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### **Original Citation**

Willmott, Dominic, Boduszek, Daniel and Robinson, Rebecca (2017) A Psychodynamic-Behaviourist Investigation of Russian Sexual Serial Killer Andrei Chikatilo. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*. ISSN 1478-9949

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A Psychodynamic-Behaviourist Investigation of Russian Sexual Serial  
Killer Andrei Chikatilo

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Conflict of Interest: Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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**Abstract**

This paper looks briefly at the case study of Russian sexual serial killer Andrei Chikatilo. Whilst serial homicide has received wide ranging attention more broadly in the literature, Chikatilo's criminality and sexually deviant behaviour have thus far lacked any in-depth psychological explanation, with his crimes attributed tentatively to dysfunction upbringing and innate deviance. However, based on theoretical arguments presented in the present investigation, a more detailed account of what may have contributed to the development of such extreme sexual violence and cognitive distortions is discussed. Consideration of psychodynamic and behaviourist perspectives lead to the conclusion that a complex interaction of biological, psychological, and sociological factors may account for the onset and continuation of his homicidal behaviour.

*Keywords:* *serial killing, sexual violence, psychodynamic, behaviourism, displaced aggression, operant conditioning.*

## **Introduction**

Between 1978 and 1990 the Russian region of Rostov was gripped by a horrific series of murders. Fifty-three women and children were brutally strangled, stabbed, and mutilated in seemingly senseless attacks committed by somebody that has now widely become known as Russia's most prolific serial killer, Andrei Chikatilo. The married father of two, a university graduate and ex-soldier worked as a delivery clerk and lived a seemingly normal life despite growing up during famine stricken war torn Ukraine. Whilst the domain of *forensic psychiatry and psychology* has widely investigated serial homicidal behaviours in others (Claus & Lidberg, 1999; Greenall & Wright, 2015; Soothill, 2008; Williams, 2016), there are highly unique and distinct sexually deviant elements to Andrei Chikatilo's crimes that set him apart from those killers such as, the sadomasochist and erotophonophilic acts undertaken alongside the killer's widely publicized sexual impotence (Cullen, 1993). These elements display psychological undertones arguably grounded in Freudian explanations of his behaviour, with killing appearing to be the result of unresolved sexual conflicts experienced in his earlier life. Whilst plausible, such innate sexual drive explanations do not in themselves entirely account for the impact that harsh living conditions experienced during war and environmental effects of extreme social deprivation are likely to have had upon Chikatilo's behaviour. Psychosocial perspectives accounting for such environmental influences may too provide a suitable alternative explanation surrounding why Andrei Chikatilo became such an infamous and brutal serial killer.

## **Serial Killer Status**

For his crimes, Andrei Chikatilo was convicted of the murders of fifty-three women and children which despite variations in definitional classifications of a serial killer, undoubtedly results in such a categorisation of him being made. One widely accepted definition originally coined by the FBI and revised by researchers is that, the murder of at least three victims occurs, over a period of at least thirty days with a cooling off period in-between (Holmes & Holmes, 1998). More contemporarily, developing out a need for consistency within legal and research classifications of serial murder, Adjourlolo and Chan (2014) reviewed several variants of existing definitions and seek to provide comprehensive consensus. The authors outline a unified definition which

includes three key recurring elements necessary to defined as a serial killer; (1) the existence of two or more forensically linked murders with or without a revealed intention of committing additional murder, (2) murders that are committed as discrete event(s) by the same person(s) over a period of time, and (3) where the primary motive is personal gratification.

Despite occasional variations in the method of killing, most of Chikatilo's victims died from multiple stab wounds and were subsequently cannibalised or otherwise mutilated (Conradi, 1992). In fact, after his eventual arrest he explained in detail to a psychiatrist that he would typically inflict a multitude of shallow slash wounds to the chest area before proceeding to inflict deeper and more targeted stab wounds to the same region. Chikatilo explained this recurring method to be rooted in obtaining sexual arousal. In Cullen (1993) Chikatilo is quoted as stating, "at the moment of cutting her...I involuntarily ejaculated", going on to suggest "at the point of stabbing them I would often imitate having sex while ejaculating" (p. 63). Many of his confirmed later victims bore evidence of mutilation, particularly to the facial region and sexual organs, something he later explained to be the product of satisfying his urges to taste human flesh whilst still warm (Conradi, 1992). This abnormally deviant paraphilic process of killing for sexual excitation is clinically termed *Erotophonophilia* and described by Gavin and Bent (2010) as a variant form of lust murder. Thought to be a subcategory of the hedonistic, thrill seeking type of serial killer categorised by Holmes and Holmes (1998), apprehension of such perpetrators is typically difficult due to sexually sadistic motivations underlying such explicit violence being hard to distinguish at the crime scene. Similarities between Chikatilo's crimes and the characteristics of Erotophonophilia including; sexual enjoyment obtained from killing, recurring urges, cannibalism, and mutilation (Gavin & Bent, 2010), alongside his lengthy murderous career where he avoided apprehension, seem to make plausible the suggestion that he may have been experiencing some form of the disorder. Although the presence of such a paraphilia may explain Chikatilo's crimes, a combination of biological, psychological, and sociological perspectives may further account for the specific sexually deviant elements therein.

### **Behaviourist Approach**

The applicable of Skinnerian operant conditioning principles suggest that pairing behaviour with a given outcome that either positively or negatively reinforces such actions, influences whether the individual will choose to re-engage in that behaviour in the future. Moreover, applying Skinner's (1953) associative learning principles to serial killing Morrall (2006) suggested that continued perpetration of a crime can be considered an environmentally learned response whereby aspects surrounding the killing or the murderous act itself, act as a form of positive reinforcement and encourage such actions to reoccur. Accounts of Chikatilo's life suggest evidence of problematic past relationships. His early intimate encounters were said to be frequently effected by erectile dysfunction which by his own admission caused him immense humiliation and frustration. Cullen (1993) reports an account whereby a shy, socially awkward seventeen-year-old Chikatilo, having forced himself upon an eleven-year-old girl and despite lacking any sexual penetration, ejaculated during the struggle. Accounting for his crimes upon conviction, he himself attributes his offending to a failed attempt to rape his first victim (where he again suggests he was unable to obtain an erection). Making a disclosure to a psychiatrist he again reiterates that at the point of fatally stabbing his first victim, he experienced spontaneous orgasmic attainment (Cullen, 1993). This he stated showed him that "I became aroused by seeing people suffer" (p. 71). As such it stands to reason that during this incident the combination of the use of force and violent behaviour adopted became positively reinforced in the form of the pleasure gained from overcoming past arousal incapability's alongside positive feelings associated with the ejaculation itself, may explain the recurrence in Chikatilo's offending.

In support of such a notion, Rachman and Hodgson (1968) found early on that sexual arousal could become associated with non-sexual objects if repeatedly presented during positive reinforcement namely, whilst the pleasure of masturbation occurred. Alongside Chikatilo's own account attesting to such, the highly similar *modus operandi* displayed between crime scenes and upon victims' bodies seemingly supports this premise. Rachman and Hodgson's findings also appear to support the application of behavioural imprinting in Chikatilo, whereby normal sexual stimulation may have become manifested or paired with a paraphilia such as his presumed Erotophonophilia, something which previous theorising has argued to be frequently associated with events the individual attributes as traumatic, including sexual impotence and upbringing (Gavin & Bent, 2010). Research conducted with individuals experiencing sexual disorders found that adopting operant conditioning

techniques, such as extinction of reinforcement, aided the discontinuation of such behaviour (Emmelkamp, 1994; Bartol & Bartol, 2008), all of which seemingly supports the recurrence of dysfunctional sexual behaviour to be the result of operant conditioned learning. However, as Bartol and Bartol (2008) point out, it seems evident that conditioning by no means offers a complete explanation of the acquisition of criminal behaviours such as that of Chikatilo. Although the theory provides an explanation for the continuation of behaviour, it fails to account for the initial onset. In fact, such environmental reinforcement explanations have been criticised more broadly for what are thought to represent overly simplistic accounts of the complexities of human behaviour (Brookman, 2009) and therefore fail to account for the innate internal structures which underlie Chikatilo's behaviour.

### **Psychodynamic Approach**

Theoretical concepts of Sigmund Freud, although never directly related to crime by Freud himself, when applied to Chikatilo's apparent lust killings appear to provide a useful account of such actions. Moreover, Freud proposed human behaviour to be rooted primarily in innate powerful sexual drives and life and death instincts known as *Eros* and *Thanatos* (Freud, 1959 cited in Gay, 1988). Despite manifesting in the unconscious mind such drives are considered to constantly seek expression and through a process of socialisation, the interacting structures of the personality develop and the ego becomes able to balance the demands of the id and super-ego (Freud, 1927). However, in instances where an individual has unresolved sexual conflict from the past, as is thought to be the case with Chikatilo, conflict is said to emerge between the Id and Super-ego. If the Id resigns unimpeded by the Super-ego, the individual is thought to become dominated by illogical primary process thinking, possibly resulting in uncontrollable urges to satisfy violent desires (Freud, 1927).

Accounts suggesting Chikatilo was impotent, suffering life long relationship and erectile problems (Conradi, 1992) alongside confirmed reports of bizarre attempts to impregnate his wife with inanimate objects whilst she was sleeping (Cullen, 1993), seemingly provide some evidence of previous unresolved and atypical sexual conflicts. Under police questioning, Chikatilo stated that the desire to achieve sexual arousal through killing continually consumed him, something that in isolation suggests Chikatilo's previous unresolved sexual conflict

may have led to an evident overbearing urge to act upon the Erotophonophilic, murderous desires within him. In fact, further evidence supporting such a notion is found when reviewing police records from the time, reported in Lourie's (1993) book of Chikatilo's early years. Police investigations led to a former adolescent girlfriend of Chikatilo stating that whilst no sexually deviant or violent behaviour was experienced by her, she had terminated the relationship after eighteen months as a direct result of the perpetrators inability to maintain an erection during intercourse. Further problematic early experiences are also seemingly present in reports that Chikatilo's mother was raped by German soldiers in 1943 during World War II (Lourie, 1993). Whilst Cullen (1993) states that the offence was formally recorded by the police, where it is suggested a seven-year-old Chikatilo was present at the time, no conviction was ever obtained.

More contemporary psychodynamic theory argues that unresolved childhood experiences can result in conflict between the Id and Super-ego, ultimately leading to the emergence of violent behaviour (Gallagher, 1987). As such, specific experiences in childhood may have led to the development of what is historically termed an *oedipal complex*. Here a person central to problematic experiences and upon adopting defence mechanisms to protect self-esteem from anxiety, sexual aggression and what Freud described as 'Thanatos' energy, may become displaced unconsciously onto others (Freud, 1927; Halgin & Whitbourne, 1997). Alongside the aforementioned experiences, other accounts established by Conradi (1992) suggest during Chikatilo's childhood he was bullied at school and possibly more significantly, was regularly beaten and ridiculed by his mother for wetting the bed during adolescence. Drawing upon the notion of displaced aggression, it is likely that killers who pathologically hate their mothers but deny such a concept as an explanation of their crimes, perpetrate against those who are similar to them. The hate is directed towards the person who has harmed them but the behaviour is enacted upon unknown persons, namely their victims. There is also likely to be some form of dependency towards their parent or caregiver directly restricting the ability to harm them. This arguably becomes very frustrating to the serial killer because they cannot kill that person without indirectly harming themselves and thus as a result, killers perpetrate against strangers to temporarily remove their frustration surrounding such. Despite this it is thought the frustration however returns in greater frequency and intensity, leading to the continuation of such violent and murderous offending. This allows for the possibility that such aggressive and sexually murderous drives Chikatilo held towards his mother or other particular school children

could have in fact been displaced and projected onto the victims of his crimes (see Carlisle, 1993; Boduszek, Hyland, & Bourke, 2012; Debowska & Boduszek, 2017; Holmes & DeBurger, 1988). Notably, all of his victims were women and children. Gavin and Bent (2010) suggest this projection has been evident in many serial killers throughout history, from which Neo-Freudian researchers attribute such behavioural actions of lust murderers as a means of obtaining satisfaction for their psychosexual needs, the result of such problematic childhood experiences (McClellan, 2010).

### **Competing Explanations**

Although such Freudian concepts are able to account for the onset and recurrence of Chikatilo's Eerotophonophilic murders, behaviourists have criticised the extent of emphasis attributed to the deterministic nature of human behaviour, especially considering the fundamental problems associated with testing and validating complex hypothetical constructs within the human psyche (Brookman, 2009). In terms of attributing problematic sexual relationships and childhood events as causation for overbearing desires which lead to an individual's ability to behave in the manner in which Chikatilo did, Freudian concepts fail to account for why not all individuals whom encounter similar experiences go on to become serial killers (Morrall, 2006). Recently research has found evidence of the importance of social relationships and ties with criminal others in the perpetration of violence (Boduszek & Debowska, 2017; Sherretts & Willmott, 2016), however these social factors were significantly less important determinants of offence perpetration in homicide inmates, than other offender groups (Sherretts, Boduszek, Debowska & Willmott, 2017). For behaviourists a fundamental criticism of psychodynamic perspectives, including Neo-Freudian object relations theory, is the degree of emphasis attributed to childhood experiences and caregiver influences, which as a consequence negates seemingly significant adult experiences and environmental factors in the commission of behaviour (Hale, 1993; Castle & Hensley, 2002).

It is known that from the age of twenty Chikatilo spent three years in the Russian army (Conradi, 1992). Despite lacking any reports of him known to have killed during this time, this may be significant nonetheless resulting from the subculture often present within the military settings, where violence and aggression is not

only promoted but recruits taught the necessary skills required to kill (Castle & Hensley, 2002). In fact, recent research carried out with a large sample of male inmates incarcerated within ex-communist Eastern European prisons, displayed the importance of environmental exposure in the development of sexually violent attitudes towards women (Debowska, Boduszek & Willmott, 2017). Operant conditioning principles implemented alongside Social Learning Theory assumptions offers a useful explanation for the onset of serial killing. Grossman (1996) concurring with Bandura's (1978) aggression findings proposed, through a process of higher ranking officers becoming role models, often reported to most consistently personify the military culture of dehumanising violence and death as a way of life, soldiers such as Chikatilo learn to adopt such behaviour. Subsequently violent and murderous behaviour adopted in striving to resemble such role models becomes positively reinforced from the praise obtained from fellow soldiers (Grossman, 1996). Whilst for Chikatilo, killing outside of his military service is unlikely to have been reinforced by fellow comrade's praise, it may explain how he learned to kill so callously and how such a violent behavioural repertoire became internalised initially. Castle (2001) investigating North American serial killers found many had previous military experience, also proposing that such learnt and reinforced behaviour is seemingly adopted in civilian life by soldiers whom have experienced previous humiliation during non-military service. Accounts of Chikatilo are frequented by apparent feelings of humiliation possibly attributable to being ridiculed for problematic behaviour such as bed wetting as a child and erectile dysfunctions experienced since adolescence (Conradi, 1992; Cullen, 1993; Lourie, 1993). Therefore, a logical conclusion that may be drawn is that Chikatilo's aforementioned learnt and reinforced dehumanised killing internalisation's that result from the humiliations he reportedly experienced, are associated with a need to prove his worth and may in turn have led him to undertake such behaviour on to his victims.

Whilst such a behaviourist explanation may fail to account for the eighteen-year gap between Chikatilo leaving the army and killing his first known victim (cf. Cullen, 1993), consideration of the humiliation he admits he experienced from a psychodynamic perspective does appear to allow alternative conclusions to be formed. Katz (1988) suggested historically, serial homicide has frequently been reported as serving as a catharsis for humiliation the killer has previously endured, something which Tanay (1976) referred to as an 'ego-syntonic' killer, whom adopts murder as a coping strategy for unresolved psychological conflicts. This alongside Adler's

(1907) *Inferiority Complex* notion whereby in compensation for feelings of inferiority, people are thought to be driven to display superiority, may in turn explain why Chikatilo became compelled to kill - further gratifying a need to display his self-worth. An alternative to the assertion that military learnt and reinforced violence allowed for such behaviour, psychodynamic principals instead suggest that Chikatilo was likely driven by unresolved sexual and childhood conflicts. McClellan (2010) claims such suggestions do bear scrutiny but ultimately as with Skinnerian and Social Learning Theory more generally, do not fully explain why those with similar experiences choose not to become serial killers.

### **Conclusion**

Application of Psychodynamic principles to Andrei Chikatilo's crimes which explain such to be rooted in unresolved sexual conflict and childhood traumatic experiences withstand scrutiny when examining confirmed accounts of Chikatilo's past. Having said this, such explanations seemingly fail to account for any environmental and situational influences surrounding the killings. Here application of behaviourist explanations suggest the act of killing may have been conditioned and reinforced by the pleasurable outcomes that preceded brutal slayings and as such plausibly account for the continuation of his crimes beyond the first murder. The onset of the first murder also appears to be attributable to deep rooted feelings of humiliation reported by the perpetrator, which seemingly transcend into extreme violent expression following the repeated failure of normal sexual experiences. Alongside this, research has displayed the powerful influence of environmentally learnt and internalised dehumanisation that often develops within military organisations and other extreme hyper-masculine environments. The combination of such situational exposure and individualistic psychology, therefore appear to have led him to commit murder.

Whilst the psychological explanations put forward offer a plausible and persuasive explanation of the behaviour of one of the most prolific yet under researched serial killers of modern times, it is unlikely that such explanations can fully account for what caused Chikatilo to commit the sexually deviant crimes reported. In the absence of his own detailed justification, the full depth of Chikatilo's depravity is unlikely to ever be fully understood and therefore research and theoretical attempts of which the present investigation constitutes

one of the first, are undoubtedly further required in order to better understand this rare form of homicidal behaviour. Despite this, recent endeavours to overcome limitations that exist when accounting for such sexual homicidal behaviours from current singular theoretical positions, have led to the proposition of an integrated model of sexual homicide (cf. Chan, 2015). Incorporating both Social Learning Theory principles alongside components of Felson and Cohen's (1980) Routine Activities Theory, Chan, Heide, and Beauregard (2011) argue the importance (and prevalence) of a psychologically damaging childhood alongside problematic adolescent development, within populations of sexual homicide perpetrators. The authors propose that through a process of social learning and exposure to various aggressive and dysfunctional environments, deviant attitudes and fantasies seemingly develop and become reinforced. Moreover, once simple indulgence in deviant fantasies are no longer sufficient in the production of sexual fulfilment, such fantasies require gratification through suitable alternatives. Essentially hereafter the authors stipulate that, the motivated sexually deviant individual seeks psychological and sexual gratification by searching out targets considered to be attractive and lacking sufficient guardianship. Under these circumstances, Chan and colleagues suggest the varying paraphilic and ultimately murderous acts will be carried out (Chan, 2015; Chan et al., 2011). Interestingly, such a model of sexual homicide offending may therefore provide an additional alternative account of both the onset and continuation of Chikatilo's criminality that warrants further exploration and applied theorising, than either the psychodynamic or behaviourist explanations are able to in isolation. Future research should undoubtedly therefore seek to examine the utility of such a unified theory of sexual homicide, directly in relation to sexually motivated serial killers, past and present, as well as those thought to be suffering from extreme murderous paraphilia's. Any advancements in our understanding of likely psychological explanations may in turn, provide the best means of preventing Erotophrophilic killers from attaining serial killer status in the future and serve as a basis to treat such atypical sexual perpetrators once clinical knowledge develops further and where such sexually deviant individuals emerge once again.

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