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DISCUSSION OF STEIN'S "FANTASY, FUSION, AND SEXUAL HOMICIDE"

STEIN'S ARTICLE is a superb piece of applied psychoanalysis. She demonstrates the power of psychoanalytic theory to understand individuals not likely to be seen in the consulting room. By using concepts of dissociated trauma, enactment, symbiotic fusion, engulfment, annihilation anxiety, and reparation, Stein provides a rich and compelling explanation for the motivations of two men who committed sexual murder. She succeeds in making the perpetrators' horrific acts psychologically meaningful, which is an impressive accomplishment.

Equally notable is that Stein's analysis goes far deeper than prevailing theories in the forensic and criminology literature. These theories emphasize paraphilic or sexually deviant fantasies as a cognitive rehearsal for violent crimes, but fail to explain why certain individuals with these fantasies act them out and others do not, or how and why these fantasies emerge and gain psychic prominence in the first place. Stein's method is based on inferring "meaning and agency" through analyzing the perpetrators' words and deeds. There are limitations, of course, to a method not based on data obtained in person. Whereas in-depth evaluations and/or treatment of Justus and Plethory could yield data that would more solidly anchor her hypotheses, Stein's analysis is well-reasoned and highly credible, and skillfully integrates the contributions of seminal writers, including Bromberg, Gilligan, Grand, Lewis, Lifton, Ogden, Searles, Stern, and Stoller. For me, what enhances its credibility is its consistency with my experience evaluating incarcerated sexual offenders' readiness for release from prison and my work in the treatment of adolescent sexual offenders, which I elaborate upon shortly.

It would be easy for most psychoanalysts to dismiss the relevance of Stein's article for their practices, because they do not work with violent individuals. Along with her earlier pieces in this journal (2001, 2003), however, I think this article *is* relevant to psychoanalysts for at least two reasons. The more immediate is that it expands our understanding of

some of the origins and functions of sadistic, murderous, and sexually coercive fantasies in patients with whom we do work. Although not likely to perpetrate violence, these people may attempt to redress and repair traumatic humiliation and shame through fantasies and nonviolent enactments of dominance or vengeance. The second reason is based on the possibility that psychoanalysts can make a unique contribution to recognizing some of the precursors to violence, especially severe, early trauma and its psychological consequences, including the kinds of malignant dissociation and vengeful, sadistic, compensatory-reparative fantasies of power and control that make a person more likely to commit violence. If psychoanalysts can better recognize developmental and behavioral antecedents to violent behavior, they can play a role in the prevention of such behavior.

Violent crime has complex roots, some of the most significant of which are psychological. Deeper understanding of violent individuals is arguably more critical today than at any time in history. In a recent *New York Times Magazine* piece on the photographs of torture of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers, Susan Sontag referred to the "increasing acceptance of brutality in American life," in which violence has become a source of entertainment, delight, and admiration. If Stein's work, and the insights she offers, bring us one step closer to identifying those individuals who are most likely to cross the line from violent fantasy to action before they act, she will have done something immeasurably important. Someday, perhaps, we can prevent the kind of horror perpetrated by the likes of Plethory and Justus, John Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo (the Washington snipers), and Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who murdered twelve classmates and a teacher at Columbine High School.

Stein's analysis is based on the fundamental psychoanalytic assumptions that human behavior is meaningful and powerfully influenced by forces outside of awareness, and that these meanings and motivations, while often not readily apparent, are decipherable. In writing for a psychoanalytic audience (and in arguing against those who rely primarily on cognitive-behavioral explanations and discount the impact of early trauma), Stein is of course preaching to the converted. It seems remarkable that assumptions taken for granted by psychoanalysts are so widely rejected, even by other mental health professionals. Dr. Helen Morrison, a forensic psychiatrist who wrote *My Life Among the Serial Killers*, stated unequivocally in a recent article (AP, May 8, 2004) that serial killers don't have any motives: "they just do it." More than one hundred years after

Freud brought depth psychology and unconscious motivation into the scientific and public realm, the most prevalent theories regarding the causes of violence are largely devoid of the recognition that behavior is meaningful and, to a significant degree, internally motivated by forces outside of awareness. I suppose this should not be so surprising given that the theory of evolution explaining human origins is still widely considered, in some quarters, less credible than the “theory” of creationism. That anyone in the forensic mental health field could discount the impact of trauma, developmental problems, and unconscious motivation on the proclivity toward violence seems astounding, but probably needs to be understood in its own right, an issue I return to.

I have evaluated more than one hundred men convicted of multiple sexual offenses and civilly committed to a prison treatment center until they were judged no longer sexually dangerous. What has struck me most over the course of this experience has been the ubiquity of severe, often horrific, sexual, physical, and emotional trauma in the early lives of these men. They experienced early abandonment, betrayal, humiliation, brutality, incest, rape, misogyny, and the profound absence of connections to caretakers with whom they felt valued, nurtured, and loved. Their traumas, and the environments in which they occurred, evoked terror, despair, shame, emasculation, impotence, rage, depersonalization, and derealization. As was the case for Plethory and Justus, when these men were first admitted to prison their accounts of their offenses were often highly implausible and full of holes. They sometimes denied having committed offenses for which they were convicted, abdicated responsibility for their actions, assigned agency and desire to their victims, or justified their actions based on manufactured or exaggerated intimacy with them. Many of these men began their treatments with fragmented, sanitized memories of childhood that included no memories of abuse at all. With time, the memories began to emerge.

Through very long term treatment, which usually lasted ten years or more, and consisted primarily of psychoanalytic psychotherapy (individual and group), some of these men benefited greatly. They overcame denial and dissociation, remembered and acknowledged many details of their histories and crimes, and gained access to emotionally wrenching experiences they had long ago learned to anesthetize, dissociate, enact, and reproduce. They did this work through establishing, over the course of many years, attachments to therapists, staff, and other inmates. As a result they healed sufficiently to leave prison, after serving their criminal

sentences, and take on life's challenges with, in the opinion of judges or juries and mental health professionals such as myself, a significantly reduced risk of sexually reoffending. No research has been conducted to prove that psychoanalytic treatment itself reduced recidivism rates among those men who were released. Yet one recent study found that men who were civilly committed and went through a psychoanalytic treatment program reoffended at half the rate of less dangerous sex offenders who had been deemed not sexually dangerous and were released after serving their criminal sentences, but without having gone through a treatment program (Kriegman, submitted, 2004). Cognitive-behavioral approaches are currently the dominant models for treating sexual offenders and, according to some studies, seem to be more effective than other forms of treatment (Hanson et al., 2002). Kriegman, however, points out, psychoanalytic approaches have not been systematically applied or studied nearly as much as cognitive-behavioral ones, especially with the most dangerous offenders. Therefore, he concludes, "we are still at the very beginning of the process of determining what aspects of treatment actually work."

We do not know much about the childhoods of Plethory and Justus, but my experience tells me that, if they were in treatment and had relationships that provided them a sense of safety, trust, respect, and recognition of their humanness, and that made them feel more accountable for their destruction and destructiveness, many of the factors typically seen in very traumatized and damaged people would emerge, and support for Stein's theory of causation would be found. The question of whether depth-psychological treatment is possible with individuals like Plethory and Justus is debatable. Just as populations previously considered untreatable, such as borderline and severely narcissistic patients, became more treatable once a theoretical understanding of internal object relations and the psychology of the self emerged, those who are prone to using violence may someday be viewed as more treatable once a better understanding of their dynamics emerges. Stein's work is a step in this direction.

When Freud placed fantasy and psychic conflict at the center of neurosis he took the spotlight off the role of trauma in psychological suffering. For the next half century or more psychoanalysts paid scant attention to trauma and its developmental and behavioral consequences. I believe this kind of discounting of trauma and its consequences is related to another common phenomenon: the pervasive human tendency to ignore

signs of impending danger or violence and turn a blind eye to horror and evil. Minimizing the seriousness of danger signs and failing to read the writing on the wall was evident in Littleton, Colorado, for instance, where police, family, and others underreacted. Authorities knew about Harris and Klebold's vengeful, homicidal, written fantasies and violent criminal behavior up to two years before the boys went on their rampage (*Dateline NBC*). Minimization and myopia were also apparent in the FBI's and CIA's failure to "connect the dots" before September 11, let alone conceive of something so horrendous as terrorists using planes as guided missiles to commit indiscriminate mass murder in the pursuit of vengeance. Turning away from horror is something we see when most of the world stands by or underreacts while atrocities are committed. This was true in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Nazi-occupied Europe, where many believe rail lines to the concentration camps could have been bombed and lives saved. We see the same process right now in our willingness to ignore what is happening in the Sudan.

At first people tend to be horrified, fascinated, even awed by atrocities committed by other human beings; but soon thereafter we turn our heads away. We often behave like ostriches in the face of evil. Why? Because we are reluctant to face the reality of trauma, even when the trauma is not our own. To face an act of evil, whether it is committed on an individual or on a broader scale—to see it as "really real" (Bromberg, 2000, p. 14)—unnerves and disturbs us. If we feel those feelings deeply enough and don't turn away, we feel compelled to do something to stop the atrocity, alleviate the suffering, punish the perpetrators. But acting requires us to disrupt our lives and to live with the ongoing awareness of horror; we must give up living in predictable and comfortable ways. Once we feel profound sorrow, rage, and despair about an act of human evil, it is hard to go back to everyday existence without feeling guilty, ashamed, and unsettled.

How, then, do we solve the problem of preserving our sense of ourselves as good and righteous while not disrupting our lives? Many of us take solace in thinking that we are helpless and cannot do anything substantial enough to make a real difference. Others think "how awful," then turn their heads, dissociate, and assign evil to "the other"—other people, other places, and other times in history. It is easier on the psyche to think evil is "not me" than to think human beings who perpetrate evil are more like me than not, more human than otherwise, as Sullivan said about schizophrenics. It is easier to divorce ourselves from trauma alto-

gether. We demonize people who so profoundly violate our sense of what it means to be human because it makes us feel more comfortable with ourselves and our lives. It distances us from intolerable feelings we cannot sustain for very long. It allows us to reconcile our sense of moral responsibility and our desire to do something reparative with our wish not to disrupt our lives or deal with things so dark and scary. Denial of the role of trauma in the etiology of violence serves this purpose.

Early in my experience evaluating sexual offenders, after hearing an especially grisly account, told in a matter-of-fact way, of the chronic, sadistic abuse and torture of an inmate by his parents when he was a child, I left the prison with tears in my eyes and realized I had no reason to think I wouldn't be where he was if I had had his parents. There but for the grace of God go I, I thought. He had been imprisoned for twenty years for repeat offenses against children, and his meager internal resources made it unlikely he would change sufficiently to ever be released from prison. With most men I was primarily infuriated and saddened by the pain and damage they inflicted on innocent human beings, but this time I was struck most by the ghastly details of this man's childhood victimization, and the inevitability of the path by which his own abuse, and the profound developmental failures resulting from his awful childhood, led to his offenses. I was shaken for the rest of that evening.

It would have been consoling to think this man was simply bad or evil. It might have comforted me to believe that the two of us were intrinsically different, and that it would therefore be inconceivable for me to have become a pedophile, even if I were subjected to his miserable childhood. I would have preferred to think this, to tell you the truth; but I couldn't quite believe it. I realized how large a role luck plays in determining the kind of life one can have, and I just felt sad. We have no control over who our parents are or, up to a certain age, what they do to us. This is a terrible truth for the unlucky.

In the case of murderers like those Stein writes about, or the children who murder children, we tend to think they have free will and choose their paths. I believe it is true, at least according to the legal definition of criminal responsibility, that most violent individuals know the wrongfulness of their actions. It is also true, however, as Stein emphasizes, that severe, early maltreatment begets violence. The "reproduction of evil" (Grand, 2000) does not usually seem so mysterious.

It is understandable that people respond to violence with moral outrage and blame those they think should have prevented it. If evildoers

are simply bad people, then nothing more than punishment of offenders and protection of the innocent is necessary. If we are to do a better job of preventing violence, however, we must also understand and address its roots in childhood trauma, not to mention other social and economic factors that contribute to it.

Violence prevention is an enormously complex problem, and requires the will, resources, and coordinated efforts of many. We must identify high-risk individuals and intervene before lives are destroyed. As society's designated experts in human motivation and behavior, mental health professionals, especially those with psychoanalytic knowledge, can do more than most people to understand the psychological roots of violence and contribute to its prevention.

Some will argue that because mental health professionals cannot predict human behavior, they really can do very little. We know the limits of our predictive powers. Yet we also know, as Stein tells us via Gilligan (1996, p. 125), that violence is a single step in a very long process. In a life that will turn to violence, there are numerous signs of impending violence along the way, some conspicuous and often overlooked, others more covert but detectable with knowledge and skill. One sign is a history of committing violence, of course. But so often, the first act of violence is preceded by a history of trauma. And therefore, the emergence of more in-depth knowledge of dissociated trauma and its psychological consequences among those who have committed violence—exactly the kind of knowledge Stein provides—may eventually enable us to discern signs of disturbed and disturbing behavior earlier in the cycle. We can then help those with frequent access to potentially violent individuals, such as health care providers, educators, and law enforcement personnel, recognize psychological and behavioral antecedents to violence and intervene before it is too late. Applying psychoanalytic knowledge and skill outside the consulting room is not an easy task, nor one most of us would readily embrace, especially in an area so dark; but if we save just one life from being destroyed, it will be worth whatever we need to do.

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