

Keith Hunter Jespersen: A Psychocriminological Analysis of Animal Cruelty and Homicidal Escalation

Overview

Introduction

Keith Hunter Jespersen, known publicly as the "Happy Face Killer," is a Canadian-American serial murderer whose crimes spanned multiple states between January 1990 and March 1995.¹ A long-haul truck driver by trade, Jespersen used the anonymity of the road to commit at least eight confirmed murders, though he has claimed his victim count could be as high as 160.¹ His case is notable not only for the brutality of his acts but for the taunting, smiley-face-adorned confessions he sent to media and law enforcement, a desperate bid for the notoriety he felt he was denied.³

While the details of his homicidal career are significant, the primary focus of this report is a psychocriminological analysis of Jespersen as a quintessential case study for the "Graduation Hypothesis"—the theory that violent offenders often begin with cruelty to animals before escalating to humans.⁵ The developmental trajectory of Keith Jespersen, from a childhood defined by profound animal cruelty and a pathogenic family environment to his eventual emergence as a serial killer, is remarkably clear. Supported by his own detailed statements, extensive biographical records, and psychological assessments, his life offers a chillingly unambiguous illustration of this violent progression.¹ His case provides a critical opportunity to examine the psychological mechanisms that underpin this escalation, highlighting the function of animal abuse as a behavioral rehearsal for murder and the environmental factors that nurture such a malignant development.

The case of Keith Hunter Jespersen provides a stark and compelling illustration of the

developmental pathway where early, severe, and paternally-reinforced animal cruelty serves not merely as a correlate of future violence, but as a direct psychological and behavioral rehearsal for serial murder.

Developmental History and Pathogenic Environment

The formative years of Keith Hunter Jespersen were characterized by a confluence of environmental and familial factors that created a fertile ground for severe psychological maldevelopment. A childhood marked by physical and emotional abuse, social ostracization, and a profound sense of powerlessness established the foundational dynamics that would later manifest in his violent criminal career.

Early Life and Social Maladjustment

Keith Hunter Jespersen was born on April 6, 1955, in Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada, the middle of five children.¹ His family later relocated to Selah, Washington, where his social difficulties became pronounced.¹ From a young age, Jespersen's unusually large physical stature made him a conspicuous target for relentless teasing and bullying from his peers.¹ This torment was exacerbated by his own siblings, particularly his brothers, who gave him the derogatory nicknames "Igor" and "Ig." These names followed him throughout his school years, cementing his status as an outcast and reinforcing a deeply ingrained sense of alienation.¹

As a direct consequence of this sustained peer victimization and a lack of familial support, Jespersen retreated inward. He became a shy, withdrawn child who was often content to play alone.¹ This profound social isolation became a critical pathogenic factor, preventing the development of normal interpersonal skills, empathy, and social feedback mechanisms. Instead, it provided an unchecked incubator for a rich and ultimately dangerous inner fantasy life. His social failures continued into adolescence; he was reportedly unsuccessful with girls and never attended a school prom or dance, further deepening his sense of rejection and inadequacy.¹

Abusive and Dysfunctional Family Dynamics

The environment within the Jespersen home was as hostile as the one he faced at school. His father, Leslie "Les" Jespersen, was described by multiple sources as a "domineering alcoholic" who ruled the family through fear and violence.¹ Keith was a frequent target of his father's rage, subjected to severe and repeated physical abuse, often administered with a leather belt.¹ While Les Jespersen later denied these claims, other family members corroborated the accounts of abuse, painting a picture of a household where violence was a primary tool for control and emotional expression.¹

This pattern of aggression appeared to be intergenerational. Jespersen himself reported that his paternal grandfather was also prone to violence, suggesting a familial legacy of abusive behavior.¹ Within this dysfunctional system, Keith was cast as the family "black sheep." He was singled out for punishment by his father and received little sympathy or support from his siblings, who actively participated in his ostracization.¹ This combination of targeted physical abuse and profound emotional neglect created a state of chronic powerlessness and rage, which Jespersen would soon seek to alleviate by victimizing those even more helpless than himself.

This history demonstrates a classic victim-to-perpetrator cycle. The constant humiliation and abuse Jespersen endured from his father and peers created a persistent state of powerlessness. Unable to retaliate against these dominant aggressors, he began to redirect his accumulated rage onto targets that could not fight back. This psychological transference of aggression is a fundamental mechanism in understanding his later crimes. It established a destructive feedback loop: feelings of shame and helplessness fueled a desperate need to exert dominance and control, and the act of victimizing weaker beings provided a temporary, reinforcing antidote to those feelings.

Approximate Age/Year	Developmental/Environmental Event	Act of Animal Cruelty	Act of Interpersonal Violence
Age 5-6 (c. 1960-1961)	Family living in British Columbia, Canada. Early experiences of being teased for his	Begins capturing and torturing animals. Methods include bashing gopher	Rolls a rock down a slide, injuring his younger brother Brad. ⁸

	large size begin. ¹	heads and strangling stray animals. ¹	
Age 9 (c. 1964)	Family has moved to a trailer park in Washington. Severe bullying by peers and siblings ("Igor") intensifies. ¹	Nails crows, cats, and small dogs to boards; tortures them with knives and needles. Forces two cats to fight to the death. Father witnesses and brags about him strangling a cat. ⁸	After being blamed for a peer's actions, beats the boy, Martin, unconscious with the stated intent to kill. ¹
Age 10-11 (c. 1965-1966)	Father, Les Jespersion, is described as a "domineering alcoholic" who frequently administers severe beatings with a belt. ¹	Continues capturing and killing stray animals. ¹	Attempts to drown a boy who had held him underwater at a public swimming pool; is stopped by a lifeguard. ¹
Age 14 (c. 1969)	Reports being sexually assaulted. ¹	Not specified.	Shoots an arrow with an exploding tip at a teacher's home. ²
Age 17-18 (c. 1972-1973)	Suffers a significant head injury after falling 25 feet from a rope during wrestling practice. Graduates high school. ⁸	Not specified.	Not specified.
Age 20 (1975)	Marries Rose Hucke. ¹	"Graduates" to larger animals, killing stray cats and dogs with a shovel and BB gun. ⁷	Not specified.
Age 35 (1990)	Divorced from Rose Hucke. Working as a long-haul truck driver. ¹	States he no longer searched for animals to mistreat. ⁷	Jan. 21, 1990: Murders his first confirmed human victim, Taunja Bennett. ¹

A Prolific History of Animal Cruelty (Zoösadism)

Keith Jesperson's extensive and brutal history of animal abuse stands as one of the most defining features of his developmental pathology. It was not merely a childhood phase or an isolated act but a sustained, escalating practice of torture and killing that served as the primary behavioral and psychological rehearsal for his later homicides. This pattern of zoösadism provided him with a crucial outlet for his rage, a method for developing the mechanics of killing, and a pathway to the sadistic gratification he would later seek from human victims.

Onset, Methods, and Escalation

Jesperson's cruelty to animals began at the remarkably early age of five.¹ Such an early onset of severe antisocial behavior is a significant clinical indicator of a deeply rooted and persistent pathology, often associated with the development of conduct disorder and, later, antisocial personality disorder.⁹ His methods were not incidental but were characterized by deliberate, hands-on torture, revealing a clear sadistic impulse. He systematically captured stray and wild animals, including birds, gophers, cats, and small dogs, subjecting them to a horrifying variety of abuses.¹

His acts included severely beating animals, often to death; bashing in the heads of gophers; and strangling them, which would become his preferred method of killing.¹ He engaged in acts that required planning and a profound lack of empathy, such as nailing live crows, cats, and dogs to boards and then torturing them with knives, nails, and needles.⁸ One of his most disturbing practices involved wiring the tails of two cats together and hanging them over a rope, forcing them to claw each other to death in a desperate struggle.⁸ This act, in particular, demonstrates a sophisticated and detached cruelty, forcing the victims to inflict the final violence upon each other while he observed. As he grew older, his violence escalated in scale. By age 20, he had "graduated" to killing larger stray animals, such as cats and dogs, using shovels and a BB gun, continuing to refine his capacity for lethal violence.⁷

Paternal Reinforcement of Violence

A uniquely malignant factor in Jespersen's development was the active encouragement he received from his father. Unlike most cases where childhood deviance is met with punishment or correction, Jespersen's animal torture was met with approval. His father, Les, was not only aware of his son's zoösadism but was reportedly "proud of him" for it.¹ Multiple sources confirm that Les Jespersen would openly brag to others about his son's ability to strangle animals to death.¹

This paternal validation was a powerful psychological accelerant. It provided positive reinforcement for his most pathological impulses, effectively normalizing sadism within his primary family unit. For a child starved of positive paternal attention, this approval likely forged a durable cognitive link between violence against the helpless and a sense of masculine pride and acceptance. This reinforcement effectively removed any potential moral or social inhibitors that might have otherwise curbed his violent trajectory, transforming a private deviance into a validated, even celebrated, behavior. This pathological encouragement from his primary authority figure is a rare and exceptionally dangerous developmental circumstance that almost certainly sealed his path toward greater violence.

The Development of Sadistic Gratification

Jespersen was explicit about the psychological reward he derived from these acts. He stated that from a young age, he "enjoyed watching animals kill each other as well as the feeling he got from taking their lives".¹ This admission points to a core component of sadism: the derivation of pleasure and a sense of power from observing and causing the suffering and death of others. For Jespersen, killing was not just an outlet for anger; it was a source of profound gratification.

Most critically, he drew a direct cognitive and emotional line from his animal cruelty to his human murders. In a chillingly lucid comparison, he explained to a reporter that the sensation of strangling animals was the "same feeling" as choking humans. He described in detail the experience of feeling the "pressure on the throat of them trying to grab air" and "squeezing the life out," concluding that "there isn't much difference" between the two acts.⁷ This statement is a direct confession that his decades of animal abuse served as a practical and psychological training ground, desensitizing him to the act of killing and honing the specific method he would later

employ on his human victims. He further articulated a conscious and deliberate escalation in his predatory focus, stating, "No longer did I search for animals to mistreat. I now looked for people to kill. And I did".⁷ This self-awareness of his own progression underscores the role of animal cruelty as a direct and indispensable stepping stone in his evolution into a serial killer.

Psychological Profile and Mental Instability

A comprehensive psychological profile of Keith Hunter Jesperson reveals a complex and dangerous interplay of personality disorders, cognitive deficits, and profound emotional dysregulation. While he did not suffer from a psychotic illness that would impair his grasp on reality, his personality structure was deeply pathological, characterized by a lack of empathy, impulsivity, and an overwhelming need for control. This profile, constructed from formal assessments and biographical data, provides a clinical framework for understanding the mind behind the "Happy Face Killer."

Assessed Personality and Cognitive Traits

Formal psychological assessment, which included the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV Axis II Personality Disorders (SCID-II), the Rorschach inkblot test, and a battery of neuropsychological measures, identified a number of significant traits and deficits. The evaluation revealed prominent features consistent with both **Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD)** and **Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)**. Specific behaviors and traits noted included recurrent unlawful acts, impulsivity, and marked irritability.¹¹ The presence of schizoid personality traits was also observed, likely as a manifestation of his severe and lifelong social cognition deficits.¹¹

One of the more paradoxical findings related to his cognitive abilities. While his history of serial murder might suggest significant cognitive impairment, particularly in the brain's frontal lobe which governs decision-making and impulse control, testing revealed that his core **executive functions** were largely intact and, in some specific areas, even above average.¹¹ This intact cognitive machinery explains his ability to maintain employment as a long-haul trucker, plan his crimes with a degree of logistical

sophistication, and evade capture for five years. However, the assessment suggested that these abilities likely degrade in unstructured emotional or interpersonal situations, where his tendency for overly complex and idiosyncratic thinking becomes a liability.¹¹

The most profound impairment was identified in the domain of **social cognition**. Jespersion demonstrated significant difficulty in identifying the mental and emotional states of others from their facial expressions, a key component of empathy. This deficit was particularly pronounced when interpreting negatively-valenced emotions in women.¹¹ This clinical finding aligns with similar deficits observed in individuals with ASPD and psychopathic traits and provides an empirical basis for his profound lack of empathy. He was, in essence, emotionally blind to the terror and suffering of his victims.

Emotional Dysregulation and Maladaptive Coping

Jespersion's emotional landscape is defined by a deep and pathological disconnect. Assessments indicated a pattern of **marked emotional inhibition**, meaning he is far more likely to intellectualize, reflect, and reason about his feelings rather than experience or express them spontaneously.¹¹ This cognitive detachment from emotion is a hallmark of psychopathy, allowing for cold, calculated cruelty without the interference of guilt or remorse.

His personality is also structured around an intense need for control and a powerful oppositionality. His creativity and individuality, noted in psychological testing, were found to manifest as extreme defiance, particularly when he felt controlled or pressured by others.¹¹ This trait provides a direct psychological key to understanding the triggers for his violence. His murders were not random explosions of rage but pathological and extreme reactions aimed at reasserting dominance in moments when he perceived his control was being challenged.

Finally, Rorschach testing suggested that Jespersion possesses a highly **idiosyncratic worldview**. He appears to live "in his head," fundamentally misunderstanding and misperceiving the motivations and intentions of others, especially in social, sexual, and morbid contexts.¹¹ This distorted perceptual lens, combined with his social cognition deficits, meant that he processed interpersonal interactions through a warped and self-referential filter, further isolating him and justifying his predatory view of the

world.

The Link: From Zoöcide to Homicide

The case of Keith Hunter Jespersen provides an exceptionally clear and disturbing illustration of the psychological and behavioral bridge between the killing of animals (zoöcide) and the murder of humans. His history is not merely a collection of correlated antisocial acts but a distinct, chronological progression of violence that escalated in both target and severity over time. By applying established criminological theories to his life, it is possible to map the pathway that led him from torturing stray cats to strangling women across the country.

Theoretical Frameworks: Graduation vs. Deviance Generalization

Two primary theories are often used to explain the relationship between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence. The **Deviance Generalization Hypothesis** posits that animal abuse is simply one behavior within a larger constellation of general antisocial and criminal acts, with no specific predictive or chronological sequence.⁹ An individual might shoplift, commit arson, and abuse animals as part of a general pattern of deviance. While Jespersen did engage in other antisocial behaviors, such as shoplifting as a teenager and later arson as an adult to "stave off his murderous urges," this model fails to capture the specific and directional nature of his violence.²

In contrast, the **Graduation Hypothesis** proposes a direct developmental trajectory where individuals who abuse animals become desensitized to violence and "practice" the act of killing, thereby lowering the psychological threshold to "graduate" to human victims.⁵ Jespersen's case serves as a textbook example, providing powerful evidence for this theory. His own statements confirm a conscious and deliberate transition from animal to human targets, a recognition of the similar "feeling" of the act of strangulation across species, and a clear chronological progression from one to the other.¹ The specificity of his methods and his self-described evolution make his case a near-perfect empirical validation of the Graduation Hypothesis, setting him apart from offenders whose histories are more ambiguous.

The Bridge to Human Victims: Early Interpersonal Violence

Crucially, Jespersion's escalation was not an abrupt leap from animals to murder. His history is punctuated by significant, non-lethal violence against human peers, which served as a critical intermediary step. At approximately age 10, enraged by a friend named Martin whom he felt repeatedly wronged him, Jespersion beat the boy unconscious. He later stated that his intention was to kill him and that he would have succeeded had his father not intervened.¹ A year later, in retaliation for being held underwater by a bully, Jespersion attempted to drown the boy in a public swimming pool and was only stopped by a lifeguard.¹

These events are highly significant as they demonstrate that his willingness to use extreme, potentially lethal violence to resolve interpersonal conflict had already crossed the species barrier long before his first confirmed murder in 1990. These assaults solidified the patterns of aggression he had learned and practiced through years of animal abuse, applying them directly to human targets. They represent a "bridging" phase in his violent development, proving that his homicidal ideation was not an abstract fantasy but a tangible impulse he was willing and able to act upon.

Modus Operandi as a Continuation of Cruelty

The behavioral continuity between Jespersion's animal cruelty and his murders is stark. His preferred method for killing his human victims was **strangulation**, the same hands-on, intimate method of killing he had practiced and admittedly "enjoyed" on countless animal victims for decades.¹ This is not a coincidental overlap but a direct transfer of a well-rehearsed lethal skill. The physical and psychological experience of "squeezing the life out" of a struggling creature was one with which he was intimately familiar, a familiarity that undoubtedly facilitated his transition to human victims.⁷

Furthermore, his **victimology** reflects a consistent predatory pattern. His human victims were primarily transients, hitchhikers, and sex workers—individuals whose marginalized social status made them vulnerable and less likely to be missed immediately.¹ This mirrors his choice of victims in the animal world: stray cats and dogs, gophers, and other captured creatures that were helpless, isolated, and lacked

a protector.¹ In both realms, Jesperson consistently targeted the powerless, seeking out victims over whom he could easily exert ultimate control, a pattern established in his earliest acts of cruelty.

The "Happy Face Killer": Crimes and Social Impact

Keith Jesperson's five-year reign as a serial murderer left a trail of victims across the United States and created a chilling media persona that would come to define him. His crimes, and his subsequent campaign for notoriety, had a lasting social impact, highlighting systemic failures in the justice system and inflicting generational trauma that extends beyond his immediate victims.

Summary of Homicidal Career

Jesperson's confirmed homicidal activity began on January 21, 1990, and ended with his final murder in March 1995. As a long-haul truck driver, he had the mobility and anonymity to commit murders across multiple jurisdictions, complicating law enforcement efforts to connect the cases. His eight confirmed victims were killed in Washington, Oregon, California, Florida, Nebraska, and Wyoming.¹

His victims were:

1. **Taunja Bennett**, killed January 1990 in Oregon.
2. **"Claudia"**, killed August 1992 in California. Her remains were unidentified for over three decades.
3. **Cynthia Lyn Rose**, killed September 1992 in California.
4. **Laurie Ann Pentland**, killed November 1992 in Oregon.
5. **Patricia "Carla/Cindy" Skiple**, killed June 1993 in California.
6. **"Susanna" (Suzanne Kjellenberg)**, killed September 1994 in Florida. Identified in 2023.
7. **Angela Subrize**, killed January 1995 in Wyoming.
8. **Julie Winningham**, killed March 1995 in Washington.

Jesperson was finally apprehended on March 30, 1995. His last victim, Julie

Winningham, was also his girlfriend. When her body was discovered, he immediately became the primary suspect. After being questioned, he confessed to her murder and subsequently to the other killings.¹ He is currently serving multiple life sentences at the Oregon State Penitentiary.²

The Need for Notoriety and the Pavlinac Case

One of the most significant social impacts of Jespersen's crimes stems from the wrongful conviction of two innocent people for his first murder. After the body of Taunja Bennett was discovered, a woman named **Laverne Pavlinac** came forward and falsely confessed to the crime, implicating her boyfriend, John Sosnovske.¹ Despite inconsistencies in her story, her confession was compelling enough to lead to their convictions in 1991. Both were sentenced to life in prison.¹⁴

Jespersen, who had gotten away with murder, was incensed not by the injustice but by the lack of recognition for his crime. This narcissistic injury—having his "work" attributed to someone else—triggered his transformation into the "Happy Face Killer." He embarked on a bizarre campaign to claim credit, scrawling a confession on a truck stop bathroom wall hundreds of miles from the crime scene and signing it with a smiley face.¹ When this failed to garner the attention he craved, he began sending taunting letters to media outlets, most notably

The Oregonian, and to prosecutors, detailing his crimes and consistently signing them with the same happy face symbol.¹ This act created his media moniker and cemented his place in the annals of true crime.

The case exposed the profound danger of false confessions and the potential for the justice system to be led astray. Pavlinac and Sosnovske served nearly six years in prison before Jespersen's detailed confessions, corroborated by evidence only the killer could know, led to their exoneration in November 1995.¹⁴ The "Happy Face" symbol itself became a chilling cultural icon, a stark juxtaposition of a cheerful image with horrific violence that trivialized the suffering of his victims while ensuring his infamy. The trauma of his crimes also created a ripple effect, most publicly through the work of his daughter,

Melissa Moore. Moore has become a prominent advocate for the families of offenders, authoring the memoir *Shattered Silence* and speaking extensively about

the complex trauma and societal stigma they endure.¹

Conclusion

The life and crimes of Keith Hunter Jespersen offer an unambiguous and deeply disturbing roadmap of the progression from a severely abused and socially isolated child who tortures animals to a prolific serial murderer. His case stands as a powerful, if terrifying, affirmation of the "Graduation Hypothesis," demonstrating with chilling clarity how zoösadism can function as a direct behavioral and psychological precursor to homicide.

The analysis of Jespersen's developmental history reveals a toxic confluence of pathogenic factors. The severe physical and emotional abuse inflicted by his father, combined with relentless peer victimization, created a foundation of rage and powerlessness. His resulting social withdrawal provided an unchecked environment for violent fantasies to flourish. Crucially, his extensive and sadistic animal cruelty was not merely a symptom of this disturbance but a formative practice. It was through these acts that he became desensitized to violence, honed his preferred method of killing—strangulation—and discovered the sadistic gratification he derived from exerting ultimate control over a living being. The paternal approval he received for this cruelty was a profoundly malignant reinforcer, validating his pathological impulses and erasing the moral boundaries that might have otherwise halted his escalation.

His psychological profile is consistent with this trajectory, revealing a man with intact cognitive abilities to plan and execute his crimes but with severe deficits in social cognition and empathy, rendering him incapable of recognizing or valuing the lives of his victims. His violence was a patterned, pathological response to perceived challenges to his control, a direct continuation of the coping mechanisms he developed in his abusive childhood.

Ultimately, the case of Keith Hunter Jespersen underscores the critical importance of recognizing and intervening in instances of childhood animal cruelty. Such acts should not be dismissed as youthful misbehavior but understood as a significant red flag for severe underlying pathology and a potential indicator of future interpersonal violence. For law enforcement, mental health professionals, and society at large, Jespersen's story is a stark reminder that violence is a learned and practiced behavior, and that the chain of abuse often begins with the most helpless of victims. Addressing cruelty

at its earliest stages is not only a moral imperative for the sake of animal welfare but a crucial measure for preventing the creation of future human predators.

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