to the Capitol building and shoot a couple of pedestrians. It's like a spree. It's a continuous psychological event but across multiple locations.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. So let's add that up. So we've got the kind of classic-

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Robert Schug:

Charles Whitman climbs the clock tower with a rifle, in one place, shoots as many people as he can.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. So that is our classic mass murderer. And then we've got a spree killer who does one and then just flips the lid and just goes around wandering the streets until they're stopped killing people in the streets.

Robert Schug:

That's what it can look like, yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And a spree killer. And then we've got-

Robert Schug:

But it's one continuous psychological event for them, even though it's different locations.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Are they different then? Mass murderers and spree killers?

Robert Schug:

There's no research to suggest that they are, or they aren't, but conceptually it sounds like it would be, right? The guy who gets a bunch of weapons and ammunition and holes up in one place thinking I'm going to take out as many people as I can and then I'm going to die.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Very premeditated.

Robert Schug:

Probably, right. Versus the person who is on the run and is continuing to commit murder after murder and not stopping. They're usually short lived sprees, but nonetheless, that's kind of a different animal. I don't mean to use the term animal, but that's a different thing. Versus again, the guy who kills and then can wait weeks, months, maybe years, and then do it again.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's my impression of a classic serial killer.

Robert Schug:

Exactly. Well, that's what the FBI originally delineated.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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So what? The so what in this is, what do we do with it?

Robert Schug:

That's a great question. I'm glad you asked. I'm glad you read my text. Yeah. So I think ultimately we can't just do anything because it's fun and exciting and sexy or whatnot. I think there are tremendous implications for this in the form of identification and intervention. Can we discern specific patterns of risk factors? And then is there a way we can identify these patterns and folks who haven't killed yet and intervene and set them on the right track? A lot of people don't have the stomach for that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, I mean, right. You can just see the debate around predictive policing, right? The idea that you're starting to label these people. It has to be absolutely perfect. There is no room for error. That's completely unrealistic.

Robert Schug:

Well, if we're saying ... here's what I'm saying, I don't know what you're saying.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Nobody ever does, ask my students.

Robert Schug:

No. But if you're saying we're going to get some information about you. You haven't killed anybody yet, but what we know about you matches up pretty well. If we're really serious about cracking down on violence and we have legitimate science, and I think that's important too. Not questionable science. We really need to be sure how down is society with implementing what we know.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Does that become a political question at that point, do you think? Do we move beyond science and we say, "This is where the science is. Here are the risks. We're going to start labeling a bunch of people who are not going to be serial killers but within that group, there's going to be a few people who really might be significantly violent people in our society."

Robert Schug:

I think the way you just phrased it is excellent. We don't want to be saying you're going to be a serial killer when you've never harmed a fly in your life or whatever. But toning down the language and talking about violence and aggression, maybe unusual violence and aggression. Does what you have been through, your journey thus far match up so much with someone's who has become violent, is there something we can do for you that will help you and the rest of us.

Ultimately it becomes unfortunately entirely political. When you're talking about making things laws and funding and that's the realm of the politicians.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That fills me with hope because politicians are so good at understanding science, aren't they.

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Robert Schug:

I just think what that should do is inspire the scientists to just really make sure we do great work.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And also convey it well to them.

Robert Schug:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because we have to pitch it at a level that politicians can understand it. I'm not sure any of us is capable of dumbing it down that far. Are there any particular cases that have really sprung to mind that just blew you away?

Robert Schug:

Well, without going into specifics, see I have to be really careful. I think what I found surprising is more often than not the lack of something being wrong with a person when you think there should be. And then also on the flip side, when something is horribly wrong with someone where you never would have expected it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you can interview somebody who's had done a dozen murders and actually come away and thinking, "Well, what a nice guy. He seems sane and balanced."

Robert Schug:

I did that twice today. To answer that kind of question, like, yeah, but that surprises me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you're saying that this is somebody in a different environment I could have a beer with.

Robert Schug:

Absolutely. And I don't feel ashamed in saying that. I'm not saying they should get out. I'm not saying open the gates, let them all be free. People make decisions and should be held accountable. I'm 100% behind that. But do I allow myself to like these people, to feel for these people-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

[crosstalk 00:35:02] for them.

Robert Schug:

To empathize with them? Yeah, of course. Of course, I do because I would be bullshitting myself if I didn't.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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Robert. Thanks very much for your time.

Robert Schug:

Thank you for having me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've been listening to Episode 22 of Reducing Crime recorded in Salem, Oregon in January, 2020. Other episodes, look@reducingcrime.com and the usual podcasty places. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_ReducingCrime.

Be safe and best of luck.