Sexually motivated serial killers and the psychology of aggression and “evil” within a contemporary psychoanalytical perspective

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Abstract  This theoretical paper explores the concept of evil, dislodged from its philosophical and religious underpinnings, and the concept of aggression from within a contemporary psychoanalytical perspective, and links these two concepts in such a way that the concept of evil is located psychologically and (re)defined as destructive aggression that emerges as violence against another. Within this discourse, the argument presented is that sexually motivated serial killers are evil. Evil is thus viewed as both premeditated violence and reactive to a perceived sense of threat or endangerment. Moreover, it has the essential element of psychological pleasure in inflicting pain on another. Related to this perceived threat, these types of serial killers may be viewed as protecting a weak and inadequate sense of self. In this context, serial killers’ heinous acts of destructive aggression are re-enactments of past insults, resulting in victims being the symbolic representative of past tormentors.

Keywords  Aggression; evil; serial killers; psychoanalysis

Introduction

Are sexually motivated serial killers evil? Yes, if “evil” is dislodged from its religious underpinnings and reframed within contemporary psychoanalytical theory. In this paper I am proposing the idea that the concept of evil may be better understood as destructive aggression that emerges as violence against another. Moreover, and equally significant, evil, reconceptualized as violent, destructive aggression, is premeditated and includes the component of sadistic enjoyment of inflicting pain on victims. Not all aggression, however, is destructive and violent. There is a form of aggression, on one end of the continuum, known as assertiveness, while the other end of the continuum is hostile or destructive aggression. The assertiveness form of aggression is healthy, non-pathological and non-destructive, and fuels human motivations such as ambitions, ideals, goals, autonomy, connection with others and self-realization.

We are all capable of being aggressive, of containing unimaginable aggressive fantasies of torture, sadism and murder, but we are not all serial killers. In various ways, we manage to control our aggression, to not act out our violent fantasies. Serial killers, however, have lost...
the boundaries between fantasy and reality, between assertiveness and aggression, between savagery and civilization, and have disconnected from humanity in a way that leaves most of us stunned and afraid of their unthinkable cruelty and unfathomable enjoyment of inflicting pain and fear.

From within the framework of contemporary psychoanalysis, the trajectory of the theory of the nature and origins of aggression is delineated. I also suggest that the psychology of aggression must include the notion that aggression is both innate (intrapsychic) and reactive within an interpersonal context. In this light, serial killers are made, but we all have an innate capacity for destructive aggression. Furthermore, I suggest that evil acts that manifest in an interpersonal context may be viewed as a reaction to a perceived threat or sense of endangerment. Related to this perceived threat, serial killers may be viewed as protecting a fragile and pathological sense of self. These suggestions do not legitimate their heinous crimes, but provide a way forward to understand evil as destructive aggression. A point is made that serial killers are “bad not mad”—the vast majority are not psychotic or insane. Finally, I suggest a new definition for “evil” based on a contemporary psychoanalytical perspective.

**Sexually motivated serial murder**

Serial murder is defined as the killing of three or more people over a period of more than 30 days, with a significant cooling-off period. This cooling-off period may be weeks, months or even years (Geberth, 1996; Hare, 1993; Hickey, 2002; Keppel & Birnes, 2003). In another paper, I have refined this broad definition to include a focus on aggression, fantasies and the motivation of sexual violence. In this regard, sexually motivated serial murder is defined as:

The killing of three or more victims over a period of more than 30 days, with a significant cooling-off period. The sexual nature of the crime, which may or may not be explicit, is perverse and sadistic and reflects an aggression that is particularly destructive, pathological and rooted in violent fantasies that are acted out on the victim (Knight, 2006, p. 1189).

In this paper, I shall be referring specifically to sexually motivated serial murder, although the sexual aspects (implicit and explicit) of serial killing may be open to debate (Beech, Fisher & Ward, 2005; Hickey, 2002) but the sadistic nature of the sexual crime is less ambiguous (Hickey, 2002; Holmes & Holmes, 1998a,b, 2002). Furthermore, not all serial killers are alike and some kill for reasons other than sex (Clarke & Carter, 2000; Grubin, 1994; Knight, 2006). Many serial killers begin their sexual crimes as sex offenders (Hickey, 2002), just as it has been shown that some serial killers begin their crimes of sadism by first inflicting torture and death on animals and pets (Merz-Perez, Heide & Silverman, 2001; Wright & Hensley, 2003).

The aetiology of this type of serial murder is unclear. Researchers have put forth various theories such as sociological, biological, neurological and psychological theories that seem to offer a partial understanding of the nature of serial murder (Geberth, 1996; Hickey, 2002; Holmes & Holmes, 2002; Knight, 2006). In other words, all these theories go some way to contributing to the conceptualization of serial killers’ behaviours, but in isolation they maintain a focus on certain aspects while necessarily ignoring other aspects. It is for this reason that there is a consensus that what makes a serial killer is a combination of many complex and interrelated neurological, social, physiological, environmental and psychological factors (Hickey, 2002; Holmes & Holmes, 1998a,b, 2002; Leyton, 2000; Miller, 2000). Some theorists have suggested the notion of a predisposition
to violence (Lewis et al., 1985; Reiss & Roth, 1993; Rubin, 1987), while others emphasize
the interplay between environment, biological factors and personality traits as the basis for
their criminal behaviour, as first proposed by Aichorn (1934) and later Eysenck (1977).
Some theorists have created classifications of serial killers based on their motives (Hickey,
2002; Holmes & DeBurger, 1998; Holmes & Holmes, 1998a,b, 2002) or presented implicit
theories (Beech et al., 2005) as a way to try to make sense of what they do. It has been
argued that there are no significant differences between the personality profiles, or
psychological themes in the life history of sexual murderers and other sexual aggressors
(Milsom, Beech & Webster, 2003). Others have focused on the analysis of the crime scene
itself, which has given rise to the notion that serial killers are either “organized” or
“disorganized” and often leave a “signature” (Geberth, 1996). This kind of information
has assisted law enforcement in the development of profiles of serial killers; however, the
efficacy of profiling has been questioned (Keppel & Birnes, 2003).

The personalities of some serial murderers have been described as “psychopathic
personality type” (Geberth, 1996; Hare, 1993; Schechter, 1990; Schlesinger, 1998), while
some have been diagnosed with one or more personality disorders such as narcissistic
(Money, 1990; Schlesinger, 1998), paranoid or antisocial (Geberth, 1996; Ryzuk, 1994).
Within the perspective of object relations theories, pathological and destructive narcissism
has assisted in the understanding of the grandiose posturing of some serial killers and the
psychological roots of their behaviour (Knight, 2006).

The literature on serial murder is largely the product of broad-based descriptive studies
of large numbers of cases of serial killers or the result of individual case studies, such as the
research of Douglas and Olshaker (1999), Abrahamsen (1985), Ressler and Shachtman
(1997) and Vorpagel (1998), while some have described their own case experiences (Kirwin,
1997; Lewis, 1998). The application of social learning theory has been applied to serial
killers (Hale, 1993; Wright & Hensley, 2003), but this theory does not account for why
those who are also exposed to violence do not become serial killers. Another perspective
taken is the phenomenological approach to understanding serial killers (Skrapec, 2001).
Skrapec asserts that learning about serial killers’ personal constructions of meaning would
position us to be able to identify the motivations underlying their repeated acts of killing.
This approach seems useful to some extent, but remains locked in understanding serial
killers’ behaviour by examining their motivations. In addition, most of these theories and
case studies do not advance the theory about the role of aggression or explore the concept
of evil in what serial killers do.

One aspect of this type of serial killer worth noting is that they have exceptionally
sexually sadistic fantasy lives, which are later acted out on their victims (Schlesinger, 2000;
Ward, 2000). The fantasy life of serial killers thus seems to hint at a level of aggression
which is sexualized and distinct from other forms of aggression. However, it is recognized
that many people have sexually aggressive fantasies but do not become serial killers.

In an attempt to understand why serial killers do what they do, it seems that there is no
explanation except to propose the notion of evil while lodging evil within a contemporary
psychoanalytical frame. It is recognized that this perspective is another way of under-
standing serial killers’ behaviour, but it is a perspective that is unique in that it looks more
closely at the psychology of destructive aggression and its links to evil in the context of
psychoanalytical theory.
The concept of evil

Western religions and philosophies place the concept of evil as a central part of their paradigms of reality. They agree that evil exists, and in Christian religion the notion of evil is related to ideas of original sin (Wilson, 2003) and is also linked closely with sexuality, so that sexuality is equated with evil and sin. Other religions, such as Buddhism, view evil as a faulty perception of reality. Evidence from our human history spanning millennia indicates a dark and destructive side of human nature that is violent, sadistic and murderous, and directed at one another. Some may call this dark side of human nature “evil”. Not only is there historical and cross-cultural evidence of humanity’s aggression against one another, but also against the environment and the earth’s now limited resources. It is out of this recognition that humanity has a dark history that various individuals have tried to make sense of evil and aggression. Thus far, such meaning-making is couched in either religious or philosophical terms.

The concept of evil, divorced from its religious meaning, is a difficult concept to define because there are various models of western reality and perception of human nature available, such as the philosophical, existential, phenomenological and psychological. Historically, the question of evil has been addressed in many cultures through legends, story-telling, fantasy, myth and speculation. In western culture, Hickey (2002) remarks that the closest we have come to quantifying good or evil is by observing that a person can be good or really bad, and thus there is a tendency to judge people in terms of their goodness or badness, but seldom is there a reference to others as being “evil”. Instead, “evil” is a label we reserve for worse than bad. Badness, Hickey continues, we expect to find in some people some of the time, but evil relegates some people to a special classification that suggests some form of satanic affiliation. This implies that what they do is so bad that it must be the result of some non-human force. To this end, some theorists such as Masters (1997) advocate the forfeiting of the term “evil” because of its occultist reference, as it disengages human responsibility. However, research argues that it is the ordinary that carry out extraordinary acts of evil, as evidenced in those obeying their commanding officers to kill, as in the case of the Bosnian, Rwandian and Holocaust atrocities (Arendt, 1963; Lu, 2004; Vetlesen, 1998). In terms of serial killers, the question is asked whether serial killers are also ordinary but simply carry out extraordinary acts of evil. I return to this point later.

Vetlesen (1998), in his response to the classical work of Arendt’s (1963) “banality of evil” and her failed attempt to find any “depth” in the evil of Adolf Eichmann, questions the celebrated criterion of impartiality or objectivity in judgement on moral issues as perhaps being ill-equipped to guide any kind of judgement when its object is evil. He also questions the ability of the neutral “third party” to respond adequately to evil from a perspective of avowed impartiality. Instead he argues that in any knowledge about evil “the victim is the supremely privileged source; this being so, the non-party to the occurrence of evil must privilege the testimony of the victimized—even at the cost of strict impartiality of moral judgement” (p. 1). In addition, in response to a sociological perspective of evil (Bauman, 1993), the underlying assumption of Vetlesen’s (2005) more recent work, and my position is in line with his argument, is that of the acknowledgement that evil exists, at both an individual as well as a collective level, of its positive ontological status, in contrast to theology-grounded denial of ontological evil. Moreover, he states that evil is understood as an absence of good rather than a presence itself. In this context, the recognition of evil leads to three interrelated questions: who is to blame, how can evil happen and how can it be prevented? (Lu, 2004). It is not the scope of this paper to answer these questions, but such questions imply the account of the roles of human moral agency, political and social structures and their relationship, as well as the understanding that such agents and structures co-constitute each other and neither can be
absolved of moral responsibility for evil acts. In this light, Lu (2004, p. 498) asserts that, “the concept of evil is indispensable for identifying acts and states of affairs that violate our most basic moral ideals and expectations”.

Over the decades, other more psychologically grounded theorists attempt to deal with criminal behaviour and violence, and endeavour to make meaning of such people and their acts (Abrahamsen, 1973; Cleckley, 1976; Douglas & Olshaker, 1997; Eysenck, 1977; Hare, 1993, 1996; Hickey, 2002; Holmes & Holmes, 1998a, 2002; Keppel & Birnes, 2003; Wilson, 2003; Wilson & Simmonds, 2000). However, none of these theorists focus on and relate destructive aggression as a mark of evil. This leads to the question of what is evil? Is evil something we are, or something we do? Is it identifiable exclusively by what it is not? These questions begin to edge into the philosophical arena, and I take the same standpoint, as argued by Vetlesen (1998, 2005), that the question of evil needs to be liberated from the metaphysical approaches just alluded to and to ask whether evil represents a philosophical issue at all. Vetlesen remarks that evil speaks louder than words. Evil is something one suffers. “It is ill-suited as an object of contemplation” (1998, p. 3). It does not belong in the domain of abstraction and thought but is physical and concrete. Forensic psychologist Paul Wilson explores the concept of evil and writes that an evil person may be described as “one who intentionally inflicts serious physical harm on another person or persons, in pursuit of a personal, ideological or religious goal, and who experiences intense psychological pleasure in doing so” (Wilson, 2003, p. 3). This is a useful definition, as it draws attention to the intentionality of harm in pursuit of personal or collective agendas. The idea of pleasure in the process of inflicting harm is an essential component of evil or evil people. Thus, my standpoint is that evil people exist, and their evildoing cannot be separated from their personhood; and the intentions to act in evil ways characterizes the evildoer.

Within a psychiatric context, extreme crimes committed by those with a psychopathic disorder are considered evil while deviancy attributed to extreme psychoticism is not credited with being an evil act, as such individuals have a “primordial contract of innocence” (Richman, Mercer & Mason, 1999, p. 300). This research also concludes that an evil act is the consequence of “the extinction of moral bonding” leading to “residual instinctive behaviour”. This approach seems to indicate an allegiance to the notion that aggression is innate, as well as forging links between personality disorders and acts of evil.

In recent years, theories of criminology, clinical psychology and psychiatry have created the term “psychopath” (Blackburn, Logan, Donnelly & Renwick, 2003). For many years extensive research has been implemented using the concept of psychopathy or the psychopathic personality, indicating a form of personality disorder rather than mental illness (Blackburn, 1998; Blackburn, Logan, Donnelly & Renwick, 2003; Blair, 1995; Cleckley, 1976; Gilbert, 1992; Hare, 1980, 1993, 1996; Morrison & Gilbert, 2001; O’Kane, Fawcett & Blackburn, 1996). One author has suggested that the term be deleted, as it remains a stereotype of an ideal-type personality rather than an accurate description of any real individual (Cavadino, 1998). Psychopathy, however, is a controversial term in psychology and does not appear in Axis II personality disorders in the psychiatric Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV), because there are no explicit diagnostic criteria. It appears more prominently in forensic assessment and there is a recognized legal classification of “psychopathic disorder” (Morrison & Gilbert, 2001) and the acceptance and use of the Psychopathy Checklist—Revised (PCL-R) (Hare, Hart & Harpur, 1991) in such settings. The PCL-R is a 20-item rating scale checklist that claims to assess psychopathic traits. The disorder of “antisocial personality disorder”, however, as described in the DSM-IV, seems to represent what is understood loosely and popularly as a “psychopath”. In defence of the terms “psychopath” or “sociopath” and “antisocial personality disorder”, they helpfully indicate the
presence of serious psychopathology within an individual and its related disruptive behaviour. However, these theorists do not make a clear connection between this type of psychopathology and its possible roots in destructive aggression which includes the notion of premeditation and intense psychological pleasure in inflicting pain. With regard to the terms ‘psychopath’ and ‘antisocial personality disorder’, Wilson (2003) points out that many of these types of people, at least in his experience, do not necessarily seek or experience intense enjoyment in their acts of violence that characterizes those few human beings whom he would describe as evil. In this regard, it is important to question whether serial killers are evil because this determines how we view them collectively as a group of people who remain on the psychological and moral fringe of society.

In contrast, Hare (1996) uses the term ‘psychopath’ rather than evil to describe individuals who are predators that use charm, manipulation, intimidation and violence to control others and satisfy their needs. “Predator” is a useful word, as it begins to locate destructive acts of violence and aggression within a psychological framework. It positions acts of violence as a calculating choice, a manipulative decision. However, a predator does not always enjoy the killing, unlike most serial killers, and thus the term is limited. Better terms used currently to describe this type of serial killer are “lust killers” or “thrill killers” (Holmes & Holmes, 1998a,b, 2002), which characterize the sense of sexual enjoyment and fulfilment in inflicting pain on victims (Hickey, 2002; Keppel, 1995, 1997; Schlesinger, 2000). This idea falls into line with Wilson’s (2003) notion that the essence of an evil person is the apparent enjoyment of their victim’s pain.

Reconceptualizing the concept of evil as destructive aggression: A psychoanalytical view

It would be difficult to find an issue that has generated more controversy during the two-century history of psychoanalytical ideas than the origin and nature of aggression (Mitchell, 1993). Since 1908, theorizing about aggression has tended to split into two principle positions, depending on whether aggression is viewed as a fundamental human instinct, a central part of the process and dynamics of the psyche, or whether aggression is seen as reactive and defensive, lacking in major significance in terms of internal dynamics. This means that aggression is located either at the core of the self or at its periphery.

In thinking about aggression and its polarization, aggression has not only been a fundamental problem of human experience in all cultures and at all points in history but how one understands the origins of aggression determines one’s position on many of the most problematic features of life: historical, philosophical, political and theological (Mitchell, 1993). If one of the two positions is adopted, then the problem of crime is a product of the laxness in controls and failure to maintain law and order; the problem is the individual. On the other hand, if the second view is adopted, violent crime is a social disease from which the individual suffers. The problem is the environmental failures to which the individual reacts (Mitchell, 1993). How one thinks about and experiences the roots of evil and cruelty and, as indicated above, the dark side of human nature that is violent and murderous, is an important part of the shaping of our personal and collective life histories and sense of self. In finding our positions on the origins of aggression, we are establishing a version of personal and collective history. “Relational” psychoanalytical theory on aggression, a third position described by Mitchell (1993), proposes a version of aggression that overcomes this traditional polarity. These three positions on aggression are outlined below.
Aggression as a drive

Examining early infantile development, Freud (1920) stated initially that aggression is a reaction to frustration in the satisfaction of the “pleasure principle”. He described the “pleasure principle” as the dominant motivational force within the infant psyche that seeks primarily to obtain pleasurable experiences and will do so without consideration or regard for the other. Later, Freud (1930) established aggression as a separate drive or instinct that is self-sustaining and independent from the sexual/life instinct or libido, although the two instincts may, at times, merge. Freud (1920) also described this instinct as the so-called “death instinct”. He wrote that the “death instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of being which the living entity has been obliged to abandon…” (p. 36). The death instinct thus seeks to return the human psyche to a state of non-being from which it initially emerged. He extended this notion in his 1923 paper on Ego and Id to suggest that “life consists of a continuous descent into death” (p. 47), intimating that psychic life is governed by the need to bring about the state of death. Freud’s (1920) death instinct is thus expressed as innate and destructive aggression. According to Freud, the death instinct may be directed inwards to harm the self (as in suicide), or may be directed outwards (a process termed “projection”) and onto others, thus viewing others as a target of aggression. The death instinct as a destructive psychic force may seek to destroy both the self (“restore an earlier state of being” as in suicide) as well as the other. Aggression “not only is a deflection of self-destructiveness to the outside, as described by Freud, important though it is, but also from the very beginning the wish to annihilate is directed both at the perceiving self and the object perceived, hardly distinguishable from one another” (Segal, 1993, p. 56).

Aggression, viewed as a continuous, destructive pressure within, demands constant release. It is the need for this urgent discharge, according to Freud (1930) that results in the spontaneous emergence of aggression. Freud (1930), in proposing this drive-theory, emphasized the endogenous, spontaneous, propulsive nature of aggression, not derived from deprivation or frustration of pleasure-seeking but a constant and driving power comparable only to the sexual instinct. If there is no reason or provocation for the aggression (such as war) then reasons will be manufactured so as to relieve the inner pressure. If aggression is viewed as innate and in need of release, it is understandable that some serial killers describe a “compulsion to kill” that is experienced as a “force within them” that urges them to kill (Schlesinger, 2000). The acting-out “means the liberation from unbearable inner tension” (p. 12). Once the killing is carried out, the tension is released and there is a sense of satisfaction for a while. Freud (1930) stated:

Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and kill him… when the mental counter-forces which ordinarily inhibit it (aggression), it… reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien (pp. 111–112).

Within this classical Freudian position evil may be interpreted as innate, as a potentially destructive and propulsive drive. Evil as aggression would be considered core to human psychic organization, meaning that human motivation is fuelled by propulsive innate
aggression. It is only the thin fabric of civilization that covers and masks, and to an extent controls “the savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien”. The problem with this classical psychoanalytical perspective is that evil is viewed as inevitable; that evil as destructive aggression is unavoidable. Aggression must be managed simply by “law and order”—or in Freudian terms, individuals must internalize that so-called “law of the father” (superego) and sublimate aggression into more meaningful private and public actions.

The classical psychoanalytical perspective, by placing aggression at the centre of human psychic organization, attempts to explain the historical significance and universality of human destructiveness. Dangerous criminals such as serial killers are understood as losing control of their unmanageable destructive aggression. Most serial killers, however, do know right from wrong; they are not prey to irresistible urges but choose not to resist these impulses in their quest for murder and sexual pleasure (Miller, 2000; Ressler & Shachtman, 1997). The classical psychoanalytical perspective of aggression does not account for the significant element of premeditation and enjoyment in inflicting pain on victims.

Earlier it was stated that serial killers are “bad not mad”. This points to the fact that some serial killers, although they may attempt to plead insanity as a defence, are mainly not tried as such, and few are convicted (Hickey, 2002). On the contrary, some serial killers display an above-average intelligence, are charming but manipulative, and capable of concealing their pathology. Some serial killers lead ostensibly normal lives as students, friends, married people with children, gainfully employed and active community members (Hickey, 2002; Keppel & Birnes, 2003). The vast majority are not insane; they knew what they were doing at the time of the crime (Geberth, 1996). The police evidence points to their intentions even if the actual crime was apparently sloppy, disorganized and opportunistic. The decision may have been made quickly, thus presenting the overt appearance of an opportunistic and disorganized crime scene but, in all cases, it was planned. Evil, as destructive aggression, is premeditated.

I am of the opinion that the classical psychoanalytical perspective of aggression as a drive is improbable and unhelpful in reconceptualizing evil, and thus understanding, to an extent, serial killers as evil. The limitations of this perspective on aggression has resulted in a second view that has for decades split apart the psychoanalytical community: the view that aggression as a secondary reaction.

**Aggression as a secondary reaction**

Non-drive psychoanalytical theorists who have abandoned approaches to aggression based on the drive theory have done so in dialectical opposition to Freud. They tend to portray aggression not as spontaneous but as provoked, not as inevitable but as avoidable, and not as core or central but as peripheral to the development of the self (Mitchell, 1993).

Traditionally the metaphor for the mind has been depicted as layered. For drive theory theorists, aggression is fundamental to human experience and existence, thus it is understood to be at the bottom of the mind. It is foundational. For non-drive theorists, human beings are regarded fundamentally as being involved in other motives such as attachment or self-fulfilment. Aggression is thus located in the more superficial and upper layers of the mind (Mitchell, 1993). It is close to the surface and is therefore secondary in human motivation.

Over the past few decades, non-drive psychoanalytical theorists have characterized aggression as both a reaction and as a defence against anxiety (Fromm, 1973; Kohut, 1972, 1977; Sullivan, 1953, 1956). Seminal writer Heinz Kohut (1972, 1977) describes infantile aggression as a reaction to significant others not providing crucial developmental needs. Kohut terms the psychological (and non-pathological) process when not all needs are met as
required as “empathic optimal frustration”. During this process, the infant becomes frustrated as it learns that it is not possible to have all needs met all the time. It is not a punitive act on behalf of the caretakers. It is not possible for caretakers to be constantly available to the infant and meet all needs at all times. The infant normally experiences some deprivation in this regard, however meaningful and diligent caretakers may be. During the period of “optimal frustration”, assertiveness or healthy aggression emerges as a reaction. Infants then slowly begin to tolerate these unmet needs and learn that life is not perfect, omnipotent or predictable, and they encounter their own healthy aggression and how to use this aggression to obtain some of the needs some of the time. However, when these needs are unmet repeatedly and continually and the infant is grossly abandoned and deprived, normal healthy assertiveness breaks down into hostile aggression (Kohut, 1977). In this circumstance aggression becomes a pathological and destructive reaction. As a result, the self-structure of the infant changes, and becomes less stable, less confident, more fragile and threatened.

The early and foundational non-drive theorists described the processes resulting in experiences of threat or endangerment in various ways such as “impingements or environmental failures” (Winnicott, 1945), “separation anxiety” (Bowlby, 1960) and “breaks in attunement” (Stern, 1985). One of the early but arguably most influential writers within the field of psychoanalytical theory, Donald Winnicott (1945), describes the experience of threat as “unthinkable terror of non-being” and “annihilation anxiety”. These experiences, if they are relentless, are likely to generate reactive aggression.

Within a certain branch of psychoanalytical theory called “object relations theories”, the development of the self is seen as dependent on pre-oedipal childhood experiences with significant caretakers (or “object relations”) as well as oedipal experiences (Fairbairn, 1949, 1952; Kohut, 1971, 1977; Winnicott, 1945, 1963). Recent research in infant development has confirmed much of this earlier psychoanalytical research (Beebe, Lachman & Jaffe, 1997). Summers (1999) outlines two significant tasks, which I term both pre-oedipal and oedipal tasks, for caretakers that are crucial for the psychological development of the child. The first task is for caretakers to delight in and encourage the infant’s interests and spontaneous enjoyment. Casement (1990) remarks that “the infant needs to be able to discover his or her capacity to light up the mother’s face—for there is to be found the fundamental basis of self-image and self-esteem” (p. 93). Belief in the appeal of one’s affects or feelings constitutes trust in the self and a capacity to develop a sense of self worth and confidence. The second task is for caretakers to provide sufficient support for the child when negative affects are experienced so that the child can learn to cope in the future with painful feelings (Fairbairn, 1949; Kohut, 1977, 1984).

The failure of these two tasks relates to the origins of the psychopathology of serial killers. Most of us perceive reality differently from serial killers, because when we were infants (pre-oedipal stage of development) and again as young children (oedipal stage of development) we would most probably have experienced a mixture of some negative, traumatic events and experiences, but also some positive and enriching events and experiences. The positive events would have helped us to learn to manage and tolerate the negative experiences by creating a sense (of reality) that sometimes the world is bad (“I have been abandoned”) but sometimes the world is also good (“my mother is back again”). Most serial killers have only had a “world as bad” experience (Hickey, 2002; Miller, 2000; Tithecott, 1997) and, as a consequence, developed a weak, narcissistic and fragile sense of self lacking in confidence and fearful of a revengeful world. Aggression, as reactive, hides this weak and fragile self, often exhibiting as pathological narcissism (Kohut, 1972, 1977) common in sexually motivated serial killers (Knight, 2006). Put another way, it is the quality and quantity of both negative and positive experiences that allow the infant to believe in a world that is either all bad, or all good, or a
mixture of both good and bad. This quality means that if there is "good enough mothering"\(^3\) (Winnicott, 1945), which means that crucial development needs are met some of the time, the infant learns that any negative experiences (unmet needs) can be managed.

I suggest that serial killers did not have "good enough mothering" to such an extent that they now endure a prosecutorial world that is all bad, all hateful, all revengeful. This suggestion is substantiated by research into serial killers that indicates that most experienced ongoing traumatic and difficult childhoods (Holmes & Holmes, 2002; Skrapec, 2001; Vorpagel, 1998). Moreover, perhaps expressive of this ongoing trauma, their play as children can be described as aggressive (Hickey, 2002; Miller, 2000; Schlesinger, 2000), with many from dysfunctional families of neglect and abuse (Hickey, 2002; Keppel & Birnes, 2003; Schlesinger, 2000), many fathers are absent (literally or symbolically) during the formative years, while the mother may be rejecting, punitive, hated or she may be smothering, controlling and infantilizing (Miller, 2000; Hickey, 2002). Many serial killers as children were illegitimate or adopted and several were sons of prostitutes (Hickey, 2002).

In terms of Freudian or classical psychoanalytical drive theory, to adopt the view that childhood (oedipal) abuse alone is the only or primary source for understanding serial murder is limited. Many individuals are abused as children and do not become serial killers. The difference may be that there are also inadequate pre-oedipal experiences which contribute to serious psychopathology. In this regard, it is likely that both pre-oedipal and oedipal disturbances in self-development give rise to serious psychopathology such as revealed by sexually motivated serial killers.

If aggression is viewed as a reaction to a perceived threat (of non-being), aggression is assumed to be justified. Attention shifts to the traumatizing conditions that are understood to precede and underlie it (Mitchell, 1993). The aggressive acts thus have "eliciting factors" and "predisposing factors". This line of thought would locate aggression as a response to danger, as the "flight/fight" reaction.

The relational psychoanalytical approach to aggression

One of the most important and prolific writers within the relational psychoanalytical framework, Steven Mitchell (1993), presents an alternative approach to the problem of aggression that "struggles to avoid that customary two-sided slippery slopes of the positions that have shaped themselves around the question: Is there an aggressive drive, yes or no?" (p. 159). Mitchell claims that his approach is consistent with those who have rejected the drive theory in terms of thinking about the origins of aggression, but much closer to those who have maintained a loyalty to the drive theory in terms of thinking about the universality of aggression.

Mitchell (1993) suggests that if we think about aggression not as a push from within but "as a response to others, biologically mediated and prewired, within a relational context, then the question of whether there is an aggressive drive or not is replaced by questions concerning the conditions that tend to elicit aggressive responses" (p. 160). Viewing aggression in this way, according to Mitchell, preserves an emphasis on the importance of the individual within a relational, interpersonal, intersubjective context. Mitchell argues that to characterize aggression as a response to danger or threat does not undermine its biological basis; rather, the biology of aggression is understood to "operate not as a drive but as an individually constituted, prewired potential that is evoked by circumstances perceived subjectively as threatening or endangering" (p. 161). This means that the capacity to express aggression is a biological given, but aggression does not discharge spontaneously and propulsively from endogenous pressure. A condition within the interpersonal world may trigger this destructive
aggression. Thus, while aggression is reactive to danger or unpleasure, it is also universal (we all have the biological capacity for aggression). This implies that most people when threatened may potentially become aggressive.

The reactive nature of aggression indicates that somehow one’s suffering must be intended by another. “For all of us occasionally, and for many people chronically, life itself is cruel, and that very characterization personifies an agent responsible for our experience. We feel treated badly, done to, and are angry in response” (p. 163). What about serial killers who constantly wish to destroy? Is it possible that they are constantly feeling threatened or shamed? Research has indicated that people with psychopathic personality features experience a range of emotions such as shame, anger and humiliation in response to some kind of provocation. Such research also indicates that the presence of low self-esteem best predicts variance in anger intensity, and the reaction to threat is to assume dominance and threaten others which hides a shame-based experience of self (Morrison & Gilbert, 2001). This and other research has concluded that the self-conscious emotion of threat or shame is regarded as a powerful affective experience related to negative self-evaluations (self as flawed, inadequate, bad and inferior) and that such shame is associated with a variety of psychopathologies including hostility (Retzinger, 1995; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher & Gramzow, 1992) and domestic violence (Dutton, van Ginkel & Starzomski, 1995; Lansky, 1987, 1992). This links to the notion that those, like serial killers, who are paranoid and persecuted will chronically feel shamed, threatened and endangered. Serial killers defend against the experience of an embittered, empty self, full of impotent anger and revengeful at a world which seems equally as hateful and revengeful as themselves. With such individuals, the aggression and sadism has developed beyond the point of origin into a complex version of self that is sustained by an enduring sense of internal and external danger.

Mitchell (1993) notes that endangerment is a subjective experience, unrelated to what an external observer might evaluate as danger. Endangerment does not concern just physical threat but a subjective sense of threat to the self. Mitchell (1993) states that:

Threats to the integrity of the self, as subjectively defined, tend to generate powerful, deeply aggressive reactions. In fact, the pursuit of revenge generated by a need to redress past insults or humiliation often propels people into situations that are physically dangerous. Much of the political aggression and violence on the world today is connected with nationalistic and ethnic identifications that are rooted in a collective sense of endangerment and past humiliations (p. 163).

In this context, drive theorists believe aggression is to be renounced, while non-drive theorists think aggression fades as the threat to self is diminished. According to Mitchell (1993), we all maintain destructive versions of self. Endangerment is an unalterable and perpetual feature of human existence while destructive versions of self are not. Mitchell believes that these destructive versions of self remain intact, with their own physicality and development history. According to this model, this means that we are destructive people but we are also loving people. The one does not subsume the other: they exist side by side. Thus Mitchell says that “I exist in different states of mind at different times, some loving, some hateful” (p. 171). He writes that “a more meaningful sense of continuity and integrity of experience over time entails not a tucking in or concealment of aggression into a preferred, loving view of self but an increased ability to recognize, hold, and work through aggressive states (p. 171).
Concluding comments: Evil as destructive aggression and premeditated violence

Are serial killers evil? Yes, if evil is reconceptualized within a psychoanalytical framework. As indicated earlier, there is evidence for a predisposition to violence as well as an interplay between environment, biological factors and personality traits as the basis for criminal behaviour. The idea of the concept of evil, stripped of its traditionally religious underpinnings, may be better viewed as destructive aggression that emerges as violence against another. Unlike social learning or developmental social perspectives, which focus mainly on the social influence and largely ignore the psychological make-up of aggression, relational psychoanalytical theory, a perspective I value, suggests the capacity to express aggression is a biological given, but aggression does not discharge spontaneously from endogenous pressure. Rather, a condition within the interpersonal and subjective context may activate this destructive aggression. Thus, while aggression is reactive to subjective experiences of danger or threat, it is also universal (we all have the biological capacity for aggression). Thus, evil as destructive aggression is viewed as emerging from within the complex interplay between psychological and social influence, and between the capacity for violence and the subjective context. Serial killers are evil people that have acted out their destructive aggression in sadistic ways. One way to understand serial killers destructive aggression is to view it as being rooted within early pre-oedipal and oedipal developmental disturbances that give rise to an inadequate and fragile sense of self and feelings of hate and revenge. The evil (consciously or unconsciously) acted out against another is directed against the silent but endlessly haunting ghosts of past tormentors. Serial killers enjoy inflicting pain and prolonging the suffering of their victim because these enraged attacks are attacks on past tormentors; these feelings are directed at those who symbolically represent the early tormentors. The aggressive attacks on the victim may be understood as symbolic expressions of their hate for the world. Serial killers vent their rage and envy against a hateful and rejecting world by attacking and brutalizing others. In such attacks, serial killers unconsciously re-enact their childhood impotence, pain and helplessness in a relentless fantasy of claiming revenge.

As discussed earlier, evil is suffered. It is not an abstraction or something that belongs to the domain of contemplation. Evil is concrete and something suffered. In this context, my position is that evil acts presuppose an evil actor who intends another to suffer. By this I argue that serial killers are evil individuals who intend that their victims suffer. Thinking about evil need not be so difficult, and thinking that serial killers are evil is to examine their victims suffering expressed through their brutalized bodies. This links with Vetlesen’s (1998) argument that “there can be no appreciation of evil whatsoever save that gained by the direct route of suffering, i.e. of experience at first hand” (p. 4).

In the light of Wilson’s (2003) suggestion as to what an evil person is, and my definition of serial murder described earlier, I propose that evil people (such as serial killers) are defined as those who, with premeditation, act out perversely and sadistically their aggression on another who may symbolically represent earlier tormentors, whose aggression is particularly destructive, pathological and rooted in violent fantasies, and who obtain intense pleasure in doing so. These types of serial killers are not ordinary people who carry out extraordinary acts of evil. There is nothing ordinary about their sadistic torture and killing in their pursuit of sexual gratification and intense psychological pleasure in inflicting pain and suffering.

Notes

1. These crucial developmental needs are psychological in nature and are for attachment, bonding, attunement and periods of emotional contentment and protection from unwanted experiences.
2. Psychoanalysts refer to “pre-oedipal” development as the mother–infant dyad and the psychological process, whereby the infant’s sense of self emerges as separate from the mother’s. This stage of development is thus before the psychological introduction of the literal or symbolic “father” (the third other) into the mother–infant dyad. Once the father becomes part of the psychological experience of the infant, development is known as “oedipal” development.

3. It is recognized that early psychoanalytical theories were gender-biased and thus interpreted as mother-bashing/blaming. However, the intention today is to understand that “mother” can be understood to include any significant caretaker in the early development of the child.

References


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