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## *The psychodynamics of serial killing*

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## ***Abstract***

In this article we present three key domains for the understanding of the psychological functioning of serial killers: a) omnipotence and the wish for domination; (b) sadistic love for the object; (c) withdrawal into fantasy, denial, and dissociation. The analysis of these domains is critical to identify the motivational, cognitive and relational processes involved in serial murderers. In particular, we propose a psychodynamic-oriented theoretical framework, by which traumatic childhood experiences and psychobiological factor predisposing to violent conducts are responsible for the deviant development of personality in serial killers.

**Keywords:** serial killer, psychodynamics, trauma, fantasy, dissociation.

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## ***Introduction***

According to the indications provided by the Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the term “serial killer” indicates a person who murder two or more people in separate events. This definition summarizes the behavior of the serial killer, but it does not explain the motivational dynamics and the intrapsychic factors that are involved in serial killing. In this respect, the presence of different classifications for identifying categories of serial murderers (e.g., Canter et al. 2004; Dietz 1986; Holmes & DeBurger 1988; White et al. 2010) indicates some disagreement in the literature about the psychological factors involved in serial killing. For example, it can be observed that the opinions of Holmes and DeBurger (1988) and Canter et al. (2004) about serial killer classification are conflicting. Holmes and DeBurger describe four specific types of serial killers, that is, visionary, mission-oriented, hedonistic, and power/control-oriented serial murderers; in contrast, Canter and collaborators suggest that the theme of power and control over the victim does not identify a specific motivation for killing, and therefore a discrete category, but they are common features of serial killing.

Although this field of study is characterized by some disagreement on serial killer typologies, it is also possible to identify some agreement on specific characteristics of the serial killer. The serial murderer is often portrayed as a psychotic or psychopathic individual with a history of repeated traumatic experiences during childhood. These characteristics are often associated with paraphilias and the persistent use of autistic fantasy as a defense mechanism (Hickey 2010; Giannangelo 2012). Furthermore, murder itself might constitute a peculiar form of sexual gratification, and sexuality might even constitute the primary motivational dynamic of serial killers, as highlighted by Schlesinger (2008). In fact, according to this author, the term “serial” might not be adequate to explain the intrapsychic functioning of the serial murderers. Schlesinger proposed indeed to use the term “compulsive” for describing the internal drive that leads serial killers to commit murders. Douglas et al. (1992) specifically use the term “sexual homicide” to distinguish between this type of killing and other murders, and they also discuss the sexual origins of the activities and acts leading to the death of the victim when sexuality is the primary motivation of the offender.

In order to understand the behavior of serial killers, an exploration of the experiential, motivational, and relational domains of these individuals can be particularly useful. Such exploration permits to describe the mental functioning of serial killers, and the emotional and cognitive expectations behind it. According to a psychodynamic perspective focusing on prevalent motivational factors, object relations and defense mechanisms, in this article we propose that the following domains characterize the extremely maladaptive mental functioning of serial killers: (a) a wish for domination and omnipotence as the main motivational factor ; (b) a sadistic love for the object as the predominant object relation ; (c) autistic fantasy, denial and dissociation as the organizing defense mechanisms. We will analyze these domains below.

## ***The wish for domination and omnipotence***

Serial killers display a grandiose sense of self and a contempt towards their victims. The words of Ted Bundy, who committed between thirty and forty murders, are a clear example of this: “I’m the coldest mother-fucker you’ll ever put your eyes on. I don’t give a shit about those other people” (Hickey 2010, p. 154). Sometimes, showing one’s own grandiosity and pride for the crimes is fundamental for serial killers. In this respect Dennis Rader, a serial killer who was known under the pseudonym “BTK” (Bind, Torture, Kill), provided the media and the police with a number of detailed information about his murders, in order to claim his own glory (Ramsland 2006).

According to Meloy (1998), a grandiose and malevolent sense of self as showed by Bundy and Rader is typical of psychopathy. Meloy defines psychopathy as a peculiar form of narcissistic personality organization characterized by “an inordinate amount of instinctual aggression and the absence of an object relational capacity to bond” (p. 5). In this pathological personality organization, grandiosity and violent behaviors are aimed to the domination and control of one’s own internal world, in which persecutory objects constantly threat the structure of the self.

The internal world of serial killers can be conceived as a field dominated by aggressive and sadistic internal objects originated in early relationship with caregivers, who were subsequently internalized and identified with (Schimmenti 2017). In particular, Meloy (1998) suggests an interaction between a psychobiological predisposition (e.g., autonomic hyporeactivity) and environmental factors represented by inadequate parental care in the emergence of psychopathy. The child in early stages of life makes experiences at the epidermal level of numerous sensations being either “hard” or “soft” (Tustin 1981). So, if caregivers does not pay particular attention to care practices, the child might be subjected to excessive “hard” sensations, which results into a basic distrust towards the external environment (Erikson 1950) and an identification with the “stranger selfobject” (Grotsein 1982) at the level of conceptual representations (Meloy 1985). Such identification sometimes constitutes the only available form of internalization for the serial killer, and it is structured to cope with the atavistic fear of aggression coming from the outside. Consequently, the object relation becomes perverse and persecutory and it leads the individual to establish a primary sadistic relationship with the object of potential love, in which the destroying power directed towards the object is the exact source of the excitation. Therefore, the typical tendency of the serial killer to manipulate and dominate the other is the result of the need to “triumph” over the object. In a purification process (Bursten 1973), the serial killer evacuates his vulnerable and impotent parts to re-establish the identification with the stranger selfobject, and thus to experience a sense of expanded grandiosity. According to this perspective, Rader’s claim for being recognized from the public could be interpreted as a need to magnify his grandiose self-structure by means of behaviors that involved the devaluation and the contempt of others.

Meloy’s concept of psychopathy as rooted in inadequate parental care during childhood are be well reflected in the general opinion that serial murder can be traced back to maltreating and traumatic childhood environments (Beasley 2004; Giannangelo 2012; Hickey 2010). However, many serial killers suffered from inadequate relational experiences in different life stages, and not only during childhood. Kemper and Dahmer, for example, were victims of emotionally neglecting and psychologically abusing caregivers for most of their childhood and adolescence (Newton 2000). The effects of emotional neglect and psychological abuse can be detected in the episode of matricide involving Ed Kemper. Kemper, who had been denigrated and humiliated for many years by his mother, one day assaulted her while she was sleeping. He used an hammer to smash her skull, then he decapitated her, and then he raped her dead body. Once finished, he threw her larynx down the garbage disposal. Kemper commented this action with the following words: “It seemed appropriate [...] as much as she’d bitched and screamed and yelled at me over so many years” (Newton 2000, p. 144). Kemper’s words gives some meaning, even though a terrifying one, to an apparently delusional act which in reality has a strong symbolic component: killing the mother and raping her corpse could not allow him to silence that “voice” which had constantly threatened his vulnerable and powerless self; rather, it is likely that Kemper felt the need to attack his internal persecutory object, which was projected on the part of the body (the larynx) that mostly represented the intrusion and persecution of her mother into him. Therefore, this Kemper’s act provides evidence that the internal persecutory object can be deeply threatening, but it also highlights the projective and identifying mechanisms that gives meaning to the serial killer’s homicidal violence, which is fueled by the need to triumph over the persecutory object.

### *Sadistic love for the object*

The themes of domination and control had been examined by von Krafft-Ebing (1886), who showed that suffering can provoke sexual arousal in some individuals. The author coined the term “sadism”, referring to Marquis de Sade’s books, to indicate the association between sexuality and violence. In the context of serial killing, and especially sexual murder, the killers enact a number of violent practices in order to obtain sexual gratification. Sometimes these practices are well organized and they involve the use of a special equipment prepared before the murder. Many violent acts are in fact inflicted before and after death on the victim’s body, and the act of killing thus constitutes only a part of the entire process. In particular, the serial killer sometimes cuts, beats, inserts foreign objects and mutilates the victim’s body after death to increase sexual arousal, and the masturbation or the rape of the corpse (a necrophilic act) might follow these practices. Furthermore, some serial killers may take “objects” (e.g., hair of the victims, but even body parts) from the crime scene, and they can also perform cannibalism (Hickey, 2010) fueled by sexual arousal (Martens 2011).

Based on the theory of motivational systems as their conceptual framework (Litchtenberg 1989, Lichtenberg et al. 1992), Lachmann and Lachmann (1995) suggest that the sadistic acts of serial killers are linked to an altered functioning of the sexual and aversive motivational systems generated by traumatic childhood experiences. In more detail, the feelings of powerlessness and loneliness deriving from the abusing and neglecting environments provoke a massive activation of the aversive system that consequently impairs the developmental processes of the other motivational systems. Therefore, the overtly violent conducts of serial killers might have the purpose to substitute the functions of the other motivational systems. In this perspective, the dismemberment of the victim might satisfy the exploratory system, sensory stimulation might satisfy the sexual system, and the cannibalistic acts might be related to the attachment system. Moreover, Lachmann and Lachmann state that such motivational systems organize the violent and sexualized behaviors through fantasies of domination and control over the other. Thus, the only way to satisfy the relational needs that had been denied during childhood is to enact a grandiose and omnipotent self. This perspective permits to identify the peculiar objectual love of serial killers: the confusion among motivational drives brought love to blend with deep hate and to become a sadistic, disturbed and distorted love.

Referring to the cannibalistic acts of Jeffrey Dahmer, Martens (2011) suggested that feelings of shame and loneliness might be the source of sadistic love. In Marten’s view, cannibalism does not necessarily represent the manifestation of a death instinct directed to the object (Klein 1957). Rather, Martens suggests that the deep sense of intimacy experienced by Dahmer with his victims was related to Dahmer’s wish for merging with them. This search for cohesion was aimed to counter his deep feelings of loneliness. Meloy (1998) also discusses the wish for merging with the object, and the preference of sexual murders for the assaults involving the contact with the victim’s skin (Levin & Fox 1985). According to the author, the skin constitutes a point of “adhesive identification” (Bick 1968; Meltzer 1975) that satisfies the wish for a return into a condition of unity with one’s mother.

Nonetheless, Martens (2011) does not exclude that envy plays a decisive role in the act of cannibalism. In fact, the envy toward the loved object might serve the cannibalistic anger, especially in response to deep feelings of shame. Also, the author suggests that Dahmer’s sadistic behaviors might counteract the feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness associated with his castration anxiety (Sadock & Sadock 2007), as it can be observed in his fear of loneliness and awe for the potential consequences of his poor social abilities. However, it is known that there is no castration anxiety in the absence of an object whom one wishes to love, and of a third who can actualize the castration, even if that third is incorporated as a split and dissociated internal object.

These considerations suggest that the deprivation of the basic needs and the violence exerted over the children can generate feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. In individuals who become serial murderers, these feelings are counteracted by means of highly sadistic behaviors that are aimed to control and manipulate the others and the relationship with them. In this regard, Bader (2002) observed while discussing perversions that only in a condition of perceived safety, when one is sheltered from guilt and feelings of shame, it is possible to become sexually aroused. In parallel, only when the object is under the killer’s control, it is possible for the serial murderer to derive pleasure from his or her own self-image and sexuality.

### ***Autistic fantasy, denial, and dissociation***

Fantasy plays a fundamental role in the psychological functioning of the serial killer. In particular, daydreaming may precede the commission of violent acts and may generate the excitation that pushes the sexual murderer to commit the crime.

It is noteworthy that fantasies with sexually deviant contents are not a pathognomic feature of serial killers' functioning. In fact, sexual fantasies with socially deviant contents can also be present in the general population (Crepault & Couture 1980; Greenlinger & Byrne 1987). In an attempt to conceptualize a developmental model able that could explain the psychological dynamics involved in serial killing, several authors highlighted the fundamental role played by fantasy. Considering the concept of "catatimia" originally proposed by Wertham (1932, 1937), Sears (1991) outlines four different stages associated with the commission of serial murder: 1) the emergence of a thought disorder that follows a precipitating or traumatic event; 2) the planning of violent behavior accompanied by a strong internal tension directed toward its realization; 3) the commission of the violent act; 4) the reduction of internal tension, accompanied by a sense of relief, gratification and power related to the murder. In particular, the thought disorder emerging in the first stage seems to reflect the activity of fantasizing that resulted from being exposed to child maltreatment. This process is responsible for the sense of omnipotence and control deriving from primitive fantasies to possess the rejecting or abusing persons, and it damages the development of the relational skills in future serial killer. This thought disorder can be easily recognized in an episode concerning Kemper's life. It seems that an early age, while discussing with his sister about a crush upon a teacher, Kemper claimed that he had to kill her before he could be with her (Newton 2000).

In this regard, Lachmann and Lachmann (1995) explicitly state that the withdrawal into fantasy aims to reverse the experiences of child abuse. It is a primitive process of reversal into the opposite, in which the response to the abusive situation is the sexualisation (Schimmenti 2012). In fact, Lachmann and Lachmann assert that "By organizing experiences where the abuse is inflicted on symbols of the early abusers, the pain is transformed into sexual and sensual pleasure, and the helplessness is converted into efficacy and self assertion through domination, control, and grandiosity" (Lachmann & Lachmann 1995, p. 21).

Focusing on the relationship between dissociative identity disorder (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association 2013), formerly known as multiple personality disorder, and fantasy (Young 1988), Carlisle (1993) highlights that fantasy does not only act defensively against painful childhood experiences, by denying them and reversing them into the opposite, but it even concurs to the formation of an alternate identity that could be responsible for the murders that are committed. The "dark side" of the individual seems to represent here the most perverse and destroying nature of the Shadow, referring to the Jungian archetype (Jung 1934), and it indicates a personality that is deeply divided into a part adapted to the social environment (the Persona, i.e., the mask used in the interaction with the society) and an egoistic and potentially violent and sadistic part (the Shadow). Therefore, according to a Jungian perspective, fantasy that comes from the Shadow archetype becomes a more and more frequent and independent mental activity over time in serial killers, until it leads to the realization of the murder when the imagined circumstances occur. With the realization of the first murder, the Shadow becomes more powerful, as much to constitute a split, not-integrated, and stable part of the personality that increasingly affects over time the areas of mental functioning that able to experience guilt. In this case dissociation, as the mental process constituting the basis of defensive disconnections in consciousness and its functions (Schimmenti 2018), intervenes so that the individual does not make experience of the pain that had caused the emergence of the Shadow in its destructive and sadistic form. Dissociation could be supported by mechanisms of idealization towards one's own dark side that, once idealized, takes full control of the personality.

Therefore, autistic fantasy in this context is conceptualized as a mechanism that is aimed to deny (Freud 1936) the vulnerable and impotent aspects of self linked to unprocessed trauma. This conceptualization allows to interpret the murder of serial killer as a "psychic retreats" (i.e., a psychic area characterized by feelings of absolute omnipotence over the objects; Steiner 1993). Therefore, the serial killing is related to a dissociative process that does not aim to reject the absence of the maternal penis (i.e., the symbolic representative of the castration anxiety, and in a broader view of the external reality), as proposed in the Freudian view of fetishism (Freud 1927); rather, the serial killing aims to reject the internal reality, which is dominated by sadistic introjects that constantly threat the self-structure, and by unbearable feelings of shame, loneliness, and powerlessness.

## **Conclusions**

Our arguments support the hypothesis that the experiences of abuse and neglect during childhood constitute the developmental origins of serial murder. In order to cope with the sadistic and annihilating objects that had been internalized in early relationship with caregivers, the serial killer used the primitive defense mechanism of withdrawal into fantasy. Then, he preserved psychic survival through other defense mechanisms such as denial and dissociation, and supported these mechanisms by recurring to primitive forms of internalization of the aggressor and by enacting overtly sadistic conducts. In this respect, the relational trauma experienced during childhood (Schimmenti & Caretti, 2016) might interact with the biological factors predisposing to violent conduct (Hickey 2010), establishing those forms of mental functioning that might result, at their extreme levels, in the personality of serial killer.

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