

CHILD SERIAL MURDER-PSYCHODYNAMICS: CLOSELY WATCHED SHADOWS

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On September 4, 1989, the bodies of two young children were found in a park in Vancouver, Washington. On October 24, the police in Portland, Oregon, responded to the disappearance of a young child in a public park. On November 1, Vancouver detectives were called to investigate the nude body of a white 5-year-old male. This child's body had been dumped in the woods, and police determined that this was the boy reported missing from the park in Portland. Police determined that all three children had been murdered. A multidimensional task force, which included agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and detectives from Washington and Oregon, was assembled to investigate the murders, a standard procedure in suspected serial murder cases. I joined the task force on November 7 and was asked to develop a psychological profile of the perpetrator. Together with the detectives and FBI agents, I examined crime scene photographs, autopsy photos, and reports, and consulted information we compiled regarding similar murders. The latter included the so-called demographic data that some police agencies keep. We also considered the psychodynamic aspects of both the perpetrator and the crime scene, viewing the crimes and the scenes as a symptom of psychopathology. We considered the character structure of the perpetrator.

THEORY AND BASIS

This type of aggression, characteristic of Kernberg's description of malignant narcissism, should not be viewed as a disease but as an aspect of personality structure and function (Fromm, 1973; Kernberg, 1992). The rewards of serial murder are psychological, and the motivations for the killer very meaningful. An understanding of the integration of aggression within the personality is essential in comprehending the motivation of serial killers. Liebert and I have previously noted that even in the presence of severe psychopathology, the actual reasons for committing serial murders are not obvious, and thus an examination of

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the underlying psychopathology and personality of the murderer is essential in understanding the repetitive drive to kill (Liebert, 1985; Turco, 1992; Yarvis, 1991).

Liebert and I proposed that narcissistic and borderline conditions provide the clinical foundation for the understanding of the offender's personality and behavior. My focus has been to build a profile based on the psychopathology of borderline and severe narcissistic disorders. Narcissistic pathology in the personalities of serial murderers is an intrinsic aspect of generating the motivation to murder. At least ten prominent theorists working on the problem of serial murder have highlighted the sadism, malignant narcissism, fantasies of power, and narcissistic insults, along with the underlying sense of inferiority, present in serial killers; control over others and a history of animal cruelty are also prominent characteristics of such individuals (Fromm, 1973; Gacono, 1992; Hickey, 1991; Lievert, 1985; Lowenstein, 1992; Marohn, 1987; McCarthy, 1978; Palermo & Knudten, 1994; Stone, 1989; Turco, 1994. Holmes and DeBurger (1988) characterized serial murderers as individuals with a motivation to exert total control and power over the victim. They noted that the motivations are appreciated only by the murderer. In my opinion, the motivations may be appreciated by the killer at an emotional level, but they are not understood by him/her.

THE PROFILE

The task force assembled for the Vancouver-Portland child murders made 42 predictions regarding a typical offender of such crimes. These included that the killer would be a white male between 25 and 35 years old; a non-affiliated loner ("cardboard people") who, if he had served in the military, would have been discharged under less than honorable conditions or administratively without serving his full tour of duty. Such individuals carefully assess the investigation and its progress, and might try to "assist" the police with the investigation. They tend to keep records of the crime, including a diary and newspaper clippings. They maintain substantial amounts of pornography and photograph the victims both alive and dead. They have sexual relations with the victims alive and, depending on the organization of the perpetrator, dead. The exception to the sexual acting out involves the subgroup "spree" type of serial murderer. Spree serial killings involve four or more victims in a short time, with no sexual assault or ritualism and a high degree of randomness in the selection of victims. The underlying psychopathology of malignant narcissism remains the same.

In the case of the Vancouver-Portland murders, consistent with data derived from past experience and stored in data banks, we hypothesized that the suspect would have a late-model car and would be employed at a job with limited responsibility. We predicted that the killer would keep a fetish, frequently a body part, a lock of hair, underclothing, or jewelry. These “souvenirs” are later used by the perpetrator to masturbate to his fantasy reenactment of the murder, a form of eroticism that continues long after the apprehension and incarceration of the perpetrator. We predicted that the murders would continue and that molestation would be accompanied by sexual mutilation, as is the pattern in such cases. The perpetrator would likely select only male victims, possibly viewing females as being “defective.” Control of the victim is always the primary motivator. During the investigation we discovered ligature marks on the neck and wrists of the 5-year-old child who had also been sodomized postmortem.

THE INVESTIGATION

Interviews with several hundred known child molesters and child murderers failed to convince the task force that we had a viable suspect in this group, and we began directing our attention to transients. Issues of prior mental health counseling, especially for violent or sexual crimes, as well as a criminal history of sexual offenses, were considered in the investigative process. We also hypothesized that the killer was not psychotic and would fit into the FBI classification of an “organized” serial murderer (Burgess, Groth, Ressler, and Douglas, 1980, 1985; “Crime scene,” 1985).

On November 13, 1989, a suspect was arrested by police officers in Camas, Washington, and charged with kidnapping in the first degree. He had tried to abduct a 6-year-old white male from a movie theater. Shortly thereafter, I performed a videotaped interview of the suspect, during which time he confessed to murdering the three children, describing in specific detail the sexual assault, mutilation, murder, and post-mortem sexual activity with the victims.

The psychological profile we developed was consistent with the behavior, description, and background of the apprehended suspect, and was used as evidentiary material for the procurement of a search warrant, thus setting a precedent in Washington State. Although he had confessed to the murders, the suspect still had a right to refuse access to his apartment and car. In this instance the judge ruled the “profile” sufficiently accurate to apply to the suspect in custody and granted a search warrant.

In the apartment we found the underclothing of the 5-year-old murdered boy neatly folded in the perpetrator's briefcase, numerous Polaroid photographs of the child tied to the bedposts, and an array of child pornography. As predicted, a diary highlighting specifics of the three murders, including comments on the investigation and plans for the future abduction and dissection of the next child, was located in the clothes dresser.

Ten years before this investigation I participated in the largest criminal investigation in Oregon's history, which resulted in the apprehension and conviction of the so-called I-5 killer. The psychological profile developed in that case was similar to the child serial murder case with three exceptions. The I-5 killer murdered adult women, and we considered the mechanism of "splitting," hypothesizing that the killer would make a telephone call to a woman friend each time he murdered another woman, thus perpetuating the "good mother/bad mother" experience. Telephone logs seized at the time of arrest confirmed this behavior.

The development of a psychological profile involves the preparation of a biographical sketch gathered from information at the crime scene, the personal habits and history of the perpetrator, the stored (known) demographic material, the autopsy reports, investigative interviews, and the psychodynamic considerations of known offenders. The profile is then integrated with other available information, including suspect data. This is the psychological assessment of the crime scene as a symptom as well as an assessment of the the suspected perpetrator and is used in conjunction with the search for physical evidence. The crime scene is a sign representing the "acting out" behavior of the perpetrator and is integrated into the profile for a composite of an unknown subject.

In law enforcement, organized serial murderers are socially competent and of, a high birth-order status, have a car in good condition, and frequently live with a partner. The organized crime scene is one in which the victim has become personalized, targeted, and restrained. The weapon is carried to the scene and taken away. Disorganized murderers have the opposite characteristics, and their crime scene reveals evidence of spontaneity, the use of weapons of convenience, and greater disorganization. Other demographic characteristics are used in the assessment of these subgroups.

MALIGNANT NARCISSISM

Kernberg described malignant narcissism as an extreme variant of narcissistic personality disorder and as an intermediate form of charac-

ter disorder between narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders. The features of malignant narcissism include a narcissistic personality disorder, unrestrained aggression, antisocial behavior, and ego-syntonic sadism. One also finds an absence of conscience, a psychological need for power, a sense of importance (grandiosity), and a paranoid orientation in interpersonal relations. The characterological aggression is integrated with a pathological grandiose self structure, which expresses itself in ego-syntonic sadistic behavior directed against the self or others in a triumphant and destructive manner. Pollock (1978) noted: "The malignant narcissist is presented as pathologically grandiose, lacking in conscience and behavioral regulation with *characteristic demonstrations of joyful cruelty and sadism*" (p. 52, emphasis added). Kernberg (1992) wrote that the underlying pathology reflects *a defensive maneuver against a sense of inferiority, rejection and insignificance*.

Developmentally, it represents severe pathological self and object representations. The individuals' parental and other objects were experienced as cruel, attacking, destructive, and oppressive of any self development, with the subsequent development of a defensive self characterized by the formation of a grandiose self structure and an integrated hostility in the form of self-righteous aggression. The cruel behaviors and mutilation of others appear to be an endeavor to obtain a sense of superiority and triumph over life and fear. In terms of the typical narcissistic personality, the issue is at what point and to what extent aggression becomes integrated into the pathological self structure. In malignant narcissism the antisocial tendencies are expressed in the extreme forms of sadism and violence. The rewards for killing are a confirmation of the needs for recognition and power. Hickey (1991) states that the most prominent form of traumatization experience by male serial murderers as children was that of rejection. This is usually associated with humiliating and debasing experiences.

We can better understand the phenomenon of serial murder if we include the integration of neurological and sociological data with the advances in ego psychology. The murders themselves have a restorative value as the aggressive and destructive elements are externalized and psychological equilibrium temporarily re-established. These "unmetabolized" elements help us understand the target of such aggression and the failure of adaptive responses during the murderer's separation-individuation phase of development (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Serial murderers have absorbed the elements of badness through the aggression of the mother. The destructive elements of the early mother-child relationship are "introjected" and "split" and then projected with a recycling of this badness through projection and displacement towards female targets. The

object of this “disorganization” occurs without the murderer’s possessing a realistic perception and true identification of the victim. The female victim then becomes dehumanized because, for the killer, she possesses the badness. The victim is the target of aggression displaced from the mother. There is a fusion of destructive impulses and disorganized sexual impulses that evolve out of the pre-Oedipal matrix. The lack of empathic bonding describes these “non-affiliates” or “cardboard people” who are superficially adapted in our society in a non-integrated manner. Their parents have a similar lack of empathic bonding to the child.

In serial profiling we search for what distinguishes as unique any given serial murder, then build a profile of potential suspects against the psychopathology of narcissistic and borderline disorders, bearing in mind Kernberg’s definition of malignant narcissism: a narcissistic personality structure, overt anti-social behavior (passive or aggressive), sadistic cruelty (extreme form of murder), ego-syntonic aggression or sadism, and a reprojection of primitive persecutory superego features in the form of paranoid tendencies. The sadism is characterologically integrated and justified by chronic sadistic arrogance, and the reprojection of the primitive persecutory superego features may be characterized by classifying others “suckers,” fools, or dangerous enemies. In Meissner’s (1996) words: “The Theory of the Paranoid Process is an extension of the Theory of Internalization, particularly concerning itself with those forms of internalization that have pathogenic potential” (p. 17). Child killers manifest pathological self love, the lack of object love, superego pathology, and a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction—a form of “soul death.” There has been a malignant transformation. There is an impoverishment of internal life in these non-affiliates as the result of devaluation and a failure of early object integration. The internal world of object relations is destroyed and there is a sense of meaninglessness in life—the “malignant transformation” of which Kernberg speaks. There is a stimulus hunger to replace the missing internal world. Kernberg uses the term “unambitious hedonism” to describe this. The more evident the antisocial features, the more disintegrated the internal object relations and the worse the pathology.

SUMMARY

There is a malignant transformation in object relations resulting in an identification with an omnipotent and cruel object resulting in an identity transformation. If the tension, desperation, and dissocia-

tion increase, serial murder becomes spree murder. The presence of pathological narcissism and psychopathic tendencies are of diagnostic significance in understanding the murderer's personality functioning and motivation to kill. Meloy (1988) considered the degree of sadism and aggression combined with narcissistic qualities to reflect the "malignancy" of the psychopathic disturbance where gratification (of aggression) occurs in the service of narcissistic functioning—that is, cruelty toward others in the form of a triumphant victory over a rejecting object. Meloy also believes that dissociation is ubiquitous in the psychopath. The initial murder of the serial murderer may reflect a "new identity." The pathological object-relations of narcissism and the malignant narcissism are important diagnostic indicators in the personality functioning of serial killers and the occurrence of these phenomena is a significant factor in the formation of the personalities of serial killers, their inner motivations, and their pattern of commission.

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