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UNCONSCIOUS SELF-DEFENSE IN AN UXORICIDE

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In the present article a new concept emerges for forensic psychology, as the author explains.—EDITOR.

In 1939 a defendant charged with uxoricide was intensively studied by court order at a New England state hospital to determine his mental competence¹. Early one morning he had gone to a police station near his home and vaguely reported that he must have killed his wife. In the night, while lying in bed with his shoes on, he had kicked her in the head. Later he denied making a confession and maintained that whatever part he had had in the death was accidental, carried out while he was dazed or otherwise not conscious of his behavior. His plea of mental incompetence at the time of the crime was not upheld, and he was sentenced to life imprisonment. After he had served several months of his sentence, an interview at the penitentiary was arranged to provide corroborative psychological data². The present communication is devoted to a further follow-up in the thirteenth year of incarceration (December 7, 1952). The aim was, as before, to compare earlier and later recitals of the crime and its attendant circumstances in order to validate the original psychodynamic formulation.

The writer visited the convict at the prison colony without forewarning. The object of this omission was to make the interview as spontaneous as possible. When first seen the subject appeared essentially unchanged though, on being congratulated about his appearance, he remarked that he had lost 56 pounds at the penitentiary during the earlier part of his sentence. He had, in fact, broken down in health and was sent to the hospital at the colony for a period, then returned to the penitentiary before his permanent transfer to the colony. While the prisoner did not at first recognize the writer, after a few minutes he recalled the earlier contacts at the state hospital and the one at the penitentiary a year later. He was cordial throughout the interview and seemed to enjoy the opportunity of conversing with an old acquaintance.

After some preliminary conversation the subject was asked if he remembered how

¹ ROSENZWEIG, S., SIMON, B., AND BALLOU, M.: *The Psychodynamics of an Uxoricide*. AMER. J. ORTHOPSYCHIAT., 1942, 12, 283-293.

² ROSENZWEIG, S. WITH KOGAN, K. L. *Uxoricide on an Unconscious Basis*. Chap. 20 in PSYCHODIAGNOSIS, New York, Grune and Stratton, 1949.

it had all happened. He freely recounted the events of the fatal evening and night. He commented that he and his wife had been "fooling around" in the bedroom but he now for the first time added that she was in her "period." He said also that she was suffering from varicose veins which always became aggravated during her period and made her legs weak. As a result of the "fooling around"—which he never defined though he was evidently trying to convey the impression of teasing—she fell and hit her head on the cedar chest in the room. A hemorrhage through the nose began and he carried her to the bed. He then went to the bathroom for some water for her but, since the bathroom door was half open, he hit his head on it and became dazed. The next thing he knew he was on the street and, he added, "They say I confessed to killing her."

It is, of course, impossible to prove or disprove the accuracy of the prisoner's statement regarding his wife's menstruation, but for purposes of interpretation it matters relatively little whether she was actually menstruating or whether his interim fancy had produced this detail. In either case menstruation could have significant bearing on his castration anxiety previously adduced³—on the well-known anthropologic-psychoanalytic basis by which the woman's menstrual "wound" makes real for the male the possibility of his own castration. If his wife was, in fact, menstruating on the night of her murder, this condition may have served (like the incident with the razor described in the earlier reports) as a precipitant to the husband's castration fears. But even if the patient were here relating only an "excuse" for the weakness of his wife's legs, which caused her to fall and thus to die, it still would be significant that he chose this from among many other possible causes his imagination could have produced. In this choice we see again evidence of the role which his ideas of castration may have played in the initiation of the crime.⁴

The interviewer wondered if the subject could recall the family situation of his early childhood. In response the prisoner was presently describing the suicide of his father. The account he gave was practically identical with his previous one but he pointed out how vividly he could see the whole event—everything connected with the suicide. Though he was only four years old at the time, he said, it all was as clear to him as if it had happened yesterday. The father, having been falsely accused

³ ROSENZWEIG, S. WITH KOGAN, K. L. *loc. cit.*, and ROSENZWEIG, S., SIMON, B., AND BALLOU, M., *loc. cit.*

⁴ The castration complex is an important, though poorly defined, concept of Freudian theory. In its original sense the concept referred to the child's conscious or unconscious fear of the loss of the male sex organ, as a punishment for any sexual offense; in later reformulations, this complex was broadened to include loss of life in general. As employed in the present discussion the term should be construed to mean fear or anxiety—primarily unconscious—of personal extinction. The sexual context is still strongly implied since "extinction" of sexual potency, especially in youth, is readily equated in the unconscious with loss of life generally. When the "castration compulsion" is introduced in the latter portion of the present paper, a departure from Freudian theory is made. This novel concept, to be developed in another communication, is a recognition that the fear of castration is sometimes found neurotically interlocked with the wish for such a fate—the wish proceeding from the femininity of the male in whom such a compulsion exists. Thus conceived the castration compulsion is an aspect of human bisexuality; and it may well be asked whether it is even possible for there to be a castration complex in the negative, Freudian sense of fear without the simultaneously existing, complementary and positive wish.

by the mother of infidelity, went into the privy and took a dose of Paris green. The son was at pains to emphasize the validity of his recollection, even though he was so young at the time of the event, and gave in support an incident involving one of his own young children at the age of two or three. An aunt teasingly asked the child, "Who is your daddy?" The child replied, "You ought to know." It is significant that he chose this evidence, involving a question of his own paternity, to prove the trustworthiness of a child's understanding and memory. He was saying, in its more obvious effect, that even as his own two or three year-old grasped the sexual relationship between his wife and himself, so he had tragically understood that of his mother and father.

Speaking of his various children and responding to an incidental question about their number, the prisoner added in a somewhat animated manner that there were "too many to count". An amused interest on the part of the interviewer soon brought out that the subject was alluding to his premarital, illegitimate children. Boastfully he put the number at 57. When some surprise was expressed in order to get him to verify the figure, he reduced it to "40 or so". A suspicion of some paranoid root of this boast yielded almost completely before the details presently supplied. The final impression was that, while the original figure of 57 was a semi-humorous exaggeration, the prisoner was nevertheless giving a faithful account of his premarital sex life not previously elicited. But 57 may still not lack significance: in view of the subject's deep castration anxiety, the number 57 (for Heinz pickle products) could serve symbolically as a good compensatory advertisement. If we follow the associations in the immediate context, the loss of 56 pounds leads to the gain of 57 children.

The prisoner talked freely of his premarital philandering. He gave specific incidents and even names of girls and older women he had known and with whom he had cohabited since he had left home at the age of twelve. Some of these relationships had been more than casual and all of them seem to have followed a consistent pattern. On the basis of his account it was possible to fill in some gaps in the original history. He had lived essentially as an itinerant worker for many years before he settled in X and married soon afterwards. In his wanderings he had passed through several of the New England states where he had found employment on various farms. Taking up with a girl or woman in the neighborhood of his work, he would continue in the job and with the sexual relationship until the woman became pregnant or other developments made it appear that marriage was imminent. Then, to avoid the responsibility and the control by the woman which were implied for him in a marital relationship, he would characteristically leave both the job and the woman. On leaving each locality he indulged what he flippantly called his "hobby" of changing his name. He mentioned several of the assumed names which he had adopted in order to evade responsibility for the woman with whom he had been living or for any child of hers of which he might have been the father. He mentioned one instance in which he had been less successful in getting clear and had arranged for the support of a child. It seemed not unlikely that in following this life pattern previous to his marriage the subject was repeating his early family situation: just as he had left home at the age of twelve to free himself of his mother's control after the father's death, he now wandered from job to job, abandoning each as soon as he had

involved himself in a relationship that threatened to give the woman a controlling influence over him.

One affair which the prisoner described was more dramatic than the rest and gave him evident satisfaction in the recounting. He was employed on a farm as herdsman and foreman. In addition to himself there were the farmer and eleven workers for whom he as foreman had some responsibility. It so happened that the farmer's wife, because of an injury her husband had sustained, had not experienced sexual satisfaction for about ten years. (The prisoner was obviously here describing a castrated "father".) Soon the frustrated wife secretly sought out the foreman and began making advances to him. She usually came to visit him in the barn where she finally seduced him by a display that he characterized as irresistible. Their intimacy continued during the next two or three years. They had three children in one year and two in another—triplets and twins. Again a suspicion of megalomaniac boastfulness arose but, for what it is worth, it should be recalled that the subject was father of one pair of twins in his legitimate family.

Another incident of his life on this same farm is of interest because its narration included a spontaneous comment on the matter of his "heredity" (of importance in the earlier interpretation). The prisoner explained that among the farm hands was a Frenchman who was very jealous of him. (Was this another aspect of the paranoid complex already implied by the megalomaniac trend?) Casually he now remarked that the French are known for their hot-tempered jealousy. He himself, he continued, was on his father's side a little French and some Indian. The Indians say, "Leave me alone and I will leave you alone." But he added, as if to complete the account, "I usually work on the Dutch side—my mother's side. The Dutch like peace and quiet." Thus was produced without any prompting the previously inferred identification with the mother that had been assumed to account for the subject's delayed response to the word "cheese" in the word-association test⁵. His identification with the mother, whom he nevertheless feared and hated, is literally reaffirmed.

It is not appropriate to discuss here in detail the role of the prisoner's bisexuality but it is apparent without this elaboration that his innate femininity would in some sense have been reinforced by this maternal identification. Such a perilous position with respect to the mother image would have left him in critical moments with two alternatives: to kill the introjected (feared and hated) object—as the father had done in his suicide—or to commit murder on the woman who by projection was a substitute for the mother.

The previous interpretation of the role which the prisoner's early experience and personality played in the commission of the crime is corroborated by these new facts about his vocational and sexual life prior to marriage. This additional evidence indicates that the orientation to the wife whom he murdered was not altogether unique; not only was his relationship to her patterned on that with his mother, as he had conceived the mother in relation to the father, but a fairly long series of other women had been known by him premaritally on the same model—with the difference that these liaisons had been defensively broken off before the critical point of his being "trapped" by the dangerous mother surrogate. Reciprocally the orientation

⁵ ROSENZWEIG, S. WITH KOGAN, K. L., *loc. cit.*, pp. 355, 363-64.

of the wife to the husband in terms of jealousy, as alleged by him in accounting for the skirmish on the eve of the crime, becomes intelligible: this jealousy which he derided as unjustified was very probably provoked by him. His mother's jealousy of the father, which precipitated the latter's suicide, made such jealousy an inseparable part of the son's castration anxiety and, unconsciously and compulsively persisting in him, required re-enactment in his dealings with the substitute or surrogate mother. It is as if the castration complex had a positive as well as a negative aspect—that it somehow opposed its own extinction and thus provocatively re-created conditions that would vindicate and perpetuate it. In other words, the subject may be considered to have been suffering from a "castration compulsion." But from the wife's standpoint, with her naive perspective, suspicious jealousy of the husband would have been readily justified by even a portion of the details here supplied to us by him—details which he must have given her by directly or indirectly boasting about his past achievements or which he may even in some degree have matched in his current life with her.

In the light of all the evidence in hand, and particularly of that which accords to castration anxiety a central place in the understanding of the murder, a new concept emerges for forensic psychology—"unconscious self-defense". When an individual on the basis of identification with a hated parent suffers from an unconsciously apprehended threat of castration, the stage is set for the triggering of an act of murder that may in essence proceed from a need to defend one's own life.

Since the law has long recognized and even justified the killing of others in conscious self-defense, it may not be out of place to suggest that some consideration be given to such unconscious self-defense. One would not argue that defendants of this type should be forthwith exonerated, but if one regards crime as personal-social disease and not merely as formal violation of a legal code⁶, the present concept can serve as a basis for understanding and treatment that would scarcely be possible without it. An offender like the above would require residence in an institution where he could be studied and perhaps cured of his dangerous unconscious orientation.

⁶ ALEXANDER, F. AND STAUB, H. *The Criminal, the Judge and the Public*. New York, Macmillan, 1931.