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The Social Construction of a Serial Killer

Much psychological research examining the serial killer has adopted an essentialist theoretical focus concentrating on the ‘nature’ of the individual who commits the murder. This study, in contrast, aims to analyse the talk of a serial killer using principles taken from discursive psychology. A courtroom transcript concerning the confession to 10 murders by the serial killer, Dennis Rader, was analysed. The transcript was read and re-read in order to examine how the killer drew upon popular understandings of serial killing, until eventually three main discourses were identified: perpetrator as ‘sympathetic’, ‘serial killer’ and ‘driven by sexual fantasy’. The analysis demonstrated that these discourses all served to reinforce the widely shared construction of the serial killer, i.e. being sexually motivated. Furthermore, the findings show how this construction served the functions of mitigating responsibility, justifying certain actions and obscuring violence. Possible implications of this construction and its discursive functions are discussed.

Key Words: discourse analysis, discursive psychology, serial killing, sexual fantasy, sexual murder

INTRODUCTION

Serial murder usually refers to the separate killings of at least three people by an individual over a certain length of time (Bartol and Bartol, 2004). Whilst there is an increase in literature on serial murder, it has been suggested that much of the scholarly work plays into the creation of essentialist stereotypes, which presuppose certain notions about the serial killer’s ‘character’ (Dietz, 1996). For example, that he is male and that his victims are powerless strangers (Hinch and Hepburn, 1998), that the killing is motivated by internal, psychogenic factors and that it is psychologically rewarding (Hickey, 1991).

There is one essentialist aspect within the dominant understandings of the serial killer that has become most prominent; namely the role of sexual fantasy. Fantasy is defined by Prentky et al. (1989: 889) as ‘an elaborated set of cogni-
tions (thoughts) characterised by preoccupation (or rehearsal), anchored in emotions, and originating in daydreams', and sexual fantasies specifically involve cognitions or images of a sexually arousing or erotic nature (Schlesinger, 2004). Although Krafft-Ebing isolated sexual murder or Lustmord as a type of crime back in 1885, the specific emphasis upon sexual fantasy was first noted by Reinhardt (1957) in his theorizing of what he termed the ‘lust murderer’ (Meloy, 2000). Since this time, attention to the component of sexual fantasy has led to the serial killer being positioned as a 'sexual sadistic killer’ (Hinch and Hepburn, 1998) in such a way that the component of sexual fantasy has come to be emblematic of the serial killer, in turn shaping how the phenomenon is defined and researched. For example, Ressler (1992: 41), in defining the ‘true meaning of the term serial killer’, states that serial killers are obsessed by their fantasies of murder and are driven to repeat their crimes until these fantasies are perfectly acted out. In other words, serial killing has virtually come to be seen as being synonymous with ‘sexual’ murder/homicide (see Meloy, 2000; Ressler et al. 1988; Schlesinger, 2007).

Seltzer (1998) suggests that this kind of construction of serial killing and the ‘serial killer as sexually motivated’ has emerged from the convergence of shifts in how we understand both crime and sexuality. In the West during the 19th century, there was a major shift in the understanding of crime, away from a focus on the criminal act to the character of the actor or, as Seltzer puts it, ‘the positing of the category of the dangerous individual’ (1998: 4). Also during this time there was a shift in focus from sexual acts to sexual identities. Thus, this double shift in understanding resulted in the formulation of categories of persons of which the sexual killer was one. Interestingly, Cameron and Frazer (1987) argue that serial killers themselves draw upon these prevailing cultural categories when trying to understand and talk about their actions. This suggests that the serial killer can be construed as ‘a discursive construct through which certain acts are made intelligible and meaningful’ (Cameron, 1994: 151). In spite of these assertions, there have been no published studies looking at how serial killers use these widely shared understandings of serial killing when talking about their crimes and life-stories. Although Canter (1995) suggests that such ‘narratives’ will most likely serve to construct the ontology of a serial killer, it has not been established whether they serve a more immediate and contextually bound function.

This has, however, been looked at with other types of offenders. For example, Lea and Auburn (2001) analysed the talk of a convicted rapist in a treatment session using a discursive approach and found that the offender drew upon dominant discourses relating to rape that embodied popular rape myths. These discourses served to construct the occasion as ambiguous and in turn raise the question of whether it was rape or consensual sex, which ultimately functioned to minimize his responsibility. In light of this, the present study attempted to discursively analyse the talk of a serial killer in order to examine whether any ‘expert’ and/or popular accounts of serial killing were drawn upon and, if so, how they were constructed and for what purpose/s.
THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

In line with Lea and Auburn’s study, this analysis drew upon insights from ‘discursive psychology’ (Edwards, 1997). Discursive psychology is an approach to the study of phenomena such as cognition and mental states that aims to move the analytical and theoretical focus from individual internal processes to situated interaction (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2005; Potter and Edwards, 2001). In other words, rather than focusing on how or whether an individual’s talk reflects the true nature of inner events (i.e. an expression of thought, knowledge or feelings), discursive psychology investigates how these inner events are handled and managed in discourse via the use of various rhetorical devices. It is through the primary work of language and ‘talk-in-interaction’ that all these inner phenomena become accountable (Edwards, 2006).

For example, using a discursive psychology approach, Auburn and Lea (2003) found that the talk of a sex offender, in the context of a group treatment session, served to construct an identity that functioned to mitigate culpability, as opposed to being seen purely as an internal event (i.e. cognitive distortion).

In the current study, the talk of a serial killer in the context of a courtroom will be analysed, allowing for a focus on how factual accounts are constructed and defended, and how blame and mitigation are undermined (see Drew, 1992; Locke and Edwards, 2003). Thus, taken altogether, this study aims to explore how the offender draws upon dominant serial killer discourses and to look at what interactional functions they serve in the courtroom.

METHOD

Data Collection

The data used in this study was the publicly available, 78-page transcript of a court hearing (Serial Killer Central, 2005). The hearing took place on 27 June 2005 in Kansas, USA and involved the serial killer Dennis L. Rader, consecutively confessing to all 10 counts of murder on which he was charged. Rader is believed to have first killed in 1974 and to have continued to do so for 30 years until his capture in 2004. He would often send notes to the police signing himself as ‘BTK’, which stood for *Bind, Torture, Kill* (Robinson, 2005). This acronym mirrors his primary method of killing he used, which was to tie the victims up, place a bag over their heads, and then kill them via strangulation. It is also worth noting that even though the victims presented no signs of sexual penetration, Rader’s murders are classed as being ‘sexually motivated’ (Becker-Blease and Freyd, 2007). This is likely due to the fact that Rader’s semen was found at some of the crime scenes and that many of the victims were found naked or with their clothes cut/removed (Douglas and Dodd, 2007).
Analytic Procedure

The transcript was systematically read and re-read by the first author until the various recurring discourses were identified. Once these were identified, sections of the corpus pertaining to these discourses were extracted and then rigorously examined using analytic principles taken from discursive psychology and discourse analysis (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Much attention was given to the ways in which events, categories and emotions were discursively constructed and what functions they appeared to serve. This was achieved by taking into account the rhetorical devices that were employed, the use of certain terminology, how the killer oriented his accounts, and the potential alternative constructions available (Edwards, 1998). Readers are advised that some extracts contain descriptions of a graphic nature.

ANALYSIS

The analysis focuses on the way in which the killer constructs his crimes in each of the lengthy accounts he produces. There were three discourses identified during the analysis: (1) perpetrator as ‘sympathetic’; (2) perpetrator as ‘serial killer’; and (3) perpetrator as ‘driven by sexual fantasy’. A number of data extracts are presented and analysed to illustrate these three discourses, with a more detailed discussion of the data and the findings following (in the Discussion section).

Discourse 1: Perpetrator as Sympathetic

In the extract below, Dennis Rader is responding to being asked about the first killings (four members of the Otero family). A number of rhetorical devices are drawn upon to construct a caring nature for the perpetrator before describing the actual murders.

Extract 1

1. Well, they started complaining about being
2. tied up, and I re- loosened the bonds a couple
3. of times, tried to make Mr. Otero as comfortable
4. as I could. Apparently he had a cracked a rib
5. from a car accident so I had him put a pillow
6. down on his – for his head, had him put –
7. I think a parka or a coat underneath him.

In this extract, Rader is describing a sequence of events that do not appear to be connected to the subsequent murders. Within this account there are a variety of devices being used to position the speaker as ‘sympathetic’ that work to normalize Rader as a concerned human being, despite the context of describing a murder
scenario. For example, Rader constructs himself as being sensitive to the family’s discomfort by stating that he ‘reloosened the bonds’ (line 2) when ‘they started complaining’ (line 1). The addition of ‘a couple of times’ (lines 2–3) reinforces this construction by implying that he was caring enough to do it more than once, presumably until the discomfort from the bonds alleviated.

Rader then goes on to describe how he attended to Mr Otero by trying to make him comfortable because he had a cracked rib, which he then qualifies by explaining the cause of the injury (lines 4 and 5). If Rader hadn’t provided this causal explanation, the listener may have assumed that it was as a result of a violent act on Rader’s part, especially given the context of serial murder. This would have damaged Rader’s construction of being a sympathetic character and so his use of narrative detail appears to defend this construction by counteracting other alternative explanations.

Rader goes on to further construct a sympathetic character in his description of how he responded to the victim’s discomfort. This is demonstrated in lines 5 and 6 where Rader is explaining how he put a pillow down for his (Mr Otero’s) head and a ‘parka or a coat’ down underneath him. Notably, Rader’s use of ‘I think’ (line 7) may function to reflexively display him as an honest person – careful only to claim what he knows to be correct. At the same time, this attempt to recall the specific item of clothing that he put down (i.e. a parka or a coat) serves to validate his account. In other words, the occurrence of a serial killer acting sympathetically towards his victims, which may be considered to be unlikely or contradictory by some, is constructed to be heard as a truthful fact via the use of specific narrative detail.

Extract 2 is taken from Rader’s description concerning the re-strangulation of members of the Otero family because his first attempt failed. As before, the extract contains various devices that work to construct and defend Rader as being sympathetic.

Extract 2

1. Went over and then took Junior – Oh –
2. Oh, before that she asked me to – save her son,
3. so I actually had taken the bag off, and then I
4. was really upset at that point in time. So basically
5. Mr. Otero was down, Mrs. Otero was down, and
6. I went ahead and – and took Ju – Junior – I put
7. another bag over his head

In this extract, Rader is addressing the murder of the young boy, Junior Otero. Notice the way in which it seems Rader will launch straight into a description of the killing, for example: ‘Went over and took Junior and put another bag over his head.’ Instead, however, there is cut-off on ‘Junior’ (line 1) that instigates a ‘repair’ (Schegloff et al., 1977). This repair involves the inclusion of an additional recalled component (lines 2–5), after which he then continues describing the murders. However, the content of this repair serves to further construct Rader
as being sympathetic. For example, by stating that the child’s ‘bag was off’ in line 3, the listener is oriented to ‘hear’ this as an indication that Rader was responsive to the mother’s request to ‘save her son’.

Rader then proceeds, in lines 3 and 4, to describe his emotional standpoint, for example: ‘then I was really upset at that point in time’. By framing his emotions in the context of ‘at that point in time’, Rader orients them to be seen as a response to the sensitive nature of killing a child. This emotionality is warranted through the description of being ‘really upset’, thus allowing the listener to infer that this particular part was not enjoyed. This ultimately served to defend against any challenges to his sympathetic character. A further discursive action to note is Rader’s use of the term ‘down’ when referring to Mr and Mrs Otero being dead (line 5). Whereas ‘dead’ or ‘killed’ may have been too strong to use, the sensitive use of the term ‘down’ can be seen to also function as a defence for his sympathetic construction.

The orientation to activities that depict a sympathetic nature is also evident in the description of events concerning the sixth murder in the series of killings. Extract 3 below involves Rader describing the final moments before he killed his sixth victim.

**Extract 3**

1. She got sick, threw up. Got her a glass of
2. water, comforted her a little bit, and then
3. went ahead and tied her up and then put
4. a blag [sic] – a bag over her head and
5. strangled her.

In this extract, Rader’s opening utterance about the victim being sick is expanded upon with the use of ‘threw up’. This serves to construct ‘got sick’ as being an act that she did rather than being the onset of an illness or suchlike. This may be partly because Rader described her as being in ill health in a previous narrative, but seems to function more as a stepping-stone for further reinforcement of his sympathetic construction. Thus, Rader’s subsequent account of getting a glass of water (in lines 1–2) now appears to be a considerate act in response to her throwing up. In addition, by stating that he ‘comforted her a little bit’ (line 2), Rader further qualifies this behaviour. The phrasing of Rader’s actions is somewhat ambiguous, leaving the interpretation open as to how he actually comforted her but, nevertheless, the word ‘comforted’ is associated with caring and consideration and so is used by Rader to construct the identity of being sympathetic.

It is worth noting also that, through the use of Rader’s previous narrative of the victim being unwell, this current account has provided a normative backdrop to interpret her reason for throwing up (Locke and Edwards, 2003). This counters the alternative inference that she may have been extremely scared and therefore obscures the severity of the situation and is consistent with the more sympathetic identity he is constructing. Without this interpretative context being provided it
would have been less clear as to why the victim threw up and therefore less clear as to its discursive function.

Conflictingly, in line 3, Rader follows on from this by listing a sequence of events pertaining to the murder such as tying her up, placing a bag over her head and strangling her. Despite this being potentially damaging to the sympathetic character that he has constructed, Rader manages this by uttering only a few lines concerning the killing. If he had launched into a detailed narrative about the murder, the damage to his constructed sympathetic character may have been more detrimental.

**Discourse 2: Perpetrator as a Serial Killer**

Rader’s accounts that relate to his identification as a serial killer are brought about when he has to account for certain behaviours and events that demonstrate premeditation. He draws upon terminology that is consistent with the dominant construction of serial murder described in popular literature, which serves to construct this as his ‘subject position’ (Althusser, 1971). By positioning himself as a serial killer, Rader is providing grounds to describe his actions as being in accordance with or essential to that category of person. This is highlighted in extract 4 where Rader is describing how he selected the seventh victim. The extract is Rader’s response to the Judge asking him about the term ‘trolling’.

**Extract 4**

1. Well, I don’t know, if – you know,
2. if you read much about serial killers,
3. they go through what they call the
4. different phases. That’s one of the
5. phases they go through is a – as a
6. trolling stage. You’re lay – Basically
7. you’re looking for a victim at that time,
8. and that can either be trolling for months
9. or years. But once you lock in on a certain
10. person then you become stalking, and that
11. might be several of them, but you really
12. home in on that person.

Rader begins by stating that he doesn’t know if the listener has read anything about serial killers. In doing so, Rader has implied that he has, in turn, indicating that the rest of what he says about the serial killers will not strictly be his own; a rhetorical device termed *footing* (Goffman, 1981). More importantly, by referring to serial killer literature as a means of making his offence behaviour intelligible, Rader has discursively positioned himself as a serial killer.

As a result, this subject positioning provides Rader with the means to go on and describe what he does during the selection of a victim. For example, in lines 3–4, Rader proceeds to explain that ‘they go through what they call the different phases’ with the former ‘they’ referring to serial killers and the latter referring to
‘experts’ who have written about serial killers. He then isolates one of the phases that serial killers go through as being the ‘trolling stage’ (line 6). Through doing this, Rader is defining his actions as those consistent with the category of person ‘serial killer’.

He then proceeds to describe what happens during the trolling phase. The use of ‘Basically’ after the cut-off in line 6 serves to limit the inferences about the subsequent account of what the trolling stage consists of, that is, even though it may last ‘months or years’ (lines 8–9), it is a behaviour comprised simply of ‘looking for a victim’, no more than that. Note also how Rader switches to the second-person in line 6 through the use of ‘you’re’ and ‘you’. This rhetorical switch from ‘they’ to ‘you’ is a way of trying to construct the ‘voice of without’ as being the ‘voice of within’ (Edley, 2001: 212). In other words, Rader has shifted from describing what serial killers in general do to describing more directly what he as a serial killer does, for example, ‘you really home in on that person’ (lines 11–12). This serves to reinforce his positioning of himself as a serial killer.

Overall, instead of being seen as an attribution of his disposition, Rader’s discursive construction of ‘perpetrator-as-serial killer’ serves to actually mitigate his responsibility or ‘responsibilization’ for the murders (McKendy, 2006). By implicitly categorizing himself as a ‘serial killer’ he has provided, as Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) claim, a set of inferential resources by which the hearer can come to understand and interpret his behaviours as being the natural expression of that category of persons. In other words, he draws on the inference that he can’t help doing what he did because it’s what serial killers do.

**Discourse 3: Perpetrator as Driven by Sexual Fantasy**

Rader draws upon another aspect of the serial killer construction by orienting to the significance of ‘sexual fantasy’. In so doing, Radar uses a number of rhetorical devices to construct sexual fantasy as being the motive behind the killings. In the following extract, Radar describes the events leading up to the eighth murder, focusing on the topic of why he brought his ‘hit kit’ (a briefcase containing implements needed for his offence).

**Extract 5**

1. Well, as before, I was going
2. to have sexual fantasies, so
3. I brought my hit kit

As Rader begins his description, he uses the reflexive term ‘as before’ in line 1, which appears to be an ‘orientation’ item (Labov, 1972) serving to direct the hearer to infer that his actions were in line with what had also been occurring in his other crimes. In other words, Rader is constructing this and his previous murders as being as a result of ‘going to have sexual fantasies’ (lines 1–2). The use of the phrasing ‘going to have’ suggests that Rader’s sexual fantasies were some sort of
act in which he was going to become engaged. Framing his remarks in this way also serves to construct Rader as knowing what he was going to do beforehand, therefore, justifying the subsequent comment ‘so I brought my hit kit’ (lines 2–3). Thus, stating that he was going to have sexual fantasies serves the ‘literal act’ of justifying why his ‘hit kit’ was a necessary item to have taken with him, but also serves the ‘primary act’ of constructing his actions as being some type of ambiguous sexual event, rather than a criminal offence (Schiffrin, 1994). This reformulation of deliberate violent acts into sexual acts serves to conceal the violence (see also Coates and Wade [2004] for how this is managed in the talk of judges).

In extract 6, Rader is describing the events immediately following the murder of the victim in count 8.

Extract 6

1. After that, since I was in the
2. sexual fantasy, I went ahead
3. and stripped her and probably
4. went ahead and – I’m not sure
5. if I tied her up at that point in
6. time, but anyway, she was nude,
7. and I put her on a blanket

This extract opens with Rader saying ‘After that’, which is in reference to the killing, on from which he describes certain post-mortem acts such as stripping and tying her up. However, before he begins to describe these acts he inserts a justifying sentence (lines1–2) that orients listeners to know that he was ‘in’ a sexual fantasy at the time. By formulating sexual fantasy as being the motivating force behind his actions, Rader is sexualizing the nature of the killings so as to make them somewhat comprehensible to the listener. This is also, as previously stated, consistent with the dominant understanding of the serial killer and thus helps counter any alternative inference as to the purpose of his actions (i.e. stripping the victim to remove forensic evidence). The way that Rader continues his account draws on and reinforces the understanding of deviant sexual fantasy being a powerful driver of behaviour, capable of taking hold of an actor, implicitly rendering him relatively passive and blameless in the event.

By virtue of the fact that the descriptions relate to murder, Rader’s sexual fantasies are thus framed as being deviant or abnormal rather than normative. Furthermore, the fact that Rader frames himself as being ‘in’ the fantasy (line 1) serves to convey the suggestion that he had no control over them. He is essentially constructing the idea that once he is in the sexual fantasy, he must do the things that are scripted within it. Put together, these two constructions, the deviant nature and uncontrollability of the fantasies, serve to reduce his responsibility and obscure the severity of the violence much like the other identified discourses do.

Overall, within these two extracts, Rader has drawn upon the discourse of ‘sexual fantasy’ and, via the use of certain rhetorical devices, has used them to
justify his actions (i.e. bringing a kit, stripping the victim) and consequently, his crimes in general. This, in turn, sees Rader implicitly placing sexual desire or drive as the motivation for his crimes, which mitigates the direct responsibility of freely deciding to kill, and also further serves to obscure the violence, which was evidently involved in the murders. As previously mentioned, this type of blame mitigation has been found within the talk of rapists who construct their crimes as consensual sex (Lea and Auburn, 2001).

DISCUSSION

In this study, the detailed analysis of a serial killer’s talk has led to the identification of three major discourses: (1) perpetrator as ‘sympathetic’; (2) perpetrator as ‘serial killer’; and (3) perpetrator as ‘driven by sexual fantasy’. The implication of these three discourses is that they construct a seemingly contradictory identity for the perpetrator, which serves the action of mitigating responsibility and obscuring violence. For example, Rader’s versions of events, which portray his actions as ‘sympathetic’, serve to construct a considerate, humane and somewhat positive identity, thus attempting to counteract any inferences that suggest a violent motive for his actions. Second, Rader’s indirect categorization or expert positioning of himself as a ‘serial killer’ is done in such a way that allows for certain behaviours to be inferred as typical of that category of person, denying Rader of having a choice over his actions. Third, Rader uses ‘sexual fantasy’ to account for the motivation behind (and justification for) many of his crimes and specific actions, which serve to exculpate him and obscure violence even further. An important point to highlight is that the three discourses can be seen to interrelate, in that they essentially construct Rader as being a good and caring person who unfortunately happens to be a serial killer, uncontrollably driven by sexual fantasies. Such a construction plays into the popular idea of the serial killer being a kind of ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ character, which crime writers and the media have reinforced (Cameron and Frazer, 1987). Gomel (1999) suggests that this contradictory serial killer construction may be because of the widely shared yet conflicting accounts relating to the serial killer, such as the ‘born monster’ or ‘abused child’. These accounts appear to embody a ‘victimization’ paradigm (Gomel, 1999), which Canter (1995) argues is readily drawn upon by offenders when constructing the ontology of a serial killer within their talk.

This study appears to support Canter’s assertion, in that, when jointly interpreted, the discourses serve to construct Rader as being a man with a good (sympathetic) side who is victim to his darker (serial killer) side. Thus, this broader reading of the serial killer construction can be seen to support the individual findings of each discourse, in that they all function to mitigate responsibility in some way. This demonstrates how the ‘serial killer’ and certain aspects embodied within this category of person can be constructed in an action-oriented way. It could also be suggested that these findings build upon our understanding of what many
serial killers (and possibly other types of offenders) are doing during talk-in-interaction in the courtroom.

For example, Coates and Wade (2004) found, in their study looking at the talk of judges in sex crime cases, that judges constructed perpetrators as being overwhelmed by psychological forces that drove them to commit their offence, and despite the gravity of violence, the judges’ narratives minimized the perpetrator’s responsibility. Similarly, in this study, the perpetrator is constructing himself as being driven by internal forces (i.e. powerful sexual fantasies), which does not accurately reflect his responsibility in the murders. It also serves to shift the focus of interpretation so that the descriptions of his crimes are not heard as being violent but rather sexual in nature. Similarly, the use of sexual fantasy allows certain acts, which may be construed as incomprehensible and callous, to be made interpretable such as the post-mortem tying up and stripping of a murdered human being. This also supports the previous arguments claiming that serial killers draw upon popular accounts of serial killing to understand their own behaviours (Cameron, 1994; Cameron and Frazer, 1987).

From a mainstream psychology standpoint, Rader’s language would be seen as a means to understand what makes him ‘tick’, for example, that he is driven by fantasy and that his motive is solely individual, pathological, and sexual (Jenkins, 2002). The discursive approach used in this study, however, allows for Rader’s accounts to be seen as supporting various aspects of the dominant serial killer construction, such as being sexually motivated. An additional implication of this study is that the construct ‘sexual fantasy’ itself can be understood as not just being an internal entity, but a widely shared discourse that can be drawn upon and managed in talk-in-interaction by serial killers and possibly other types of sex offenders such as rapists and child molesters. Although the interactional actions that this serves is dependent upon the context in question, such as a treatment session or courtroom, the findings from the present analysis, as well as Lea and Auburn’s study, suggest that it would likely involve the lessening of responsibility. This demonstrates how the management and handling of certain discourses in a courtroom context is done via intricate ‘discursive constructions that are hardly recognisable as doing the important business that they do’ (Sneijder and te Molder, 2005; p.694).

Fairclough (1989) proposes that discursive actions require a relationship with reality that often succeeds in changing reality. Accordingly, the various discourses and discursive actions used by Rader to construct himself as being a sexually motivated killer may have a certain consequential relationship with reality. For instance, various professionals, such as those in the legal and psychological fields, may attend to Rader and other serial killers in ways that are in accordance with this construction, for example, in terms of how they are treated, sentenced, and researched or written about (see Douglas and Dodd, 2007; Robinson, 2005). Exactly how professionals orient themselves to the discursive constructions provided by serial killers and other sex offenders is a hugely interesting and important area that should be attended to in future discursive research.
An increase in this body of research may one day result in informed training of practitioners to become more reflexive when it comes to attending to contextually based language used by serial killers, which in turn may eventually facilitate social change (Lea and Auburn, 2001). Thus, with this in mind, the present study contributes by providing an initial demonstration of how the serial killer construction, encompassing the notion that sexual fantasy is the driving force, can be drawn upon and managed in the talk of a serial killer and how, within the courtroom, this serves to obscure the severity of the violence and mitigate the offender’s responsibility.

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NOTES

1. Rader’s use of ‘bag’ in extract 2 refers to an aspect of his killing method where he would place a bag over someone’s head before strangling them.

REFERENCES


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