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MIND OF THE MURDERER

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EDITOR.

Crime is one of the many possible expressions of human motives. In general, the criminal is one who has no inhibitions in acting out his unconscious impulses; he is in conflict, perpetually, with others and with himself. His ego and superego have not developed to their fullest strength.

Murder is the most serious of all crimes, and it is expressed in a great many ways. The mind of the murderer is a complex and multiple one, with a great many different facets.

At the outset let us consider briefly the sadistic murderer. There is considerable evidence that cruelty is an end in itself. It apparently satisfies an inborn propensity in all human beings. By a process of indoctrination, tenderness and gentleness are normally emphasized and enhanced and cruelty placed under rather strict control. The relation between cruelty and sexual impulses has been noted, yet not all satisfaction coming from cruelty is sexual in nature. The sadistic murderer is tremendously stimulated by the ordeal through which he puts his victim, enjoying mastery over him and exulting in his fear and helplessness. It is quite noteworthy that the great majority of sadistic murders are committed by younger criminals.

A quite common type of murderer is the one who kills the person of whom he is most fond. Quite often he is also suicidal himself, and yet he goes for assistance after the crime. He exhibits the symptoms of a depressive psychosis before the homicidal incident. Suicidal tendencies are well known features of the depressive psychosis, and it has been considered that suicide is a form of aggression against the self. The depressive psychotic chooses for his victim a beloved person, a person who is almost a part of himself. It is understandable that after the homicide has been done the urge to complete the act is lost and the suicide is not attempted, since it is a common observation that if the non-homicidal depressive after attempting suicide shows no immediate wish to repeat the attempt the entire depressive illness may show signs of rapid remission. The method of homicide together with its site suggests that the act has been done on a sudden impulse and without planning or premeditation.

Quite often the act of murder represents symbolic suicide. The killing instinct instead of turning inward is turned outward and the perpetrator's aggression toward himself is channelled into aggression against another person. Generally speaking, it seems that aggressive behavior will ensue when ego strength is insufficient to combat the destructive forces derived from early oral aggression. An estimate of the relative strength of early oral tendencies as compared with ego strength would perhaps furnish material for prognosticating violent crime.

In a frank mental illness like schizophrenia murder is often part of the psychic mechanism. Murder in this case serves as a defense against the ego disintegrating effects of schizophrenia. One purpose of murder is to discharge overwhelming rage in individuals threatened by a mental collapse. There is a great deal of evidence that feelings of rage play an important part in the psychic economy of the schizophrenic. Quite often this rage appears to stem from frustrations encountered during early years. If, as in the potential schizophrenic, hate is abundant and not discharged, it accumulates, leading to progressive isolation and alienation of the individual from his fellows and through projection, to an increase in the number of enemies, antagonists and the malevolent forces arrayed against him. If the ego is not destroyed, the hatred must somehow be discharged.

In schizophrenias of acute onset the murder is usually preceded by a period of unbearable tension and extreme anxiety associated with depression or agitation, in which case presumably unassuageable anger plays a leading and dominant role. In cases where the onset is gradual and insidious, the individuals may be passive types who offer little resistance to the disease and their ego undergoes a slow disintegration. The more active types struggle with the disease and resist its onset as long as their ego strength will permit. When the breaking point is finally reached, they may either give up the struggle or make a desperate last minute attempt to ward off the psychosis. Quite a few commit murder when this occurs. This is so because only an aggressive act of great magnitude will suffice, the choice depending on the relative strength of inhibitions, social sense, etc.

A study of bizarre murders indicates a state of extreme and unbearable mental and emotional tension and turmoil preceding the act. A majority of them are characterized by unnecessary ferocity and sadistic frenzy. With few exceptions the murderers in such cases seem strikingly calm after the act, and quite free of remorse. The violence served as a means of releasing them from tension.

Child murder by parents is generally a suicidal act as a result of identification processes. In most of the cases examined psychiatrically it was not primarily an expression of conscious or unconscious hatred against the child. In both schizophrenics and in manic depressive psychotics there is a tendency for mothers, especially, to project their symptoms onto their children so that the child becomes analogous to an organ in the mother's body. What may first be a suicidal drive may gradually be converted into a tendency to kill both herself and her child. After this the mother may actually feel relieved of the symptoms which she believes she has destroyed in the child. In processes where there is less dissociation the tendency may be merely to seek peace for the whole family. Such cases may represent an attempt to escape from the turmoil of life, either real or fancied, and the child becomes an integral part of the escaping personality. The suicidal urge may be incompletely successful and therefore lead to murder. Some aggressive tendencies against the child may also be present as in the case of the unhappily married mother who lost her first child through possible neglect, her second through seduction by her lover and attempted suicide with the third. These are the psychological mechanisms that lead to the act of child murder.

There are two types of reactions to the murder on the part of the parent who has committed the deed. Usually each individual may show some combination of the two

reactions. First there is usually some increase in the symptoms which the individual already has and which lead him to perform the deed, in such a way as to denote a depression, such as a stupor. This reaction is in some way a punishment for the deed. It is often initiated with a twilight state which expresses bewilderment, ideas of punishment and death, and a denial of the identity of the individual and also of the deed. There is usually a conscious amnesia for the deed, associated, however, with evidence of unconscious knowledge of it. Following this reaction, there is a tendency in some cases to recover from the symptoms that led to the murder.

The mind of the murderer is a complex mechanism which requires a great deal of unraveling to give us an idea of what leads a person to commit murder. At this date we are just beginning to scratch the surface.