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The role of schizoid personality, peritraumatic dissociation and behavioral activation system in a case of parricide

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to emphasize several important details through a case study of parricide: a) the schizoid personality structure as a potential basis for brutal offenses, b) the role of dissociation during the commitment of crime; and c) the contribution of non-standard psychological assessment instruments and Gray's reinforcement sensitivity theory in illuminating the killer's personality and motivation for the offense. A parricide case was analyzed through psychiatric examination, standard clinical psychological assessment, and Behavioral Inhibition and Activation Scales based on Gray's theory. It was determined that the perpetrator suffered from schizoid personality disorder and that there were visible signs of peritraumatic dissociation at the moment he committed the offense. It was concluded that: a) a schizoid personality sometimes become a perpetrator of a brutal offense in situations where he feels he is in danger of punishment, and his personal space is being threatened, b) dissociation, activated by murder itself, can help the murderer to protect himself from a traumatic situation which overcomes his resources, and c) Gray's theory can serve as a framework for understanding individual cases as this one.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Mental disorders and violence

Many of the perpetrators of serious criminal offenses are psychologically disturbed. For example, in 2005 more than half of the prisoners in U.S. jails had mental health problems (Glaze & James, 2006). In a meta-analysis which reviewed 62 surveys from 12 countries, Fazel and Danesh (2002) concluded that several million prisoners worldwide suffer from various mental disorders: 3.7% of men were psychotic, 10%

Abbreviations: SPD, schizoid personality disorder; BIS, Behavioral Inhibition System; BAS, Behavioral Activation System; FFS, Flight/Fight System.

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were diagnosed with major depression and 65% suffered from some form of personality disorder, usually antisocial (47%). Similar percentages were also found in women. The prevalence rate of psychosis in female inmates was 4%, depression was 12%, and personality disorders were 42%, of which 21% were antisocial (Fazel & Danesh, 2002). Also common among prisoners were cases of organic brain syndrome, anxiety, and psychosexual disorders, as well as drug and alcohol abuses (Loza & Hanna, 2006). These statistics testify not only to the number of undiagnosed disorders among the perpetrators of criminal acts, but also to the pathogenic effects of the prison environment and lack of psychiatric care for prisoners.

On the other hand, the risk that a mentally disturbed person will commit a serious criminal offense is often exaggerated in the media, whereas in the scientific literature, there is still a debate about whether, and to what extent, a mentally ill is dangerous. The results were obtained via Swedish registers for hospital admissions and criminal convictions by Fazel and Grann (2006) who suggest that one out of 20 violent crimes are committed by patients with a severe mental illness.

Increased violence among those with personality disorders is usually explained by poor impulse control and regulation of affects, and the frequent presence of a paranoid cognitive style or narcissistic injuries (Esbec & Echeburúa, 2010). These features are mostly seen in Clusters A and B of personality disorders, and are commonly found among those who have been labeled as “dangerous and severe personality disorders,” thus indicating their pronounced preference for criminal acts (Gledhill, 2000).

1.2. Schizoid personality disorder and violence

Although schizoid personality disorder (SPD) within the scope of Cluster A can be seen as having an increased risk of committing serious crimes, very little research has been conducted on this topic. Some authors have described a person with SPD as prone to rare but extremely aggressive attacks if their personal space is compromised or if they are disturbed (Esbec & Echeburúa, 2010).

The most prominent characteristics of this personality disorder are at an interpersonal level and are characterized by social withdrawal, social isolation and avoidance of intimacy (APA, 2000). Thus, a spectrum of negative emotions towards others is expected (e.g., hostility, anger, vindictiveness). Social alienation creates a sense of rejection that can precipitate violence (Esbec & Echeburúa, 2010). Affective characteristics, such as affective rigidity and anhedonia, make them unable to empathize with others' suffering (APA, 2000), which might also be a fertile ground for violent offenses. Occasional psychotic decompensation may also lead to an incomprehensible act of extreme violence.

Based on a case of murder and suicide of an individual primarily diagnosed with SPD, Loza and Hanna (2006) suggested a link between this disorder and violence, and proposed that SPD traits could possibly be added to other risk factors for violent behavior. An additional argument in favor of their thesis is a study by Stone (2005) which found that 47% of serial killers meet the criteria for SPD.

1.3. Dissociation and violence

According to the DSM-IV, dissociation is the “disruption of the functions of conscious, memory, identity or perception of the environment, which are otherwise usually integrated” (APA, 2000, p. 456). Dissociative disorders and dissociative states, similarly to SPD, are phenomena whose connection to violence has been less frequently studied. Lack of interest in this topic is certainly undeserved if one takes into consideration the frequency with which pathological levels of dissociation can be observed among perpetrators of criminal acts. Based on a review of 12 epidemiological studies that dealt with the relationship between dissociation and crime, Holmes et al. (2004) found prevalence rates of pathological dissociation (defined by high scores on a scale or by

meeting the criteria for dissociative disorders) between 9.5% and 49% and concluded that, on average, a quarter of prisoners had, or were currently suffering from, dissociative symptoms.

Dissociation can play different roles in the development and performance of violence. For example, it can be a mediator between initial domestic violence and the rebounded violence by the victim—“cycle of violence” (Haapasalo & Pokela, 1999, pp. 116). Second, people with dissociative disorders may be prone to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and during flashbacks can commit violent acts because they believe that they are again in a dangerous situation. Next, the perpetrators of violent acts, who do not meet the criteria for any dissociative disorder, may temporarily be in a dissociative state at the time of committing the violent offenses (e.g., transitory depersonalization). Finally, dissociative amnesia of the criminal act is the most common phenomenon associated with crime. Upon reviewing 10 studies dealing with this subject, Moskowitz (2004) concluded that even one third of prisoners who committed homicide had amnesia for the actual crime.

1.4. Gray's reinforcement sensitivity theory of personality

In recent decades, a handful of biological models have risen to prominence. Jeffrey Gray is the creator of one of the most famous and widely accepted theories and has inspired other biologically orientated authors such as Cloninger and Depue (Cloninger, 1987; Depue & Iacono, 1989). Gray's reinforcement sensitivity theory originally assumed three basic emotional systems: Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS), Behavioral Activation System (BAS), and the Flight/Fight System (FFS). The first system is sensitive to conditional aversive stimuli, the second to conditional appetitive stimuli, and the third to unconditional aversive stimuli. Consequently, BIS is a system that mediates the activation of fear and anxiety. It is the basis of negative emotions and behavioral inhibition and corresponds to the dimension of anxiety. BAS is a biological mechanism responsible for the control of appetitive motivation and plays a role in the creation of positive emotions and, serves as a basis for trait impulsivity. FFS is the mediator of rage and panic and is the basis of a trait similar to psychoticism as defined by Eysenck (1967). Gray's theory was revised in 2000 (Gray & McNaughton, 2000), and the definition of three systems was slightly modified in terms of the stimuli that activate them, as well as consequent emotions, behaviors and characteristics (all changes and supporting research of the theory can be found in Corr, 2008).

In order to operationalize two basic motivational systems of Gray's original theory, Carver and White (1994) developed the Behavioral Inhibition System and Behavioral Activation System Questionnaire (BIS/BAS scale) with three BAS subscales. Although this instrument was created in order to operationalize Gray's constructs and to provide tests of the hypotheses that followed from Gray's theory, in this study it has been administered as an additional instrument in the individual clinical forensic examination in order to supplement the information about the offender and to be verified in convergence with the classical clinical battery of tests.

2. Method

Psychiatric and psychological evaluations were performed by order of the court, and offender accepted the extended assessment procedure for forensic and scientific purposes. He was interviewed five times with an average duration of 5 to 6 h by the team of experts (two psychiatrists and a psychologist).

One of authors (GMP) conducted the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV Axis I disorders (First, Spitzer, Gibbon, & Williams, 1997) and Axis II disorders (First, Spitzer, Gibbon, Williams, & Benjamin, 1997). All researchers were authorized to access the official data on the murder.

Psychological testing was performed with a standard battery of clinical tests: an IQ test based on Wechsler's principles (VITI; Berger, Marković, & Mitić, 1991), a personality inventory similar to the MMPI (MMPI-202; Biro, 1995), and the Rorschach Inkblot Test (Exner, 2002). Additionally, Serbian translations of The Behavioral Inhibition System and Behavioral Activation System Questionnaire (BIS/BAS scales; Carver & White, 1994) were administered. It is a questionnaire measuring Gray's BIS and BAS constructs. It consists of statements followed by four-point Likert scales ranging from very true to very false. The BIS/BAS has three BAS and one BIS subscale. The BAS-Drive subscale refers to the persistence in striving for desired goals. Items in the Fun-Seeking subscale measure a need for new experiences and for an immediate and automatic approach to the potentially rewarding events. The third aspect of the BAS system, Reward responsiveness, refers to the sensitivity and positive reaction to the occurrence or anticipation of a reward. The authors noted that three BAS subscales defined different qualities of BAS sensitivity that could be found in relevant literature (Carver & White, 1994).

3. Results

3.1. Biographical data on the offender

At the time of committing the offense the offender was 27 years of age. He was born and grew up in a city. After high school, he began a study program at a university, chosen by his parents, even though he actually wanted to go into the same field as his father.

He was unsuccessful at the university and only managed to pass a total of two exams during the first year. For the next seven years, he repeatedly enrolled in first year courses. At some point during this period, the offender reported his student record book missing, and opened a second, which he filled with forged grades, and displayed it continuously to his parents until he was to finish his degree and complete his thesis.

The offender's parents played a crucial role in his social life. They limited and selected his friends, completely controlled his professional direction, forbade him from engaging in the social activities typical of his peers, and decided on the suitability of the people and places to be visited, often finding most of them to be unsuitable. Therefore, he lived a very solitary life, without close emotional relationships, friends, or sexual partners. Up until the time he committed the offense, the offender had never displayed any kind of antisocial behavior or any striking signs of mental disorder.

He grew up as the only child of a father with a university degree, and a mother with a secondary school diploma. The family was extremely closed and maintained no contact with relatives or friends. The offender described his parents as hyper-controlling, hyper-intrusive and working together to plan his life activities. The father demonstrated verbal and occasionally physical aggressions toward the offender, while his mother tacitly supported his father's behavior. However, the offender stated that his parents did not agree even between themselves and disputes often occurred in the home. There were no serious illnesses or psychiatric disorders in the family although the father was prone to periodic alcohol abuse.

3.2. Crime data

The offender committed the murder of his parents two days before he claimed he would be defending his thesis, and before the celebration of this occasion which his father had scheduled at his workplace. The offender indicated to his parents that he had passed all of his exams and completed his thesis. On the day of the murder the offender behaved inconspicuously. He spent the day playing on the computer, and at night he went out downtown. Upon his return to the apartment, around 11 pm, he found his mother watching a movie on television. At that moment a murder scene was playing on

the screen. The offender sat down next to his mother and watched the movie with her. At one point, he saw a shadow, about which he commented: "I don't know whether that shadow came out of me, or if it was already there...the shadow went to the window and took a wrench from the balcony ledge...I saw my mother receiving blows to her head. I didn't hear anything, as if I only had the sense of sight. My mother was making a painful grimace...I don't know if there was any blood. My mother fell...then the shadow moved to the hallway, and I was still sitting on the couch, but I could see my father receiving blows to the head. He fell. I didn't hear if my father said anything. Then the shadow vanished."

The offender further stated that he had gone into another room and described his condition in the following words: "I don't know for how long I sat there, but I know that I wasn't blinking...it was daylight when I came to. I saw the bodies and mechanically I started to cut...it all seemed unreal, I have a knife in my hand...like watching hands cutting...it seemed unreal, as if there were two dead human beings and someone was cutting them up. It was as if I had been thrown into some situation, like I wasn't doing it...it was as if I was being guided." During examination by court-appointed experts, the offender described how he had dismembered his parents' bodies, and his further "packing" them in plastic bags which he scattered among various dumpsters throughout the city.

The day after the murder he reported the disappearance of his parents to the police, prompted by inquiries from his father's colleagues. During the psychiatric interview, no psychotic manifestations were observed; the offender was cooperative, especially during repeated interviews. Flat affect and lack of emotional responding were notable regardless of the topic of conversation, during which his thought process was associated and he did not produce psychotic content. In repeated conversations, there was a noticeable change in affective modulation; he gradually started to express his emotions related to traumatic family experiences (i.e. conflicts with his parents). However, at all times the complete absence of affective responding for the crime persisted, which the offender continued to describe in an impersonal manner, as if he was only an observer and not the actor ("my mother receives blows... my father receives blows ...").

Based on the characteristics of the offender's social life (withdrawal, superficial and short-term social relationships, lack of intimate relationships with others), and especially on the basis of his affective properties (cold and without modulation), and the impression that there was nothing he truly cared about and would really enjoy, we concluded that the respondent met the DSM-IV criteria for schizoid personality disorder (APA, 2000).

3.3. Psychological testing

A standard clinical battery revealed that the offender's intellectual functioning was in the average range and without any influence of anxiety on cognitive functioning. On the basis of personality tests it was concluded that offender had indicators of a schizoid personality organization (asocial, introverted, affectively insensitive) without signs of psychotic decompensation.

Fig. 1 shows the results of the offender on the BIS/BAS scale in comparison to the reference group (477 participants of both genders in the general population aged 17–76 years; the details of the normative group can be seen in Smederevac & Mitrović, 2005).

As can be seen in Fig. 1, only the result of the BIS subscale is at the average level, while the results of all the three BAS dimensions are significantly below the general population average by more than one standard deviation (SD). The sub-dimension of sensitivity to reward (BAS-reward) was the lowest (nearly 3.5 SD below average), a slightly higher result was obtained on the BAS-Drive (–2.3 SD), and the result on the Fun-Seeking subscale was nearest to the average, although still below it by 1.3 SD.

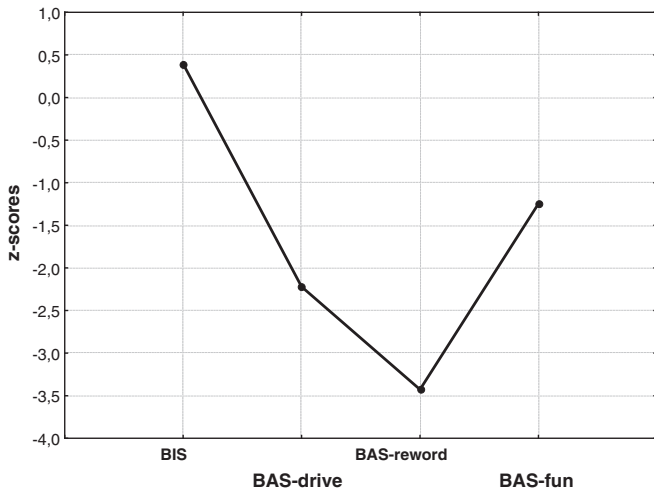


Fig. 1. The offender's results on the BIS/BAS scale relative to a normative group.

4. Discussion

The goal of this paper is to indicate several important details through a parricide case study. First, as mentioned in the introduction, schizoid personality and people with SPD are not frequently perpetrators of serious crimes. Some authors (e.g., *Esbec & Echeburúa, 2010*) argue that, although rarely, in some situations schizoid personalities and people with SPD can become brutal murderers, a category into which the offense described here, certainly falls. How did a schizoid personality contribute to this case of parricide? How can the offender's constant deceit about his studies be understood?

The offender's lack of motivation towards his education (poor response to reward could have had an impact), which he did not choose himself, may have contributed to his failure at the university. Lying about attendance and positive evaluations have been, possibly, a way to postpone aggressive outbursts by the offender's intrusive parents, who, even without such strong provocation, as his failure at the university was, continuously punished him mostly with disturbance of his peace and limitation of his freedom. Hence, the act of parricide can be understood as a consequence of: a) a series of negative emotions towards his parents resulting from continuous and accumulated violations of his privacy, sense of peace, and freedom, and b) the anticipation of an unprecedented threat of aggression and sanctions that would follow the disclosure of his fraud.

A study on parricide offenders in Finland, which compared matricidal and patricidal killers, found an interesting difference between the two groups of offenders. While the murderers of mothers are more often psychotic patients, murderers of fathers often commit crimes after prolonged conflict (*Liettu, Säävälä, Hakko, Räsänen, & Joukamaa, 2009*). While in our case the offender's motivation for the offense more closely resembles those who commit patricide, the opinion of the examiner was that, during the commission of the offense, he saw his parents as people who, in their attitude towards him, were loyal to each other, and he clearly anticipated the aggression of both—actively from his father, and passively from his mother which manifested itself through her support of his father.

The offender's description of the crime is a clear example of dissociation during the offense and removal (dismemberment) of the corpses. His description indicates the presence of an "out of body experience"—he saw himself as a shadow and watched his parents as they were struck. At no time did he use first person, or speak of himself as the offender of the event.

This "detachment" experience is an essential part of the definition of depersonalization according to DSM-IV: "...feeling detached from, and as if one is an outside observer of, one's mental processes or

body (e.g., feeling like one is in a dream)" (*APA, 2000, p. 490*). Also, this experience is found in one third of people who have experienced trauma. Moreover, depersonalization can occur as a result of trauma caused by one's own violence, and can be considered peritraumatic dissociation (*Moskowitz, 2004*). In this instance, dissociation occurs as a protective mechanism similar to the one seen in Acute Stress Disorder. Some authors have found the phenomenon of depersonalization during acts of violence committed by psychopaths while in the process of carrying out their crimes (*Meloy, 1988*). Cuartas reported the same observation in men during violence against their partners (as cited in *Moskowitz, 2004*). *Simoneti, Scott, and Murphy (2000)* stated that these abusive partners often described their offense as they "had seen themselves" while committing the act of violence. It was determined that the level of depersonalization during the violent act was related to the intensity of the violence (*Simoneti et al., 2000*).

With regard to the extreme cruelty of the act, the manner of execution, and disposal of the corpses in the offense described here, and given the nature of the offender's relationship with the victims, peritraumatic dissociation due to the trauma of the act itself would be a more likely explanation of the offender's impersonal description of the offense. This is more probable than the explanation that it was an attempt to reduce his responsibility through denying control over his behavior. However, avoiding responsibility or feigned disassociation cannot be excluded because there is no amnesia for the whole event, which would be expected in a case of dissociation.

Another goal of this study was to demonstrate the applicability and usefulness of non-standard testing and theory-driven psychological instruments, such as the BIS/BAS scales, in an individual clinical/forensic exploration. By using this instrument, we found that the offender had very low scores on all three BAS subscales, and the score on the BIS scale was at the average level of the general population. These results would seem to suggest that the offender was characterized by reduced activity of the Behavioral Activation System, which is responsible for responding to reward. The sub-dimension specifically related to sensitivity to reward (BAS-reward), in this case, was the lowest (as much as 3.5 SD below average). Not responding to rewards demonstrates emotional coldness, insensitivity, and independence of all positive and social stimuli of approval. This insensitivity results in a lack of motivation for starting and maintaining activities, providing an image of passivity and reticence. The connection between low sensitivity to reward and schizoid personality disorder has been theoretically assumed and empirically confirmed in studies that rely on Gray's theory. Thus, in research by *Svrakic and his colleagues*, among seven Cloninger's personality dimensions, the largest correlation with schizoid personality disorder was that of Reward Dependence ($-.46$), which should rely on the BAS system (*Svrakic et al., 2002*). This insensitivity to positive reinforcement is considered to be biologically determined (*Corr, 2008; Svrakic et al., 2002*), however in the case of this offender, it may also reflect the consequences of permanent lack of reward as he was growing up.

In what way could the offender's insensitivity to reward be linked to the offense he committed? Having difficulties in activation of the BAS system is certainly one of the factors of a solitary, asocial lifestyle with superficial relations to those who should be closest, and even more so with the rest of society, since the offender had no need for social stimulation as a form of positive reinforcement. Not responding to rewards is also the basis of a poorly adopted system of social norms, as they develop, among other, through reinforcement with positive social messages. Poorly adopted moral norms probably contributed to the offender's low ability to distinguish between good and evil. However, no less important to an understanding of the crime is that insensitivity to reward was the basis of anhedonia, putting the offender in a desperate position in which he had nothing to lose (because nothing represents a reinforcement), where his crime did not essentially change his life situation, but brought him what he most wanted—to be left alone.

Keeping in mind that the offender achieved an average score on the BIS, we can assume that his capacity to respond to signals for punishment are preserved, which is consistent with the fact that the act of murder followed the anticipation of the discovery of several years of “deceit”, that he had constructed in regard to his studying, as well as the expectation of punishment. On the other hand, an average (but not higher) score on the BIS scale indicates that the respondent was not highly sensitive to signals of punishment which, together with reduced scores on the BAS scale, indicates lower emotional reactivity to both kinds of reinforcement, that may be the result of many years of efforts to find an appropriate way to deal with the all too frequent negative feedback and absence of positive reinforcement.

Finally, as far as the question of offender's mental state *tempore criminis* is concerned, the team of experts (two psychiatrists and psychologist) estimated that his mental competence was significantly reduced, but not to the degree of insanity. Consequently, the offender did not receive medical safety measures, but rather corrective measures (i.e., a prison sentence).

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