Pathological Narcissism and Serial Homicide: Review and Case Study

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Serial homicide, as a psychopathological condition, has been described as long ago as 1886. The traits and characteristics of serial murderers are varied, as are the theories that attempt to explain their motivation. Theorists have emphasized, for example, traumatic events in early life, sexual disturbance and dynamics, and neurobiological abnormalities. In the past fifteen years, as narcissistic disturbance in general has been better understood, a relationship has been noted between pathological narcissism and serial homicide. Narcissistic personality disorder, narcissistic injury, underlying feelings of inadequacy and humiliation, self-glorifying compensatory fantasies, and the erection of narcissistic defenses have all been mentioned as important factors in understanding the serial killer. An illustrative case report, which encompasses many of these characteristics, is presented here along with a review of clinical research, theory, and findings.

But even where it emerges without any sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness, we cannot fail to recognize that the satisfaction of the instinct is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with a fulfillment of the latter's old wishes for omnipotence.
—Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents

Homicide, the ultimate form of human aggression, is not a unitary event, but a complex behavior with different clinical pictures, different dynamics, and different prognoses. Serial homicide is a relatively rare phenomenon (Drukteinis, 1992) at the extreme end of the aggressive spectrum. Here, the offender kills not because of a logical motive, or as an outgrowth of a psychotic disorder, but because of an internal pressure to commit the act (Revitch and Schlesinger, 1989). If, as Fromm (1973) and others suggest, aggression should be viewed as an aspect (or outgrowth) of personality functioning, the motivation to commit serial murders would thus stem in large part from an individual’s underlying personality makeup. That is, in such cases aggression has been integrated within the personality (Kernberg, 1992).

The psychopathology of narcissism has been increasingly studied ever since the condition “narcissistic personality disorder” was included in the third revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (1980). Specifically, the relationship between nar-
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cissism and aggression, murder, and serial murder is being explored. Liebert (1985), for example, believes that most cases of serial murder occur among the borderline/narcissistic personality disorders. In Liebert's view, even the older cases reported in the literature (e.g., Revitch, 1965) would probably be classified, according to current nosological standards, as borderline or narcissistic.

The purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between serial homicide and pathological narcissism through a review of the literature and an illustrative case report.

PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF SERIAL HOMICIDE

Revitch and Schlesinger (1978, 1981, 1989) developed the concept of a motivational spectrum in classifying homicide. At one end of the spectrum are homicides committed as a result of external (sociogenic or environmental) factors; at the other end are homicides committed as a result of internal (endogenous or psychogenic) pressures that drive (compel) the offender to act. Compulsive homicides are frequently repetitive (serial) and ritualistic. Fantasies may precede the murder by many years (Schlesinger and Kutash, 1981). Once started, the homicide may be repeated frequently, or there may be intervals with years in between.

In many cases reported in the literature, an offender who has committed a bizarre (usually sexual) murder and has served a lengthy prison term will repeat a similar crime when paroled. The case of William Heirens, famous for his saying "Catch me before I kill more, I can't help myself," is illustrative (Kennedy, Hoffman, and Haines, 1947). Prior to his spree of gynocide, Heirens broke into homes and also was a panty fetishist. He described severe anxiety, perspiration, and headaches when he tried to resist the urge to kill again.

Such cases of compulsive serial offenders have been described in the literature as far back as 1886 (Krafft-Ebing, 1934). In one case reported by Krafft-Ebing, a twenty-three-year-old man made at least four sexual attacks on women and killed several other women. After killing one of his victims, a fourteen-year-old girl, he mutilated her body, tore out her intestines and genitals, bit off a piece of flesh, and sucked blood from the wound. He also strangled a twenty-eight-year-old woman and ripped out her intestines and then tried to choke his nineteen-year-old cousin. All of these activities were accompanied by erection and ejaculation. Jack the Ripper, the compulsive serial offender who terrorized England, sadistically murdered five prostitutes, and possibly two other women whose mutilated bodies were found in a river; he earned his name through a tantalizing letter he wrote to the press, where he threatened to continue his murders: "I am down on whores and shan't quit ripping them."

Another serial killer, Peter Kurten, terrified Dusseldorf, Germany, in the late 1920s. In his childhood he was fascinated by the torture of dogs; and from the age of thirteen through his later adolescence, he had sexual relations with pigs, goats, and sheep, finding particular excitement in stabbing sheep while having sex with them. He committed his first murder at the age of nine and spent the rest of his life in and out of prison for murdering or attempting to murder various women. Once released from
prison, he began a reign of terror, during which his compulsion to kill was so strong that he attacked not only women but men and children, choking them and cutting their throats. On one occasion, he killed a five-year-old and a fourteen-year-old girl on the same day. Other cases in the literature, reviewed by Schlesinger and Revitch (1997), have involved cannibalism, vampirism, necrophilia, and similar acts.

The incidence of serial murder is difficult to determine, since accurate statistics are not kept. Stote and Standing (1995) believe that serial homicide rates have increased, but only as much as have overall homicide rates in general. Holmes and DeBurger (1988) classify serial murder into four subtypes based on phenomenology of the act and motivation: 1) visionary—serial murder as a result of psychotic commands; 2) mission oriented—the goal to kill certain types of people, such as prostitutes; 3) hedonistic—murder as a result of thrill seeking; and 4) power control—gratification from complete control of the victim.

Revitch and Schlesinger (1981, 1989) believe that the vast majority of compulsive serial murderers have an underlying basis of sexual conflict. In such cases, there is a combination of hostility to women, preoccupation with maternal sexual conduct, overt or covert incestuous preoccupation, guilt over sex and rejection of sex as impure, and feelings of sexual inferiority. Some unhealthy emotional involvement with the mother has been found in many of these cases. The mother may be rejecting and punitive or, to the contrary, seductive, at times openly so. In some cases, the child may have experienced or witnessed the mother’s promiscuity. In adult serial murderers, hostility to women is the outstanding characteristic. Adolescent and preadolescent offenders are chiefly preoccupied with maternal sexual conduct and sexual morality (Revitch, 1965); some of these individuals even develop a fantasy of the mother’s purity. One fourteen-year-old boy who choked a ten-year-old girl and cut her neck expressed dislike for all girls but entertained a fantasy of his mother’s purity and insisted that his parents abstained from sexual relations.

The role of fantasy in serial homicide has been noted by Prentky et al. (1989) and by Myers et al. (1993). According to these authors, fantasy eventually leads to action; and then the action is strongly driven by the fantasy, which takes on more and more power. Hale (1994) has emphasized the role of humiliation and embarrassment as motivation for serial murder. In Hale’s view, the victim revives memories of someone who embarrassed and humiliated the offender earlier in life. The murderer then transfers feelings of humiliation into rage, in an attempt to remove the initial memory; but the memory is not expelled and the killings continue. Drukteinis (1992) explores the conversion of a childhood trauma into mastery by murder; in such cases, the perpetrator attempts to gain complete mastery and dominance by torturing and humiliating the victim.

According to Money (1990), serial sexual killing is not a result of psychogenesis, but a consequence of a neurobiological abnormality: “[t]he brain becomes pathologically activated to transmit messages of attack simultaneously with messages of sexual arousal and mating behavior” (p. 28). Many years earlier, MacLean (1962) spoke of the interconnection and proximity of the limbic structures connected with feeding and
aggression (amygdala) and the structures connected with sexual functions (septum and hippocampus). MacLean also pointed to the display of genitals in male squirrel monkeys during a fight, highlighting the interconnection between sex and aggression.

**NARCISSISM AND SERIAL HOMICIDE**

Kohut (1966, 1968) described rage and aggression in narcissistic psychopathology and its relationship to low self-esteem: "The most violent forms of narcissistic rage arise in those individuals for whom a sense of absolute control over an archaic environment is indispensable because the maintenance of self-esteem—and indeed of the self—depends on the unconditional availability of the approving mirroring function of an admiring self object or on the ever present opportunity for a merger with an idealized one" (Kohut, 1972, p. 386). Many other writers (Fox, 1974; Noshpitz, 1984; Hurlbert and Apt, 1991; Rosen, 1991; Schulte, Hall, and Crosby, 1994; Hockenberry, 1995) also have noted the relationship between severe forms of narcissism and severe aggression, but not necessarily murder.

The relationship between narcissism and murder in both the adult and the adolescent has been observed by several investigators. Miller and Looney (1974) postulate that an adolescent offenders recidivism can be predicted by the degree to which that offender has dehumanized the victim; the description of dehumanization, as evidenced in case studies, is replete with narcissistic psychopathology. Thus, the most pathologically narcissistic offender, with total and permanent dehumanization, is at highest risk for repetition. McCarthy (1978), in his comprehensive study of ten adolescent murderers, cites narcissism and narcissistic injury and insults as major ingredients fueling homicidal behavior: "Both sadistic fantasies and homicidal acts or explosively violent assaults can be understood as attempts at redress of a common narcissistic vulnerability" (p. 25). Marohn (1987), in his psychobiography of the notorious western folk hero John Wesley Hardin, also concludes that narcissism was a major factor in the multiple murders committed during Hardin's adolescence. Revitch and Schlesinger (1978) report a case of a sixteen-year-old serial murderer's description (obtained while under the influence of intravenously injected sodium amytal) of his sadistic fantasies, his feelings of power and control when the victims begged him not to hurt them; after describing these fantasies he yelled out "Super David, the ruler," indicating how he wished people would view him.

Stone (1989) surveyed celebrated murder cases, including serial murders, and concluded that "many of the perpetrators can, with a fair degree of certainty, be considered examples of malignant narcissism" (p. 643), and that those murderers who do not admit their crimes are on the most extreme end of malignant narcissism, far beyond the scope of treatment. In many of the cases that he studied, Stone found humiliation and narcissistic injury predating and directly contributing to the murder; many of these offenders had also been brutalized as children.

Focusing solely on serial murder, Ansevics and Doweiko (1991) reviewed reports on eleven cases in a search for common themes, characteristics, and developmental
patterns in the compulsive, repetitive murderer. They concluded that "the serial murderer reflects a variation of the borderline personality disorder and should be treated as such rather than as an antisocial personality disorder" (p. 115). A common variation of borderline psychopathology is narcissism, as manifested in self-glorifying fantasies motivated by a need to compensate for sexual inadequacies. Ten of the eleven murderers studied by Ansevics and Doweiko had experienced what amounts to severe narcissistic injury following rejection of a female in adulthood, to the extent that the subjects decompensated and developed rage directed against women.

Liebert (1985) uses narcissistic and borderline personality disorders in profiling serial murder cases to assist in investigation and apprehension. He believes that the narcissistic individual has "incorporated too much of the bad from the maternal relationship and can split this introjected badness from his own personality and perceive it as originating from the outside. . . . The individual no longer possesses the badness—it is the other person, the female victim, who has it. . . . He may either project his introjected dissociative badness onto his victim and justify his own violence or displace his violence toward his bad mother onto the victim and destroy the mother’s badness” (p. 192). Sexual and aggressive impulses become easily fused as a result of the underlying structural weakness of the narcissistic and borderline personality, and the murder thus becomes “a substitute for normal erotic pleasure” (p. 197). Regarding the fusion of sex and aggression, Freud (1905) noted that the sexual instinct is composed of different components, “some of which detach themselves to form perversions. Our clinical observation thus calls our attention to fusions, which have lost their expression in the uniform normal behavior” (p. 572). Thus, in serial homicide a fusion of sex and aggression is made easier by the weakened personality structure found in borderline and narcissistic cases.

In analyzing a spree serial murder, Pollack (1995) agrees with Abrahamsen (1973) that violence is used in such cases as a defense in the service of narcissism. The offender in this case manifested characteristics of “pathological grandiosity in response to rejection and humiliation” (p. 265), as well as the need for power and control described by Holmes and DeBurger (1988). Pollack concludes that the psychopathology of malignant narcissism—specifically, the erection of narcissistic defenses as a response to very destabilizing interpersonal relationships and life events—is a major consideration in understanding the serial murderer. Meloy (1988) believes that in particularly severe and malignant cases narcissism, sadism, and aggression are combined.

Hickey (1991) developed a trauma control model of serial murder and found that highly developed narcissistic features are present in cases of repetitive murder. Similarly, Lowenstein (1992) emphasizes pathological omnipotence as a central feature in the serial murderer. Finally, Gacono (1992) made a detailed Rorschach analysis of a sexual murderer and found borderline personality, sadism, and significant pathological narcissism as factors relevant to the homicide.

All the above-noted characteristics (see Table 1 for a summary) and theories are helpful in the phenomenological/psychodynamic search for understanding behavior as complex and multidetermined as serial murder. Different examiners stress different
TABLE 1
Narcissistic Characteristics in the Serial Murderer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liebert (1985)</td>
<td>easy fusion of sexual and aggressive impulses due to structural weakness of narcissistic personality disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone (1989)</td>
<td>coexistence of narcissistic and antisocial traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hickey (1991)</td>
<td>narcissistic features used to control trauma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ansevics and Doweiko (1991)</td>
<td>self-glorifying fantasies to compensate for sexual inadequacies; experiences of narcissistic injury and rejection from female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowenstein (1992)</td>
<td>pathological omnipotence and antisocial behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollock (1995)</td>
<td>pathological grandiosity in response to rejection and humiliation; narcissistic defenses in response to destabilizing life events</td>
</tr>
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Aspects of the same case—that is, various facets of behavior and various levels of consciousness—depending on their own perspective and orientation (Perr, 1975).

In the following case, the element of pathological narcissism is so striking that it clearly plays a major role in understanding this particular offender and the disorder of serial murder in general.

CASE REPORT

A thirty-year-old male (John) was convicted of the murder of a twenty-five-year-old woman and the subsequent murder of a twenty-six-year-old woman and her two young children, ages six and eight. Although not charged, he was also suspected of two later murders and apparently confessed (off the record) to his attorney, but refused to do so officially. At the time of the evaluation, the defendant was raising either a diminished capacity or an insanity defense.

John became a suspect in the initial murders because he was acquainted with both of the adult victims. He had had a sexual relationship with the first victim and knew the second victim because she was dating a friend of his. When initially questioned by the police, he denied guilt; but when he was interviewed a second time, he gave a full confession, which he later recanted in part. He told the police that he had shaved all his body hair and entered the home of both women without any clothing on, except for sneakers that he covered with socks. His motive here was not to leave any hair or fiber evidence that could be traced to him. He was also careful not to leave any fingerprints (using latex gloves). The defendant told the police that he had read books on criminology and criminal law in an attempt to become an expert on how to commit a murder.
without detection. Additionally, following the murder of the second victim, he poured alcohol into her vagina, in order to remove any traces of DNA, since he had had sex with her. He indicated that he came upon this idea after viewing the movie *Presumed Innocent*, where a similar method was presented.

It is extremely difficult to understand all the psychodynamics involved in these homicides, since John gave many different versions to many different individuals. With regard to the first victim, Laura, he stated that he visited her "just to have sex." Following sexual relations, Laura tried to convince him to stay with her all night, whereas he wanted to go home. She then threatened to tell his girlfriend about their sexual relationship and Laura tried to cut him with a knife. He retaliated by starting to choke her: "I took her upstairs; I don't know why. I was still choking her. I asked her why she wanted to do this to me and expose everything. I left her on the bed and I left and I went home." This is not exactly what the physical evidence showed: there was medical evidence of forcible sex, the victim had been hog-tied, and her head was smashed.

Six months after this homicide, the defendant killed the girlfriend of one of his friends. He gave a similar story, stating that he went over to visit her, had sex with her, and then got into an argument during which she too threatened to tell his girlfriend about their sexual encounter. Again, according to John, a fight ensued; he choked the victim, tied her up, and killed her. He then killed her two young children, who apparently saw John and knew him because he had been to their home on a number of occasions to visit their mother and her boyfriend, John’s friend. After killing these three individuals, the defendant went to a restaurant, ate dinner, bought beer, returned home, and slept well.

The DNA analysis came back; and since alcohol preserves—rather than destroys—semen, a perfect DNA match was made. The defendant then changed his story, stating that he knew alcohol preserves semen and actually wanted to get caught.

When asked why he had killed these people, John was unable to give a clear answer except to say that he was angry and felt that the women would expose their sexual relationship with him to others. When asked whether he got any type of powerful or sexually arousing feeling from the killings, he stated, "No, I am powerful in any way I need to be powerful. I get respect from everyone. I can conquer whatever I have to conquer; it is something I was born with. I do whatever it takes to overcome whoever it may be. When I tell you to do something, it’s not intimidation or fear; either you do it or deal with me.” When asked whether any feelings of inadequacy might underlie some of his behavior, he stated: “I have no fears or worries. People try to overcompensate when they fear something. I have no fear, none whatsoever.”

Psychological testing showed an individual of average intelligence with no significant organicity. Diagnostically, he falls within the spectrum of the severe personality disorders with strong narcissistic and less pronounced antisocial traits. There were several primitive and regressive Rorschach perceptions, such as “blood blotted and smudged on a piece of paper, running down a piece of paper”; “Drops of blood”; and “Two boar hogs; their heads have been cut off, just their heads. Their heads have been severed. They are posted on a wall like a trophy.” These responses are consistent with
severe characterological disturbance falling within the borderline spectrum, also typi-
cal of individuals with malignant narcissism, and there is a tremendous aggressive
component as well.

Most of John’s explanations of his perceptions on the Rorschach were logical, and
his perceptions bore a reasonably adequate relationship to the stimulus material on
which they were based. The Rorschach also revealed a marked lack of empathic
capacity, as evidenced by his providing only one human (movement) perception—a
trait consistent with both narcissistic and antisocial features. His perception of “ovaries
of a woman,” given to the traditionally considered male card, suggested conflict with
his male self-image. His response on the MMPI showed a strong need to appear
without any socially undesirable characteristics, to the extent that he might even lie to
achieve this impression.

TAT stories were replete with themes of narcissism and control: “He wants to be
great at it; he wants to become a world-renowned violinist.” Several stories also
suggested severe conflict and anger toward women and a generalized negative view of
females: “His wife had an affair; it’s her nature. She’s been doing it all along. It makes
him angry. He dies of syphilis; she gets it from having so many affairs; she is a whore;
she was born that way.” “He killed his wife because she was unfaithful; he strangled
her. She had an affair and flaunted it, and he couldn’t take it anymore. She made him
into an animal because of her actions. Once a woman finds out that you love her, she
changes and starts doing what she wants to do because she figures no matter what, you
will be there; you will follow her; she figures she’s got you; you are not going
anywhere, so why not have an affair.”

The defendant was unemployed during the time period when the six murders oc-
curred. He was previously in the Army but was expelled for attempting to steal and
manipulate money out of subordinates. His early life is difficult to assess. He tried to
present himself as coming from a typical middle-class background with indulgent
parents and siblings; and he had, in fact, achieved some success as a high school
athlete and was apparently well regarded in his adolescent years as a result. But his
statements could not be confirmed or invalidated by interviews with family members,
since they has severed all ties with him after learning the details of the various homi-
cides.

DISCUSSION

Pathological narcissism clearly played a major role in this case. John supplied a
motive for his homicides by trying to give the impression that the women he murdered
wanted him sexually and would expose their sexual relationship to his girlfriend. He
displayed no emotion at all following the murders; in fact, after murdering the second
victim and her two children, he went to a restaurant, had dinner, slept well, and
showed no discernible remorse or anxiety. Narcissism poured out of John in various
test findings, particularly TAT stories with themes of omnipotence and control. He
also described himself as being powerful in all ways and having no fear at all.

John probably felt some degree of humiliation and embarrassment after being ex-
peled from the military, where he had served as a drill sergeant who exerted excessive control over his men, often resorting to acts of sadism and manipulation. He had been unemployed for a considerable period of time when the murders began—another possible source of humiliation. Hale (1994) has noted that a sense of humiliation can serve as a trigger for serial murder. Drukteinis (1992) also stresses the role of humiliation and the serial murderer’s need to gain complete dominance over his victims. In addition, John had enormous hostility toward women—a characteristic noted by Revitch and Schlesinger (1989) as a major factor in adult sex murderers. Holmes and DeBurger’s (1988) power-control type of serial murder is evident in this case, and is probably the closest of these authors’ subtypes associated with narcissism. Fantasy also must have been involved in this case, since John planned the various homicides with extraordinary detail, even shaving his body and entering the homes without clothes on. Whether he had an unhealthy emotional relationship with his mother is impossible to determine, but the fact that he described his family in such a rosy way suggests the opposite.

No matter what theoretical orientation one adopts, the role of narcissism seems to be fundamental in understanding the personality makeup of this serial murderer, with his overwhelming need to present himself as strong, powerful, and always in control. Liebert (1985) has noted the poor level of personality integration found in narcissistic cases, predisposing such offenders to an intrusion into consciousness of primitive sexual/aggressive impulses. A better-integrated personality with similar traits and dynamics might have stronger controls and thus would display no acting-out behavior. Further clinical study is needed in order to understand why individuals with characteristics and experiences similar to those of the serial murderer do not commit serial murder. Such studies could contribute substantially to our understanding of serial murderers and their clinical treatment.

NOTE

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