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Psychology: Power of Performance

HIT OR MISS?

Overcoming Psychological Hurdles As A New Contract Killer

Introduction

No one is born a killer. That being said, there are conditions that make some people more capable of committing the act of murder, such as sociopathy, psychopathy and other mental illnesses. However, in this paper I will be studying the less explored experiences of contract killers. Stumbling across this demographic by chance, while researching ironic effect was a happy twist of fate. Immediately intriguing, is how contracted killers come up in psychology. They rarely fit inside the subtypes of violent offenders and research is hard to conduct with actual subjects. The more popular articles in this field tend to focus on determining why people become killers: whether it be from environmental factors, genetics, or otherwise. What I will be determining and analyzing are the mental blocks that contract killers face in the beginning stages of their profession and how to overcome them quicker and more efficiently. I believe that contract killers are more susceptible to the phenomenon of choking and low self-efficacy when they first join their field, and I will determine steps that can be taken to lower the risk of this happening. “Choking” is defined as when a person performs poorly at a task that they are usually proficient in, due to high stress. Choking is often seen in professional athletes and musicians who suddenly lose their ability to perform when on stage or during official games. Although choking implies proficiency and this paper focuses on the novice contract killer, they will be generally be considered professionals in the field of murder based on the knowledge that criminals who are given the opportunity to join this field do so because of their prior experience and skill shown in killing. Self-efficacy is an individual’s belief in their ability complete a certain task. This is measured by the level of demand, strength of confidence and the generality of the task. Low self-efficacy leads to feelings of self-doubt and decreased effort in performance. These two issues and their effects are very important considering how high the stakes are. High-efficacy can be all that stands between a contracted killer and jailtime. Choking can twist the odds in favor of the target and lead to a reversal of roles. The quicker these issues are addressed and corrected, the safer the “performer” will be. In this paper, I will detail how with positive self-talk and concentration skills, contract killers can easily adapt to their new jobs and combat low-efficacy and choking.

Analysis

Contract killers, or hitmen, as they will be referred to in the rest of this paper, are people who usually have a criminal record and are scouted out to join agencies where their “services” are

exchanged for money. In order to analyze their psychological issues, we must first understand how hitmen come across their jobs. The first and most important source in this paper is the personal account from an incarcerated, former hitman who is referred to as “Pete”. Ken Levi happens across Pete while interviewing fifty random inmates, and after verifying that his position in the contracted killing profession is accurate, begins a series of interviews that, when cross referenced against other supporting literature, are the basis for most of the insider information used in this analysis. There are two types of hitmen, either they work for a higher organization or they rent out their own services independently. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus only on the independent hitman. According to the interview with Pete, entering this business is similar to being scouted by sports teams. The first time he was approached, was when a person who had seen him in action at a bar fight and liked his style, offered him fifty dollars to carry out a hit (Levi, p.56). There is no official vetting process or specialized training that extends past learning how to proficiently use a weapon which may be taught from anyone in a similar business who is willing to help. At the beginning of his career, Pete had to actively seek out two men that were known in the streets, to teach him about weapons, but past this, there is no emotional training even though it is known that killing someone out of passion is nowhere near the same mindset as killing one for money (Levi, p. 54). Being a hitman is so fundamentally different from being a killer with a mental diagnosis or who is a single offender with motives. They are people who live in the same society as the rest of us and understands the deviancy of murder. Because they understand that “the act of homicide is unlawful, self-serving, and intentional” (Levi, p. 49), the independent hitman is unable to rely on a pre-existing mental condition or higher chain of command to fall back on to justify his actions in his novice stage. In their research, Dominique Laferriere and Carlo Morselli outline the main components that impact criminal self-efficacy which are personal performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, social persuasion and physiological states and reactions (2015).

Personal performance accomplishments are measured by success in relation to past performances and criminal earnings. In the early stages of their career, hitmen will likely not have many past performances to compare their work with. Killing for a hit has a much higher standard to be met than a non-pre-meditated murder. The hitman is now having their work judged by the customer, the public, and the police. These anxiety inducing conditions combined with a lack of personal references can lead to lower self-efficacy and undue feelings of inadequacy. Additionally, the pay is important when taking criminal earnings into consideration. People tend to measure their

ability based on what their employer offers to pay them. This is true in all professions and being offered meager pay can be a major hit on self-esteem. In the beginning, to avoid a lowered morale and increased self-doubt, it is crucial to not attach worth to the profit made. Pete's first job offered him fifty dollars, and by the time he had been put in prison, his most profitable job had given him \$30,000. From a study, it was found that "the more criminal earnings offenders are able to reap from their criminal activities, the higher their criminal self-efficacy" (Laferriere, Morselli, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, the physiological state of a hitman is that of a person who understands and mostly obeys the laws of our society. After the first contracted kill, there is a shift in state that can make or break the mind of a hitman. In one of his interviews, Pete explained in depth the changes that occurred to his mental and physiological state after the first person he killed for money. He described feeling sick for a month and not being able to keep his food down. "I mean actually [Pete] was sick.... He couldn't keep his food down, I mean, or nothing like that... [It lasted] I'd say about two months ... Like he said that he had feelings... that he never did kill nobody before [Pete]" (Levi, p. 56). His thoughts were constantly haunted by the face of his victim and he felt his perceived ability to continue his career diminishing. This experience is also loosely related to the choking phenomenon. The hitman described feeling an immense amount of hesitation building up in himself as he stared his victim in the eyes. He was feeling this way because until this moment, he had only killed people who had wronged him and knew why they were being targeted. This could have been the point where he stopped pursuing his career, but instead he decided to push through these feelings and start to push his empathetic feelings to the side when at work.

One of the other main influencers of criminal self-efficacy is vicarious learning from a role model. This is hard to acquire solely considering how secretive the industry is. Finding an accessible role model who is willing to lend their services is not impossible, but it's also certainly not an easy or quick process. Furthermore, as it was referenced earlier, the only type of role model readily available was purely a source of physical comparisons. There are rarely any professionals willing to share their inner processes with novices "On the other hand, novice hit men like Pete are reluctant to share their experience with anyone else. It would be a sign of weakness." (Levi, p.57). As with conventional self-efficacy, making social comparisons is a key indicator of one's

self-worth. Without vicarious learning, people could tend to turn to more introspective thinking, which can be harmful if it leads to negative self-talk and over-thinking.

Discussion

Now that all the factors that can lead to decreased performance in the field of contract killing have been identified, it is time to apply skills that can be used to combat these issues. Low self-efficacy can be treated with a range of different practices. One solution is to begin positive self-talk. Starting a new job in any field is a stressful situation, and hitmen are still human beings. During the first kill, it can be helpful to remember that as a beginner with no past performances to reference, it may always seem like there are others doing better. This is a normal fear but repeating short and searching questions such as “Will this be a good learning experience” and “What will I gain from this” will allow for a calmer state of mind when facing tough situations. Research has shown that using interrogative rather than declarative phrasing has a more positive effect on performance. Repeating these questions about the future will prompt the brain to start thinking about more intrinsic motivators and therefore feel more personally responsible for the outcome of their actions (Senay, Albarrachin, Noguchi, p. 499). Self-talk is one of the easiest ways to raise self-efficacy, as long as it is consistent. Strengthening concentration skills will also be a huge help when it comes to overcoming the insecurities that arise as a novice hitman. When determining the best kind of attentional focus to practice, both internal or external could be useful in certain situations. Because of the inner turmoil a hitman faces due to his hyper-focused external attention on the first person he killed that was not out of revenge, it could be better to practice internal broad attention. Typically, an experienced sports or musical performer would prefer external attention focus but in the special circumstance of a hitman, external attention would put too much emphasis on the behaviors and expressions of the target and allow for empathetic emotions and eventually feelings of guilt to arise. This causes unnecessary grief and lengthens the recovery time needed to continue in one’s career. On the other hand, having an external narrow attention focus is helpful for keeping emotions out of the way and just thinking about the monetary gain that will result from the completion of a hit. Results from an analysis of 75 homicide cases reveal that “[...]at its very core contract killing is highly instrumental for example, it is the material gain that is of value and not the victim or the murder itself” (Yaneva, Ioannou, Hammond, & Synnott, 2018). Contract killers are extremely extrinsically motivated; therefore, it can be suggested that having a narrow

external attention focus will generally be the most consistently helpful solution to minimize the probability of choking during a job.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will say that I do not condone the actions of contract killers, but it is an interesting field to focus on because of the mystery surrounding this group of people. I wanted to apply these theories of performance psychology to things outside of sports and office jobs. The purpose of this research was to test if these practices are applicable across the widest range of people. Because of the secrecy and importance of reputation in the world of contract killing, being able to rely on oneself to get through any mental obstacles is a must-have skill. Reading these articles and journals has shown that starting a life as a hitman is not too different from joining any other workforce or being a part of a sports team, except the stakes are higher. In this regard, it is more important to understand how to overcome any psychological issues that may arise in a timely manner, as the situations will almost always be life or death.

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