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A Psychiatric Study of a Violent Mass Murderer

A single homicide is such a commonplace occurrence today that it hardly merits attention from the hardened eyes of the public, but periodically the world still gets shaken by gruesome mass murders. There are few psychiatric studies available dealing with the subject of violent mass murder. The purpose of this paper is to study one man named Bill, who on 28 September 1964, using a heavy double bladed axe, struck and killed his wife and five step-children in less than 10 minutes. A sixth child was killed sometime later with a shotgun.

Methodology

The data upon which we based our conclusions were obtained in several ways. The direct interviewing was done in concert. These interviews took place over a span of four years and totalled 70 hours. Other data studied were obtained from the many letters written to us by the defendant concerning his dreams and memories that he thought would be of interest to us. We examined his school records, police records, and hospital records. In addition, we interviewed his mother, his attorneys, and the custodial personnel.

Sequence of Events

On Wednesday, four days prior to the murders, Bill lost his job. His pregnant wife Betty threw him out of the house because of it. He went to stay with his mother but felt lost and lonely for his family.

On Sunday while visiting his family he became convinced that reconciliation was not possible. Later that evening he returned to the house but Betty refused to talk about it and told him that he could sleep in their bedroom and she would sleep on the couch in the living room. He lay there unable to sleep, with a single thought on his mind, "I got to keep my family together."

At this point he arose and walked into the living room where Betty slept with her back turned to him and the blanket pulled over her head. He grabbed the double-bladed axe and struck her on the head at least twice with such force that he knocked her off the couch onto the floor. He characterized his state of mind for the next few minutes as being without any feeling or thought, yet recalls the event as being more real than any of the events that followed.

Next he woke up Judy, his 16-year-old daughter, and told her that her mother wanted to see her. He stood by the door and as she hurried by he struck her on the back of the head with the axe. Quickly, he killed 10-year-old Paula, 14-year-old Dorie and 17-year-old

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Ben. Wally, the 9 year old, awoke and ran out of the room, Bill running after him, hitting him on the head with the axe.

It took him several hours before he could decide to kill his 4-year-old daughter Suzie. She awakened at some point and he talked to her about Dorie having a headache and then he waited until she was asleep, put the blanket over the barrel of a shotgun and shot her in the head. Following Suzie's death, Bill was no longer aware of the passage of time, nor was he able to reconstruct the details of his acts, including his suicidal behavior. He went into the nearby town where he purchased some whiskey and sleeping pills and took a cab home.

While drinking he recalled that Betty accused him of sexually molesting the older girls, Judy and Dorie, but claimed that he had not done so. He said to himself, "If I have the name, I might as well have the game." So he tore off Judy's pants, propped her buttocks up on a pillow, played with her genitals, wanted to have intercourse, but was unable to have an erection.

Later he scribbled notes saying "I am sorry," which he pinned on the bodies of the dead children. Then he swallowed the sleeping pills, went outside, cut the gas line with the axe, and put one end of the line through the bathroom window. He turned on the gas, then returned to the house, draped the windows with bed sheets and filled the bathtub with water. Clutching Suzie to his breast, he climbed into the tub with the idea that the gas, whiskey, and pills would make him fall asleep and he would drown.

The suicidal attempt failed, and upon awakening he experienced an emotion for the first time; namely, he became frightened, saying to himself, "If I could only lay down and die." He searched for the guns but only found the shells. At this point his suicidal behavior became more bizarre and he finally fell asleep.

Finally, on Tuesday morning he was driven out of the house by the odor of decomposing bodies. He walked onto the nearby highway, stopped a truck driver and told him: "I just killed my family, call the police." He sat outside of the house and waited for the police to arrive.

Family History

Bill was born in 1934, the only child of a turbulent marriage of two people who indulged themselves in sex, violence, and the excessive use of alcohol.

Bill's mother was an untutored woman, full of contradictions, negligent of her son's basic needs, yet at the same time loyal to him. She was the mother who, according to Bill, on the one hand babied him and made him dependent on her, and on the other hand, beat him over the head and shoulders whenever she was angry with him. At times she treated him more like a companion than a son. He could turn to her whenever she was not intoxicated and not involved in sexual pursuits with other men. How Bill felt towards her and what she was like in his eyes can best be described by quoting an excerpt from one of his letters to us:

I am convinced that I hated her as a child for her drinking and her immoral ways, but I also have to admit that I did love her. She repulsed me with her stale beer breath and the embarrassment of having to hold her up on the way home. The fear of running dark streets at night looking into bars for her and then the fear of bringing her back home where my dad might beat her up. I loved her a lot because we were driven together through a common denominator, i.e., fear of my father who might turn upon either one of us. I played with her sexually while she was asleep or pretended to be and I enjoyed vicariously her sex acts with my father and others which I have witnessed myself.

His mother behaved bizarrely when intoxicated. On one occasion, she attempted suicide by throwing herself in front of a large truck. On another occasion, she ran nude out into the street. She also became involved in unusual auto accidents. In one of these she and her young son were arrested and put in jail. When she was angry with Bill, she would strike him on the back of the head as he was running away from her. On several occasions, she literally abandoned him; once in a bus depot and once in a train station after they had visited her relatives, because she was annoyed by his bad behavior in front of them. On both of these occasions, it was Bill's father who rescued him.

Bill's father, because of his passivity coupled with chronic alcoholism, was unable to achieve any lasting success in his profession. Although frequently violent towards his wife because of her infidelities, only on one occasion did he turn on Bill. When Bill was 4 years old his father beat him so severely that he almost died. From that time on Bill's father never laid hands on him.

In 1958 Bill's father committed suicide by shooting himself in the head after finding out that his divorce had become final and approximately ten days after he had made homosexual advances toward his son while under the influence of alcohol. Bill was asked to identify his father's body in the City Morgue.

Past Personal History

Bill's personal history suggests that he managed to function well in areas where there was a total noninvolvement of his parents. With his IQ of 135 he did well in school and extramural activities. People felt sympathy for him because of the kind of parents he had.

In 1956, he was honorably discharged after four years enlistment in the Navy, having attained a rank of 3rd class technician. He worked in a factory for two years as a parts inspector. In 1958, he met and married Betty who was ten years his senior and who had five children by her previous marriage. Coincidental with his marriage, his work record began to deteriorate and no longer was he able to hold a job for a period of more than six months.

Psychosexual Development

From the earliest years of his life he slept with mother whenever she was not involved with his father or other men and when she was not angry with him; otherwise he slept on the couch not far from the open bedroom.

Innumerable times he observed sexual intercourse among adults. Almost always there was a nightmare of arguments and physical violence. On many occasions, when his father was absent, he fondled his mother's genitals when she was drunk or pretending that she was asleep. Before he reached the age of puberty he was seduced into sexual activity by other adults.

He masturbated from an early age, the activity for which he was punished a great deal by both of his parents. At the age of ten his mother caught him masturbating and beat him until he was exhausted, then gave him a "silent treatment" and refused to cook for him for about a week. She was mostly afraid that Bill's intellect would be impaired by his continued masturbation. At least on one occasion while his parents were having sexual intercourse, he masturbated. His father saw it and threatened him, saying that he would make him wear boxing gloves to bed in order to keep his hands off his penis.

His first sexual intercourse took place when he was 14 years old and the girl was 16. He continued to date her for sexual purposes for about two years after that. The girls he chose, dated, and had sexual relations with were always older than he by as much as ten years. Frequently, they were married, occasionally divorced, and seldom single. Although

women found him to be a good sexual partner, Bill always felt that his penis was inadequate in size. He dates this feeling of inadequacy back to having overheard his mother brag to a friend about his father's large penis.

Study of Violence

Considerations of his recollections of dreams, fantasies, memories, and actual experiences dealing with violence and misdirected aggression, may contribute to a better understanding of the brutal nature of the murders. When he was 10 years old, Bill heard his mother screaming, ran into the house and found his father breaking his mother's toes one by one. He grabbed a croquet mallet and hit his father on the head with it, "splitting it wide open." Bleeding, the father ran outside. The police came and led the father away. Bill believed he had killed his father and he was sure he would have to go to prison for it. The bleeding head was the subject of recurrent nightmares.

When he was 17 years old, while his parents were drinking in the kitchen, his father threatened his mother with a beer bottle. Bill became enraged, pushed his father, knocking him over. In the process of falling, the father hit his head on an end table causing him to bleed. Bill grabbed his mother and ran out of the house.

Two incidents occurred when Bill was in the Navy. On one occasion a girl came to visit him. He thought she was divorced and began living with her. Her husband discovered her whereabouts and complained to Bill's commanding officer who ordered Bill to send her back home. He did so but got drunk and went A.W.O.L. He was caught and restricted to the base for a week. His anger became an impotent rage whereupon he got hold of some carbon tetrachloride and drank it with the intent of committing suicide.

The second incident took place while he was talking to some men and women in a bar. When one of the men said to him, "All sailors suck dicks," Bill became enraged, walked out of the bar and slugged the surprised bartender in the bar next door, who happened to be a son of the local deputy sheriff.

Following his marriage there were several minor incidents of violence directed towards Betty and her oldest daughter Judy. The most significant one occurred in 1961, when he sexually molested Judy at the time of his wife's first pregnancy by him. Betty found out about it and ordered him out of the house. He was out of work at that time and contemplated and acted out a rather unrealistic scheme to reconcile with Betty by means of kidnapping his friend's wife in order to be put in prison so that Betty could get social welfare aid. He went to his friend's house and attempted to abduct his wife. She screamed, he slapped her, and cut her with a knife.

This attempt was so bizarre that he was committed to the state hospital for seven months, where he was diagnosed as being a sociopath with alcoholic addiction. The next act of violence was the mass murder of his entire family.

After his arrest, while he was confined to the county jail and awaiting the outcome of the court hearing of his competency to stand trial, he became angry at his attorney and attempted suicide by cutting his wrists. He was found unable to stand trial and was transferred to the state hospital for the criminally insane. Three years later he was found to be competent to stand trial and was convicted of first degree murder of his stepdaughter Judy and confined to the state penitentiary for life, in isolation and at hard labor.

Discussion

There are relatively few well documented psychiatric studies of murderers, especially the ones who commit mass murders. This case concerns a man who was an only child, emotionally deprived, sexually molested, and brutally beaten, who eventually turned his immense fury and rage onto his family and destroyed them all in the name of reuniting with them.

Anamnestic material that he relates and deals with has as its central theme the oedipal conflict which is not only fantasized but actually acted out in his intimacies with his mother and in his physical fights with his father in an attempt to rescue his mother. His fantasized wishes for his father's death were realized when the father committed suicide following final separation from his wife.

After his father's death, Bill's recurrent nightmares of his bloodied head were a clear indication of Bill's neurotic guilt and fear of retaliation. After his marriage to an older woman with five children, his oedipal conflicts were freshly re-experienced.

He unconsciously defended against this set of conflicts and concomitant guilt feelings by means of identification with his father. His work record deteriorated, he drank excessively, and developed a singular attachment to his wife Betty. All this points to how strong his regressive identification with his father became.

This identification became a dangerous one when his wife first became pregnant by him and rejected him. The danger was two-fold: if he were to be rejected by a woman he loved just as his father was he would be following his father's footsteps into a grave via suicide. Secondly, staying with the pregnant woman would expose him to the child's coming between them just as Bill did between his parents.

He solved the conflicts related to the first pregnancy in a psychotic fashion. He displaced his murderous rage upon an innocent woman by attacking her with a knife. The action insured his removal from the home and resulted in incarceration in a state hospital. It is well to recall that fantasies and dreams of imprisonment are defensive maneuvers guarding one against the fear of loss of control over one's destructive impulses and their attendant punishment.

The second pregnancy reawakened dangers of identification with his father. This time Betty insisted that their separation be final just as Bill's mother did when she refused to reconcile with his father. Father's solution to the loss of his wife was suicide. Bill's solution was murder.

At this point Bill abandoned crucial identification with his passive father and turned into a raging maniac who killed his family, which was his only alternative. His destruction of his wife Betty precluded her from abandoning him, as his mother had abandoned Bill and his father.

On the conscious, secondary process level of thinking he manages the loss of his family by means of the defense mechanism of denial. He is constantly preoccupied with obsessional fantasies that they are alive. Idealization takes place. In this make believe world of his, the ravages of time do not change Betty's appearance, nor her love for him nor is she unfaithful to him like his real mother was. As far as his children are concerned, he imagines them to be happily married, having children of their own and they all live together in a state of bliss. By means of his constant denial of their deaths he appeases his conscience and maintains a precarious balance between that portion of external reality which is not part of his feelings for his family and the one that is denied.

Heretofore, the oedipal aspects of the case have been emphasized. On the preoedipal level, which depicts the intrapsychic conflicts and struggle between mother and child, Bill did not fare any better. The major trauma of that period of his development had to do with abandonment which occurred early and repeatedly. In addition to purposefully leaving him in the bus and train station on a couple of occasions, Bill's mother abandoned him while drinking in the bars and it was his father who came to the rescue.

Next in importance, as far as psychic trauma is concerned, was the physical violence and brutality he experienced as a small child. His mother frequently beat him over his head and shoulders. This is believed to explain why Bill during the commission of murders hit everybody on the head. Furthermore, it may well be that his physical assaults upon his

father when he hit him on the head represented his attempts to undo the psychic trauma of being beaten, by means of actively repeating what he once experienced passively. In that sense it is also presumed that Bill's primitive rage at his bad, preoedipal mother was discharged when he hit his wife Betty on the back of her head.

The third set of traumatic episodes in his childhood had to do with early sexual seductions by adults of both sexes, which interfered with the development of normal object relations. It is known that individuals who have been exposed to premature sexual stimulation frequently show defects in their superegos and in their capacity for effective repression.

From the structural point of view with specific emphasis on ego pathography, it is postulated that during the actual time of commission of murders id was reigning supreme and both ego and superego were unable to function. After the murders, partial relationship to reality was restored. For instance, one part of the reality testing apparatus was able to perceive the external world as it was. Bill knew that he was in his own house, he knew how to get to the neighboring town in order to buy whiskey, cigarettes, and sleeping pills. The other part of external reality was not clearly perceived and part of it completely denied. Subsequent to the murders he behaved as if the victims were not dead. He wrote notes to the children saying, "I am sorry"; played with one of them sexually as if she were alive.

The other important aspect of the ego is its defensive functions which were grossly impaired. The archaic defense mechanisms such as denial, introjection, projection, and identification with the aggressor were part of his unconscious armamentarium which he utilized in his futile and frustrating struggle against his instinctual or id drives.

It is needless to say that serious defects in his ego and superego functioning existed long before the murders occurred and were responsible for many minor acts of violence he committed in the course of his turbulent life. These ego defects were a product of early psychic traumata and had a devastating effect on his ego development, as well as being responsible for its malfunctioning in later life as well.

Conclusions

The story of this man's life is that of traveling a long and a hard road to preserve the self which culminated in the killing of others. His adult behavior is an excellent example of Freudian principle of over-determination, according to which childhood events and traumata shape and mold the course of an adult's behavior. This case illustrates that childhood experiences of being abandoned, of being beaten and of being sexually abused are significant determining factors for these particular murders.

In conclusion, we believe that such a triad of traumatic childhood experiences may lead many persons to "homicidal-proneness." We view homicidal-proneness as a strong unconscious tendency derived from intrapsychic conflicts to commit murder when the right circumstances present themselves and serve as precipitating factors. The longitudinal study of the development of personality from early childhood through adulthood may provide invaluable clues for assessing the potential for violence.

Based upon this triad, it may also be possible to predict violent behavior which may culminate in murder and mass destruction when the character structure of a person in question is well understood from the genetic, dynamic, and adaptational points of view.

It is our impression that many men who commit bizarre acts of violence and eventually commit murder, suffer from personality disturbance which is defined as a psychotic character disorder with passive-aggressive features.