

## Case report

### Serial Murder: Power, Control and Social Domains

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#### Abstract

This paper presents new explanatory perspectives on the behaviour of serial murders via the theory of social domains platform. It focuses on the specific role of deficiencies in benign control and efficacy and their dynamic tension and interaction with malign and coercive forms of power, to reveal overlayed and interwoven motivations of serial killers. Empirically based, evidential support for this is furnished by detailed case studies of Edmund Kemper, Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, Fred West and supplemented by data on many others. Overall, it is suggested that explanations of serial murder should generally take 'concurrent' forms wherein subtly interwoven motivations and reasons overlay, intersect and support each other, thereby supplanting 'single-cause' or one-dimensional' explanations. Such considerations offer a basis for rethinking some of the assumptions in which current profiling and investigative strategies are based.

**Keywords:** Murder; Night stalker; Social domains

#### Introduction

The data I present in this paper is based on a secondary analysis of published data which I reinterpret, and reshape to present theoretical ideas around the disabling effects of deficiencies in benign control and the benign efficacy it confers on individuals as part of the explanation of why some serial killers kill. It thus advances an original set of theoretical perspectives on serial murder that have not been considered in existing literature. In this respect this is not a review essay that simply reworks other people's commentaries. For example, although I draw on the work of Masters, (because it is rich and intriguing) my use of his insights on the data he presents is in the service of very different theoretical agenda -which is to advance my own ideas on benign power and efficacy in human behaviour from an interdisciplinary research perspective [1]. In this sense, there is a clear need for

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such theoretical innovation signalled by the absence of a concern with the benign power and efficacy both in commentaries on serial murder (as well as in general human behaviour) and a lack of discussion and acknowledgment of it in the behavioural and social sciences. The larger, more encompassing empirical research and theoretical debates to which this paper contributes, have to do with connection between agency and structure (individual and society). In this regard I argue that the causal explanation of serial murder can be enhanced, by drawing from the 'social domains' framework [1] which incorporates multiple standpoints of knowledge and practical perspectives on human social behaviour. Integral to this, the method used to formulate these ideas utilizes a blend of theoretical reworking and reinterpretation of secondary data -in this case on serial murder. This 'adaptive' methodological approach has received detailed treatment [2-4].

While the subject of benign efficacy raises some important questions and insights concerning the role of power from a gender standpoint, I do not develop them in this paper, since I feel this would require considerably more space. Thus, I must content myself with case studies largely reliant on male serial killers. Clearly, benign control and efficacy is relevant to female behaviour as much as it is to males', but exactly how, and to what extent they intersect, are issues I do not have the room to pursue. Among other questions I also do not cover and thus 'skirt around' -are those moving beyond motivational concerns such as the development of practical investigative strategies used in tracking down serial killers. It seems obvious to me that this work is required because benign power, control and efficacy play considerably important roles in understanding the behaviour of serial killers.

#### Power and Control in Everyday Life

Power in social life is most usefully defined as 'the probability that one actor ('person' would be more appropriate for present purposes) within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which that probability rests' [5]. In this regard however, power has been almost exclusively associated with domination, manipulation and exploitation. However, unfortunately, this definition limits its factual content and explanatory range. In this sense, mutual benign control offers an expanded definition of power and its properties while simultaneously upholding the core idea that individuals get others to comply with their wishes, despite resistance. Canter's (1995) work in which he distinguishes different intensities of power and control exerted by criminals over their victims, and how they perceive and treat them (as objects, vehicles and persons), comes closest to the argument outlined here. However, Canter does not deal with benign power, control and efficacy nor the way in which they interact with coercive and exploitative modes, thus modifying and exacerbating their influences and effects.

Mutual benign power and efficacy rely on skills of persuasion, inducement and negotiation and, in this regard both malign and benign forms of power and control frequently coexist within serial murderers thereby creating the psychological tensions that precipitate their killing sprees. In this light it is misleading to classify serial murderers in

terms of 'missionary', 'visionary', 'lust', and 'power /control' types as if the power/control type was separate and independent [6]. This obscures the fact that power and control play a generic and causal role in all serial murders. However, such power is not always entirely coercive and manipulative. In fact, in a psychological sense 'mutual benign' power (and control) is closely connected with its malignant forms, which seemingly play a more obvious and upfront role in serial murder. The psychological tensions and dynamics between various power mixes provide the motivational foundation for different types and patterns of serial murder including the missionary, visionary and the lust/sexual types just mentioned, as well as those influenced by traumatic childhoods [7] or those reflecting 'revenge' on specific sectors of society [8], or 'hatred' towards particular groups (such as women, prostitutes, gays). The same tensions lie behind the attempt to 'put right' a perceived humiliation, or being 'possessed' by monsters, demons, or entities [9], or even, simply to gain attention, fame, or celebrity. I suggest that such 'immediate' motives all share a common basis in an underlying deficiency in, or in a problematic relationship with, mutual benign control.

Mutual benign control is the ability to obtain the rewards and satisfactions of social life by employing interpersonal rules of 'fairness' which allow everyone to benefit from encounters and in which no one dominates. In this sense it involves genuine mutuality which requires 'doing with' rather than 'doing to' others. That mutual benign control is an essential 'additional' feature of power and control draws attention to its ubiquitous presence in 'normal', non-criminal, human activities more generally. The interactional give and take involved in, and required by, mutual benign control, is fundamental to general social conformity, because it allows people to mutually obtain needs, wants and desires. In turn, in individuals this promotes feelings of acceptance, satisfaction and fulfilment. Unfortunately, however, serial killers are frequently deficient in the skills of mutual benign control and thus, either have no option, or explicitly choose, coercion and manipulation. For example, Jeffrey Dahmer and Dennis Nilsen [10,11] are/were extremely lacking in such skills and abilities. A more direct preference for coercion underlies the serial murders of David Berkovitz and Richard Ramirez, both of whom employed an 'ambush predator' strategy. (This, also characterises many 'spree', or 'mass' murderers, such as Michael Ryan, in Hungerford, Scotland, and James Huberty, the MacDonald's marksman in Los Angeles USA.)

While some serial murderers possess, and readily use benign skills and abilities or, are able to simulate them—they selectively utilize such acting skills in close combination with more malign and exploitative forms of control. Ted Bundy, was able to manipulate potential victims into placing initial trust in him, [8,12]. Peter Sutcliffe used benign control in order to maintain 'normal' relationships with his wife as well as workmates, but also as a way of making initial contact with his (female) victims, although he rapidly reverted to horrific hammer blows from behind to dispatch them [13]. Both Myra Hindley and Ian Brady [14] and Fred and Rose West also gained the initial trust of their (often juvenile) victims in a similar manner, before subjecting them to the most unrelenting torture.

Since the effects of power and control in social life are stretched over time and space through social activities, serial killers are influenced - as is everyone in everyday life - by the 'longitudinal' influence of key 'social domains', in terms of which a killer's behaviour can be understood as a succession of control failures. As such, being in control of one's life in general reflects 'a balance of control' over the

multiple groups and networks - friendship, intimate, work colleagues, family, and social community that make up general social life. Thus, serial murder can be understood as an attempt not only to deal with deficiencies in skills of benign control and efficacy and the consequent psychological pain issuing from the threat of identity breakdown and the displacement of self, but also from multiple collapses of these social networks and the killer's 'current life situation'.

## Emotional Adjustment and Psychological Survival

Although infrequently remarked on, everyday social life throws up psychological problems which require constant, but subtle and sensitive readjustments in situ. In order to properly deal with these routine psychological problems, individuals must achieve and maintain a minimum of psycho-emotional integration via their own cognitive and emotional skills. This 'psychological survival' is greatly aided by 'mutual benign control and efficacy' which ensures a broad equity in everyday transactions between individuals. Without this 'integrative glue' in interpersonal relations individuals would find it difficult, if not impossible 'to make a difference' in their personal and social lives without trespassing on other's interests (Layder 2004). All social behaviour depends on persuading others to concur with our own interests, wishes and desires, and in this sense mutual consent is the very essence of love, friendship, intimacy and romance.

Mutual benign control underpins the entirety of social life by minimizing conflict and keeping competition and exploitation at 'civil' levels through the enlistment of other's support, and regulating the temptation to immediately 'put right' perceived insults, or slights. It is a complex and skilled accomplishment achieved through various intensities of persuasion, charm, tact, love and so forth, although naturally spiced with arguments and 'softer' forms of manipulation. The 'mutual consent' underlying benign control ensures that it remains a partial (rather than 'complete') attempt at influencing other's responses and feelings by negotiating alignments with one's own during every point in everyday interaction [16]. In direct contrast, serial murderers habitually choose coercion and 'total' control - which are neither negotiated nor achieved - and in which their interests, desires and purposes are secured by deception, manipulation, intimidation or threats. It would be wrong, however, to understand mutual benign control as 'morally pure' because all social behaviour contains mixed motives [16,17], and thus is, in varying degrees, 'selfish'.

## Benign Efficacy: Getting What You Want, Desire and Need

Benign efficacy is the ability to achieve mutually desired states of affairs by applying the implicit rules of benign control in everyday life and as such it involves a sense of personal effectiveness. Serial murderers have a problematic relationship with mutual benign control in so far as they are either deficient in its core skills, or they lack a moral commitment to it, and the responsibilities that go along with it, or indeed, a mixture of both. It follows that those who don't deploy these skills will be excluded from the most intimate spaces of social life and the rewards of emotional satisfaction and identity-support that such participation enables. They cannot readily obtain the satisfaction of desire from others, that benign efficacy allows and facilitates. This problematic relationship may be the result of different factors such as an extremely deprived, or an appallingly cruel childhood (for example, as with Henry Lee Lucas, see [18,19]). However, a limited proficiency in mutual benign skills, means that the development of some very basic social and emotional capacities, and forms of human

involvement are severely hampered. A person who lacks benign efficacy finds it difficult to perceive her or himself as an effective agent able to obtain what they want, desire and need from others. More than likely, this will lead to an erosion of self-control as well as a corresponding need to control others. Second, a lack of benign efficacy hinders the ability to get on with others and effectively function in social life. For example, Henry Lucas pointed out that 'when I am around people, I feel tense, anxious, I have trouble talking to them, I always have' [20]. Others such as Edmund Kemper, and Ted Bundy have expressed such unease in the company of those they consider in some way as belonging to a 'superior' social niche.

Also, a lack of benign efficacy leads to a narrowing of the range of choices available to individuals, particularly those required by normal, everyday behaviour, as opposed to criminal activities involving coercive control. When an individual lacks benign efficacy, normal, mutually supportive behaviour is particularly difficult. For example, in relation to murder, Lucas remarked 'something pushes me into doing it, what other choice is there?' In addition, a lack of benign efficacy automatically leads to problems around identity - particularly its lack of substantive markers. Serial Murderers often see themselves as non-persons, or 'nobodies' due to an absence of a felt sense of effective agency, of being able to exert benign power over others. This is also linked with a sense of not being a real embodied person, but rather, a 'displaced self', which may further lead to the idea of a 'monster' or 'dark force' within. At its simplest and most basic, a lack of benign efficacy can lead to an inability to engage in, or be at ease with, routine ('normal', 'civil') social relationships and a consequent inability to have constructive - non egocentric or non-narcissistic - conversations or social exchanges. In addition, such a person lacks the ability to elicit and incorporate the emotions and feelings of others - and to empathize or display emotional intelligence [21] such deficiencies are related to the ability to put oneself in the shoes of others and imagine the world emotionally from their point of view. In essence, they find it difficult to entrain others in their own projects, desires and interests and thus, elicit their cooperation, so that everyone benefits.

## The Displaced Self & Distorted Psychological Survival

Mutual benign control ensures psychological survival in social encounters by helping maintain ontological security, a coherent sense of identity and mental integrity. In that sense the problem of 'psychological survival' is far more widespread and deeper than implied in the thesis that is largely limited to prisoners deprived of their freedom through incarceration. Rather, there is a continuous need for 'psychological survival' in everyday social interaction in so far as it ensures and creates feelings of dignity, self-value, social significance, self-confidence, self-esteem, as well as recognition and approval by others. These form the basis of the ability to 'attract' others into one's personal orbit in order to satisfy (mutual) needs and desires. Conversely, a paucity of skills in mutual benign control triggers the use of coercion as a means of identity support and emotional satisfaction. Serial murderers are typically low in ontological security - in feelings of realness, significance, self-worth, 'independence', power and influence (see later case studies). As a result, they are prone to identity displacement - an apprehension that their self is displaced from the body and shut out from its 'home' inside its skin container. This displaced self is 'banished' because it is not good, successful, or effective enough, but it is not entirely lost because it retains a link with the bodily self in an estranged or alienated form. But it is not a 'false self' in [21]

sense, that controls the real self and sustains the myth that serial murders are controlled or 'run' by some monster or dark entity. Rather, the displaced self gives rise to confusion and a continuous threat of mental chaos. In this manner, it inclines individuals towards coercive control as a pre-emptive attempt to eliminate confusion, uncertainty and unpredictability. Because coerced outcomes are more predictable, such control compensates for the uncertainties accompanying an absence of benign efficacy and its skills.

At root, serial murderers avoid being at the mercy of life, of chance and fortune by ignoring social constraints, others' demands, and the use of coercive control which circumvents the problem of time lost in the pursuit of emotional satisfaction through legitimate means. The serial murderer employs total control as a short-cut and shield against psychic discomfort, anger and frustration. Unfortunately, his 'internal' psychic pain can only be temporally alleviated (not genuinely or authentically resolved), by the 'external' act of murder. In this sense, the serial murderer is already committed, and thus addicted to, a career of murder because with each successive victim, threats of mental breakdown and personal identity remain.

## Questions of Morality, Responsibility and Sanity

Now while it is the case that a lack of benign efficacy and self-displacement, lead to the psychological deficiencies and consequences I have described and consequently entrain serial killers in a vastly distorted quest for psychological survival, this does not absolve them from responsibility for their murderous thoughts and actions. Although, such limitations may impose a restricted range of choices, they do not entirely obliterate the capacity to rationally choose between morally right/ good/ appropriate, and bad/ wrong/ unacceptable, courses of action. In this sense, those who are racked by the psychological pain and discomfort caused by a deficit of benign efficacy and self-displacement, are not psychotic in the sense of being detached from reality or from rational perceptions and thought processes. Such individuals are aware as anyone else, that torturing and murdering victims is morally wrong and reprehensible, although they may not feel morally repelled by their own actions, nor feel sympathy and empathy for those on whom they visit such repugnant violence. Those who 'suffer' from such psychological debilitations are not, by any stretch of the imagination, necessarily insane or seriously mentally ill. Nevertheless, at the same time, they certainly could be described as enacting and experiencing extreme 'distortions' in their grasp of moral issues and their perception and 'understanding' of their moral commitments and responsibilities towards others.

## Serial Murder and Social Domains

The theory of social domains [1] posits the existence of social reality as a complex of social processes unfolding from four interlocking domains with their own distinct types and 'mixtures' of power and time (temporality). The domain of 'psychobiography' refers to an individual's social experiences as they emerge biographically throughout their lives. For instance, the early lives of Edward De Salvo, Henry Lee Lucas, and Charles Manson were critically formative in relation to their later criminal activities. Second, the domain of 'situated activities' refers to everyday interpersonal dealings including the 'personal styles', and strategies used against victims. For example, Peter Sutcliffe, used casual 'chat-up' ploys before surprising his victims with an attack from behind with a hammer, while Ted Bundy pretended to have a broken arm or leg to gain his victims' sympathy and trust, before ruthlessly stabbing or strangling them. The domain

of 'social settings' refers to the immediate arena of social behaviour (as in Dahmer's preference for picking up victims at gay bars or Bundy's for university campuses as his hunting ground, or Sutcliffe's use of red-light districts for many of his prostitute victims, or the West's preference for the domesticity of their home at Cromwell Street). Finally, the domain of 'contextual resources' refers to the wider influence of class, gender, ethnicity, age and so on. For example, [8] heavily emphasizes social class grievances in motivating killing sprees of serial killers and influencing their choice of victim types.

The theory of social domains, however, stresses that no one domain, on its own, 'determines' a killer's behaviour. Rather each domain is, in varying degrees, influential. This analytic position avoids both a false choice between subjective (psychological) or objective (social) factors, while also steering around the problem of wrongly stressing the deterministic influence of single factors. For example, neither social class (as exemplified by a deprived or abused childhood), nor psychological factors (such as mental deficiencies) nor innate physiological factors (such as head injuries) or even genetic or bio-chemical factors can provide ultimate or overall insights or explanations. Rather, for each killer there is a slightly different balance of domain (and other) formative influences on their behaviour. As a result, unique combinations of power and temporal rhythm impress themselves on individuals as if 'vertically stacked' while everyday life itself is experienced as 'horizontal' movement through their influences. In real life, vertical and horizontal planes do not occupy separate or exclusive niches, but rather, meld into each other. Thus, in the routine unfolding of everyday life individuals 'puncture' a vertical cluster of domains as they push, or are dragged, (horizontally) through social time and space.

In this regard, 'psychobiography' traces the fashioning of individual identities and self-images, emotion and control strategies reflecting individual lifestyles and activities over time. A serial murderer's inner mental life, their attitudes towards emotion and control, their confidence, egoism, dominance or dependence, intersect with the social world to shape their motivations and attitudes towards others [22,23]. Much of social life consists of a latticework of multiple instances of 'situated activity' involving daily contacts, interactions and communications (either face-to-face or digitally). In this sense, situated activity is the natural home of mutual benign control, as it occurs in, and between, many different 'social settings'.

Crucially for serial killers, situated encounters are a forum for the display of confidence, power, and emotional reactivity as a response to 'emergent' 'local' meanings and circumstances. In this sense, serial murder is an amalgam of the influence of all four social domains whilst situated activity is their meeting point. It is the arena in which psychological factors (deriving from psychobiography) converge with social factors - ranging from situated activity (the interpersonal details of the actual murder), through the organized social settings in which they manifest, as well as the wider social context of values, ideologies, class, gender and ethnic circumstances. The fusing of powers of individuals, situated activities, social settings and contextual resources, is the causative social ambience of such criminal behaviour.

## Reprise

In many respects serial murderers are 'compensating' - albeit in an inhuman and utterly distorted manner - for a deficit or absence of skills and abilities in benign power, control and efficacy. They commit murder in order to;

- a. Command personal 'attention' for themselves (and their circumstances) and, thus create, and shore-up, elements of self-identity, self-worth and self-respect which have been drained away or otherwise lost, during their psycho-biographical development. The murderer urgently requires attention in order to buttress a vastly diminished sense of value, significance expressed through a viable sense of identity and authenticity.
- b. Murder itself, reflects a desperate need to effect change - to make a difference in, and to, a perpetrator's current life situation and social circumstances. Social networks may be breaking down, or threatened, or non-existent. Acts of murder are distorted attempts to salvage impoverished personal lives, and the inability to create and sustain personal relationships (Dahmer, Nilsen). Serial murderer's lives are in a state of existential crisis.

Murderers try to deal with problems around identity displacement, psychological survival and (ontological) security by adopting extremely coercive measures (multiple murderous acts) which they incorrectly assume will solve 'at one stroke', their psychological problems. Unfortunately, such problems remain perpetually unresolved by successive murders.

As a killing spree extends over time, perpetrators may reflect on the trajectory of their lives, causing further problems. They imaginatively review the possible benefits of 'retiring' from their murderous careers, or of being caught and arrested, since these might seem to offer a solution to their overall powerlessness. The lure of negative celebrity may furnish the attention and recognition they crave, even though based on notoriety and infamy. More positively, the idea of being apprehended, creates the possibility of becoming a 'charismatic personality', albeit behind prison bars. A great number of serial killers want to be recognised and acknowledged for their 'achievements and accomplishments' (the number and type of murders, the mode of dispatch of victims, their unique crime signatures). They 'demand' attention for themselves and their lives.

Many want to record their lives and 'life philosophies' through writing, (Nilsen), music (Manson), or art (Gacy). They want to garner personal and social significance to compensate for the utter lack they have experienced hitherto, and over which, they have harboured resentment or festering rage and a desire for revenge. They would gain the kind of attention and recognition they have craved, often since early childhood [7]. Dennis Nilsen wanted to draw to himself the attention that had been denied to him by the collapse of his current life situation and which highlighted his inability to attract partners or sustain intimate relationships. In fact, the arrests of Richard Ramirez (the Night Stalker), Charles Manson (and to a lesser extent Peter Sutcliffe) resulted in the acquisition of a bevy of female admirers ('groupies'). Many serial murderers marry or remarry, whilst incarcerated. Such events pander to their intense narcissism, general self-absorption and craving for personal charisma.

Of course, in a sense all serial murderers are unique and, therefore, don't have the same motivations and desires. Jeffrey Dahmer, for example, did not share Ramirez's, De Salvo's or Manson's intense desire for fame and celebrity, but he similarly attempted to blot out feelings of insignificance and insecurity to boost his ego and self-esteem. As Dahmer's killing spree spiralled out of control, he constructed a shrine to the skulls of his victims in his Milwaukee apartment. He used this to tap into its energy to give him power, mastery and significance with which he could counter his low self-esteem and self-belief.



His self-worth, value and significance were further buttressed by his conviction that he was accountable to no one (there was no God). In turn, this fed into the idea that he could keep the killings to himself in his own secret world, and have complete control over it. Dahmer tried to prop up his identity and invest his crumbling, impoverished world with some sense of meaning and identity to wrest it from the reality of its pointlessness, chaos and disorder.

## Case Studies

### Edmund Kemper

At the age of fourteen, Kemper killed his grandmother by shooting her in the face, then twice in the back, and stabbing her many times, before also shooting his grandfather as he arrived home [8,24,25]. There seemed no obvious reasons for such horrific and precipitous actions, other than the fact that we know from others close to him (for instance, his sister), that throughout his childhood he had been preoccupied with thoughts of slaughter, killing and execution. For these crimes he was incarcerated in a maximum-security mental hospital for four years after which, in 1969, he was returned to the care of the Californian youth authority who paroled him back to his mother, against the advice of psychiatrists. He grew to the height of six feet nine inches and weighed near to 300 pounds. He began to rehearse a murderous plan of action which started when he was twenty-three years old. It involved killing pretty, young women hitchhikers whom he picked up and struck up a friendly relationship, before unleashing violence upon them including strangulation, shooting stabbing and beheading. The killing spree lasted eleven months and included his mother, whose head he smashed in with a hammer before decapitating her, and finally, sexually attacking her headless body. In the end, he had killed ten people, two of whose flesh he ate, before finally turning himself in to police.

Why did he do what he did? Besides being preoccupied with murder and execution from a very early age, he had also developed a generalised rage against those who had either rejected him or, whom he considered beyond his ability to control or love (like women). His general view of women was clearly influenced by his hatred for his mother because of her intensely critical and harsh treatment of, and attitudes towards, him. (She once forced him to live in the cellar for eight months!) As Leyton notes, the idea that his primary motive was sexual is unconvincing since he hardly touched many of his victims sexually. He himself claimed that 'he felt very inadequate sexually and sensually and socially'. He also stated that the idea of making passionate love 'became dissatisfying because part of me knew I couldn't really carry these things out. I couldn't follow through with the male end of the responsibility' [26].

This conviction became part of his motivation to kill so that his victims couldn't reject him as a man. By killing his female victims, he was 'more or less making a doll out of a human being ... and carrying out my fantasies with a doll, a living human doll' [27]. Clearly, his own feelings of social inadequacy displace any notion that he had an overwhelmingly powerful sexual drive. His lack of benign efficacy in the social and interpersonal arena required him to kill so that he could deal with women as living dolls, rather than real live human beings, since they would make him feel personally, sexually and socially inadequate. This theme is repeated at many junctures, particularly with the female hitch-hikers he picked up. He stated that he felt they were 'flaunting in his face the fact that they could do anything they wanted ... and the thought that they felt safe in a society where I didn't feel

safe'. Interestingly, Leyton asks, 'of what could a 300pounds six-foot nine giant feel afraid?' But this ignores that here, Kemper is referring not to a specific and practical fear, but to the anxiety generated by ontological insecurity resulting from exclusion (real or imagined), from the inner sanctum of social life (being able to attract and interest other human beings).

Similarly, Leyton seems to overstate the influence of social class by suggesting that Kemper's actions were directed by a revenge or hatred for a 'dominant class' reflected by the fact that the hitch-hikers 'represented' the desired young women of this class who flaunted their indifference to him. While class influence is present to some degree, its actual influence is largely inert. The crucial point for Kemper is that he resented anyone - from any class - who possessed the skills of benign efficacy which permitted access to the social, emotional and material rewards of civil society. His rage was not specifically towards the dominant class, but towards the 'universal passport' of mutual benign control, which for everyone, except himself, opened the doors to feelings of adequacy, social significance and acceptance.

Kemper's experience of other people, particularly women, was of an empty hollowiness, rather than full and genuine contact. He killed the women he targeted because 'alive they were distant not sharing with me. I was trying to establish a close relationship, and there was no relationship' [25]. The only way in which he could achieve possession of them was if he killed them. This is also the reason why he ate the flesh of some of his victims 'I wanted them to be a part of me - and now they are' [25]. (Incidentally, these same reasons are used by Dahmer and Nilsen for eating the flesh of their victims.) In this sense, through the act of murder Kemper is attempting to obtain emotional and existential satisfaction, which he was unable to obtain because of his deficiency in benign control, efficacy and authentic mutuality. By reducing victims to non-human status, he was, albeit in a distorted manner, able to simulate real, authentic human relationships. He considered the death of his victims as a triumph, a victory, they were dead and he was alive - it was a victory over his own anxieties about the uncertainties and insecurities of social existence more generally.

Clearly an important element of Kemper's psyche was his rage against his mother for her cruelties towards him and her constant carping criticisms and humiliations. She was a university administrator who was insecure about her own social status in that she feared downward social mobility, and while she had a good reputation at work, in the domestic sphere with Kemper, she was extremely difficult. She refused to be 'overprotective' towards him as a child, and indeed, went out of her way to punish and ridicule him, 'to make him a man'. This forced Kemper to desperately struggle for her love and approval, and made him inadequate around women generally. But his alienation was not simply an expression of mother rage, it was the result of rejection by society more generally, which thwarted his dreams of 'fitting in'. For instance, his desire to be a police officer was thwarted by being rejected because of his height and this can only have reinforced feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, rejection, indifference and insignificance. He felt that other people, in particular his female victims, were more equipped to handle life and were more happily adjusted than he. There seemed a chasm between Kemper and everyone else who enjoyed their lives and the rewards stemming from the mutuality that benign efficacy control confers.

The murder spree Kemper embarked on, allowed him to establish an identity as a celebrity multiple-murderer. This 'identity' both shored up his uncertainty around personal identity and, to an extent,

stemmed the deterioration in his sense of self that already lacked any positive attributes (he felt he had no personality at all). But in the end, he was exhausted by the task and his mind was 'slowly beginning to unravel'. Giving himself up to police allowed him to wallow in the celebrity he had created, and simultaneously, set himself free from the unfinishable task of resolving his alienation from society by the continued murder, in his eyes, of its most valued representatives.

### Jeffrey Dahmer

Dahmer murdered at least 17 males by the time he went on trial in 1992. His first victim was a hitch-hiker, but after a period of nine years during which he did not kill, he resumed again and his spree intensified. Most of his victims were homosexuals whom he had met in gay bars and clubs in Milwaukee and whom he drugged, strangled and stabbed before dismembering their bodies—often having sex with them while dead. He kept their skulls as 'souvenirs' which he could display on his domestic 'shrine' in his apartment. The smell of rotting bodies permeated the apartment buildings to such an extent that it was commented on by his neighbours, his potential victims and eventually the police, who finally arrested him. His main motive for killing was so that these 'potential lovers' would be prevented from leaving, and thus, stay with him longer. In this sense, he was desperate for companionship to mitigate his lack of connection with others and his extreme alienation from social life. He tried to render some of his victims into zombies by drilling holes into their skulls and then injecting acid. By this method he hoped to erase their free-will and make them totally compliant with his wishes and desires. Of course, these horrific and foolish experiments failed and, in his view, was left with no option other than to kill them. With some, he also sampled their flesh as a further means by which he could properly 'possess', and keep them with him for all time.

His constantly depressed state and lack of bondedness with others had developed over a good length of time and wasn't helped by his early experiences of family life in which his parents were profoundly ill-suited, constantly arguing, and malicious towards each other. They eventually divorced and left him abandoned in the family house. He had very low self-esteem and self-worth, he felt impotent and inadequate and unable to cope with other people. He was adrift and 'disconnected from the universe inhabited by everyone else, all those people who belong together and are bonded', he lived in an emotional no-man's-land [11] and all this was exacerbated by a heavy drinking habit which he acquired by the age of fourteen. All in all, Jeffrey Dahmer is a clear example of someone who lacks the skills and capacities of 'mutual benign control and efficacy'. In this sense, he found himself perpetually locked-out of the comforts and rewards which most people take for granted, and that are a normal, routine part of social life.

Authentic intimacy based on love and mutual respect were denied to him, as was even casual friendship and companionship. In order to fill this vacuum, he was required to devise, improvise and invent his own, exotic and sometimes hideously distorted versions of social bonding—and the warped emotions that accompany them—as bizarre substitutes for such commonplace ingredients of human existence. In this regard, for Dahmer, killing became 'a grotesque distortion of the act of love.... he had to kill in order to love, in order to indulge in the hideous parody of intimacy and cherishing which was the only kind of love he knew how to show' [11]. Fantasy became a huge part of Dahmer's psychological support system in the face of his alienation from normal reality and became, perhaps, the most important buttress

for him in sustaining *any* sense of identity. Masters observes that he was 'a man alone and alien who watched other people form bonds and did not know how it was done, whose counterfeit version of bonding was to drug a person senseless and hold him; whose only intimate relationship was with a corpse, because he knew no other way' (1993: 141).

To argue that Dahmer was 'swept away by his own compulsion' to murder in such hideous and bizarre ways seems a rather oblique rendering of his reasons for such actions. He himself at times appeared to believe this; it was a 'monster' within, that compelled him to keep on murdering, he said 'I don't know how else to put it. It didn't satisfy me completely so maybe I was thinking another one will' (1993: 141). I think the real reason is rather more prosaic, although none-the-less based on a complex web of motives. It was not to satisfy a putative monster's urge that he was compelled, but rather that he was chronically engaged in a fight to alleviate psychological pain and maintain a semblance of a coherent identity to help confront the void in personality and emotions that leaked from the nothingness of his social existence. The compulsion to kill was an attempt to stave off the existential vacuum and the ontological insecurity caused by a deficit in benign efficacy that enveloped and overwhelmed him. By adding another skull to his 'shrine', he could feel 'at home' by imbibing its mystic energy. The fact that another, or 'the next', kill could not resolve these intractable problems, is the real reason that such murderers become addicted. Each successive murder is not enough to erase or assuage the incapacities of feeling, and the emptiness and unreality at the heart of Jeffrey Dahmer's life.

Serial murderers like Jeffrey Dahmer are generally unreflective and have little grasp of their real motives or the causes of their behaviour, they are simply caught up in a continuous flow of activity towards the objects of their murderous desires. In Dahmer's case this was heavily influenced by the urgent need to make his victims stay with him, to continue to keep him company, to meet the elemental need for meaningful human contact and bondedness (this urge also strongly applies to Dennis Nilsen). In this sense, their actions represent a desperate attempt to rescue or resuscitate something from nothing, and amount to an illusory attempt to try to obliterate the chaotic debris of their friendless lives. Of course, this is not in any way an attempt to find 'excuses' for such inexcusable behaviour, but rather, to present what may be some of the reasoning behind their actions and which endow them with some meaning in an otherwise pointless set of circumstances.

### Ted Bundy

Bundy is rather different from Kemper and Dahmer in several ways. Unlike the other two, Bundy made something of himself in a social (status) sense, collecting qualifications in psychology and law and, at various times, holding down fairly responsible jobs, while mixing in middle-class circles—despite his snobbish and critical attitudes towards this very class. To a not insignificant extent he demonstrated an ability to engage in mutual benign control, although his skills in this regard were less than authentic. His was an ability to act out the rudiments of benign control—a rather false, theatrical and dramaturgical accomplishment, rather than a natural, sincere commitment to the essentials of genuine mutuality and social bondedness. But perhaps the most significant difference is the extent of Bundy's narcissism. Kemper's and Dahmer's self-preoccupations were, perhaps, born out of a consciousness of their own deficiencies. However, Bundy's whole existence seemed to be a search to secure the conditions under

which he could command centre stage and project a 'successful' version of himself to an external audience and thus, garner admiration and ultimately, gain celebrity and fame. He sought to project himself as a confident and successful member of the human race, to cover up his actual feelings of inadequacy and his inability to fit in with the middle-class ambience he so desired to join [12].

Bundy was suspected of killing at least forty mainly middle class, beautiful young females, and like Kemper, he also considered them to be representatives of the segment of society that excluded him and made him feel so insecure. A psychiatrist once commented that Bundy was 'somewhat threatened by people unless he feels he can structure the outcome of the relationship' [8]. This observation goes straight to the heart of what is required in order to be able to enact mutual benign control, in the sense that a feeling of threat stems from a growing awareness of the link between a failure to obtain satisfaction through benign (non-coercive) means. The realisation that this might be, or is indeed, the case, poses the question of who is actually controlling or might control, the relationship. Thus, the ability to structure the outcome of a relationship through malign manipulation, becomes a pressing necessity, especially if this is exacerbated by insecurities about inferiority, identity and social acceptance. His remark that he saw the legal profession 'as engaged in in a quest for order' [8] also reflects a deficiency in benign efficacy. Leyton expresses surprise that this multiple-murderer should be concerned with 'order', the 'resolution of conflict', and with the 'avoidance of violence'. But seen against the background of the importance of benign control and efficacy, it makes good sense, since it requires an urgent need to avoid pain and divert the threat of chaos and displacement around personal identity. The 'order' that Bundy sees as an intrinsic feature of the legal profession is precisely the order that he needed to buttress his self-identity, but which so far had eluded him, and which drove him to murder again and again.

This perhaps, is seen in the persistent self-doubts he harboured even after his escape from Colorado jail when he reported that he 'felt smaller and smaller and more insecure too. And more alone. Bit by bit I felt something drain out of me' [8]. It began to dawn on him that he might find more personal happiness in 'the order' imposed by incarceration which would allow him to develop his own ideas and to bask in the fame and celebrity that he had achieved by his despicable slaughter of young females. Another aspect of his identity problems was mirrored in his propensity to 'act out' various versions of himself, and to switch between them, as if to disrupt the expectations of consistency held by, others and to stave off his lack of a socially viable sense of identity. Thus, at different stages of his psycho-biographical career he proffered an establishment Republican self-image, whilst at other times he donned a 'rebellious' version of himself. It was as if he inhabited a continuously inauthentic world in which he presented and expressed himself as 'a performance' chosen for that moment. Indeed, in his trial he defended himself by acting as his own attorney which allowed him to project his intellect and legal prowess to a wider public audience.

The underlying reasons for such identity shifts were clearly associated with a more fundamental inability to grasp and enact the small-scale, but fundamental rules of social participation, the rules that make it possible for a person to 'fit-in' socially, emotionally and practically at the most basic and elemental levels. He stated, for example, that he didn't know 'what made people want to be friends' or 'what underlay social interactions' [26]. These are absolutely basic to human being

but denied to anyone lacking the skills of benign efficacy. His trial was a very public forum in which he could hold a captive audience to attend to what he thought was his importance and significance in the world. It was a form in which he could 'remedy' the way in which he had been overlooked in a world but which, in fact, he had found frustratingly beyond his capabilities and influence. However, the demands of his ego and suffocating narcissism could never be truly satisfactorily appeased or satiated, either by murder or through enacting his starring role as his own attorney since, in the end, his whole project was self-defeating.

## Fred West

While Kemper, Dahmer and Bundy illustrate some enduring characteristics of serial murder, they do not possess the features displayed by Fred West, who was aided and abetted in his killings by his wife, Rose. Most importantly, incest, sadism, abduction and torture feature heavily in their crimes involving their own family members, as well as female strangers who Fred and Rose found while driving around, searching for likely candidates to pick-up and entice to stay at their house in Cromwell Street. In this regard, the role of mutual benign control and efficacy -or rather deficiencies in them- are again significant, but in ways we have not yet examined. In this respect, the case of the Wests throws light on other consequences of a problematic relationship with benign efficacy. The question of the mutuality of desire required by, and at the heart of, authentic intimacy, is raised by Fred West who clearly did not understand, experience, or seek it out as part of his sexual persona, and hence, underlies his incestuous urges, his sadism, and the pleasure he and Rose gained from the infliction of pain and torture.

Fred West exemplifies someone who is drastically deficient in the skills of social interaction which rely on positive and creative skills that underlie basic human relations which draw others to them because they anticipate mutual loving regard. As substitutes for these skills West turned to incest and sadism which allow him to obtain satisfaction regardless of whether the people to whom he is relating appreciate this or not. They are simply 'objects' for his desires who will have things done to them, rather than real human subjects anticipating the play of mutual satisfaction. In this sense the acts of sadism and incest with his daughters gave West the 'impression' of his existence -an identity as an effective agent in the world- but never furnishes a mutually satisfactory relationship with others. In incest and sadism there is no pretence of love from the victim, instead the perpetrator looks for obedience and acquiescence as evidence of his own identity and agency as perpetrator. For someone like West who lacks a genuine need for mutuality and the feeling of authenticity, the viable alternative (which produces similar effects) is the use of sadistic force whereby the pain and suffering of the victim offer tangible evidence of the personal effectiveness of himself. In this manner, the victim's indifference is nullified and she/he is forced to acknowledge the existence (identity) of the perpetrator. As such, this is clear evidence of a reaction to the displaced self and the struggle for psychological survival, in serial killers, which I mentioned earlier in the paper.

I agree with Masters that incest, sadism and murder are different expressions of narcissism, but West is an even more extreme case of narcissism than that exhibited by other serial murderers so far considered. As substitute ways of relating, incest, sadism and murder require the eradication of true emotion, in order to be able to treat a person as an object -to 'validate the doer rather at the expense of the person to whom it is done' [9]. These, of course, are vivid indicators of



how mutual benign control and efficacy facilitates normal, non-sadistic or incestuous behaviour, since they depend on doing with, rather than doing to, someone else, as well as choosing reciprocity to serve and satisfy emotional need. In this sense, perpetrators of incest and sadism begin from a lack of the capacity for emotional relatedness, rather than a deliberate rejection of relatedness as a desired state-of-affairs. This, of course, is not intended as a plea for sympathy towards such perpetrators, but merely to point to the reality of their situation as players in a social game in which knowledge of the rules of participation are integral. Unless a person has such tacit knowledge, he or she is excluded from the rewards of authentic bonding.

In Fred West the vanity, egocentrism and narcissism that formed a huge portion of his personality was certainly something that fuelled his sadism and murderous intent. However, it was also based on a glimmering awareness of his own carefully hidden deficiencies, especially his basic lack of power to achieve authentic emotional and sexual satisfaction. It is important for such a person to operate in a world of certainty and predictability because it is precisely their lack that creates fear and anxiety. To varying degrees everyone has anxieties about the unpredictability of situated activity in routine social life - how it will unfold and turn out [15]. However, in sadists and murderers, the fear of lack of power and control is extreme and intensified. West was fearful of letting anything of himself be 'stolen' by others. In this sense, intimacy, affection, and genuine closeness, rather than the mere physicality of sexual behaviour, was a threat to him, for they augur insecurity, loss of control and unpredictability.

## Domain Theory as a Platform for Explanation

The theory of social domains offers a general platform for understanding the activities and motives of serial murderers. Instead of single factor explanations, such as lust, humiliation, the monster within, revenge against specific groups, deprived childhoods, and so on, domain theory emphasises multiple influences and standpoints, psychological, biological, interactional and social-organisational. While acknowledging the significance of particular factors (such as humiliation, or an impoverished childhood), it places them in a wider perspective. In parallel with this, power phenomena - and specifically, the 'negative' influence of a deficiency in mutual benign control and efficacy - plays a crucial role. Thus, for specific killers this explanatory factor allows for a range of additional motivational influences.

From their psychobiographical experiences serial murderers acquire personal styles and emotionally toned strategies of control, employing them in their situated activities in choosing, enticing and ultimately, dispatching victims. At the same time, other domains influence these choices. Specific social settings may become important to a killer's modus operandi, such as Bundy's close identification with university campuses, both as a killing ground, and source of victims, Dahmer's, preference for picking up victims in gay bars and clubs, the West's preference for the domestic environment of their home in Cromwell Street (and Peter Sutcliffe's combing of red-light districts). Similarly, social contextual factors such as economics and social class - reflected in revenge, resentment or hatred for particular groups - which Leyton ascribes to Kemper, Bundy, De Salvo and Berkovitz. However, as I have pointed out, an over-emphasis on 'main', 'single factor' or 'primary' explanations, completely misses the importance of a problematic relationship with benign control which underlies and feeds into them.

## Humiliation, Lost Power & the Dark Entity/Monster Within

Where there is clear evidence that a serial murderer is motivated by humiliation 'in an attempt to regain lost power' [28], then it is certainly significant. Still, however, the domains platform and the influence of benign control can be considered as underlying and 'parallel' contributory influences. Where there is weak evidence for humiliation as motivation, then it should be dropped as a primary explanation, especially if more significant factors press for attention. For instance, although many killers routinely experience 'humiliations' (as do all of us), these may not, in fact, be decisive. More powerful explanations may well be pertinent, such as identity displacement and psychological chaos, ontological insecurity and an absence of benign efficacy. Similarly, the 'divided self' explanation [7], in which serial murderers are thought to experience an inner schism in which a dark entity/shadow/monster begins to take over, and which ultimately gets out of control and 'compels' the perpetrator to commit a succession of murders. One of Carlisle's informants, for instance, points to a more persuasive explanation when he says 'the beast can take over to complete an identity (what I call the 'displaced self') if you leave a hole in yourself. In other words, it seeks a vacuum. In a healthy person the vacuum doesn't exist. There's a sense of identity that prevents the need for a dark awareness' [9]. This suggests the greater likelihood that the compulsive monster is created to deal with the incessant pain of identity problems (caused by the vacuum of the displaced self) and to attempt to thwart psychological breakdown. After all, as this informant went on to say, 'when you feel evil there is a sense of power'. This seems to indicate that the invocation of a dark entity or monster within, is a desperate seizure of control, via the short-cut of coercive power, to compensate for an absence of benign efficacy, the experience of identity displacement, and the vacuum and mental chaos it causes.

An anonymously published account by serial killer makes some interesting observations in support of this argument and offers a first-hand account of the serial killer's perspective. He says, 'if there is any single reason why a serial killer does what he does, it is so he may seem enlarged and magnified in his own eyes through the wilful and violent degradation of another human being'. This is because just prior to every decision to victimize 'a serial killer always first experiences a sudden and precipitous psychological fall, an extreme low, which he can neither tolerate or deal with in any rational fashion'. In this manner, the act of killing, in effect, allows a murderer to rescue a viable sense of self - in order to convince himself that he really is 'a somebody, special, unique and perfect'. In this manner, he 're-establishes and reaffirms his own great worth via the brutal degradation of his victim'..... 'To become a real somebody he needs only to display his power to debase, his power to break, and his power to destroy'..... 'He proves his own personal power and superiority by proving his victim's 'worthlessness' through the demeaning violence he metes out' [29].

Strangely, this informant appears to contradict himself by claiming that the serial killers 'real gratification comes from the subjugation, terrorization and brutalization of his victim, and not at all from the actual murder of the victim'. I do not suggest that no gratification is derived from the degradation of victims, but surely, in the light of his previous comments, a killer's primary gratification must surely come from the (deluded) feeling that the act of the murder itself, completes his transformation - in his eyes, if not in anyone else's - into 'a



somebody' of value and significance, who is special and worthy of attention.

## Towards 'Concurrency' Explanations of Serial Murder

In this article I have employed a social domains platform with which to indicate some of the dynamics of serial murder and the multiple causal influences involved -including psychological/ subjective, inter-subjective (socially situated) and objective or contextual factors. More specifically, I have presented what I call a 'concurrency' model of explanation in which the notions of 'benign control and efficacy' and the murderer's 'displaced self' function as an underlying set of forces that feed into, and interact with, other, possibly more immediate precipitative influences such as hatred, vengeance, humiliation, 'being on a mission', sexual/lust, search for fame and celebrity, and so on. That is, there may be as many motives for serial murder as there are serial murderers, but we must understand such motives as interdependent and interacting with a whole set of other possible influences.

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