

NOT THE KILLING KIND!

Cartwright, D (2002) **Psychoanalysis, violence and rage-type murder: Murdering minds**. Hove & New York: Brunner-Routledge. ISBN 1-58391-202-9. Pages 202.

*Sharon M Nortje
Durban*

Rage-type murder has become a focus of public concern with media reports of school shootings in the United States. This book explores whether a psychoanalytic understanding of the mind has anything to contribute to the questions that recent events have raised in the public mind.

Psychoanalysis, violence and rage-type murder: murdering minds is a scholarly examination of the role of psychopathology and personality in offenders who have committed acts of rage-type murder. Using psychoanalytic theory and case studies this book isolates key psychological factors that appear to help explain why acts of extreme violence occur. It emerges out of Cartwright's therapeutic work with violent offenders, at Westville Prison in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. He has an interest in particular intrapsychic factors that appear linked to violent behaviour, and how these differ depending on the type of violence displayed. Cartwright focuses on offenders who had committed aberrant acts of extreme violence but lacked an often-expected history of violence. These individuals lived apparently "normal" lives. Cartwright noticed a number of similarities between cases, especially related to the type of defensive organisation adopted and their general approach to conflict.

Within an object relations framework Cartwright sees the mind as made up of relationship representations - principally self-other relationships - where relationship to aspects of the other may be privileged and separately represented. The lack of integration between images of the other, and the experienced relationship to that image, is seen as at the root of personality disturbance.

In considering rage-type violence from an intrapsychic perspective, Cartwright does not diminish the importance of the social, biological, or neuropsychological contributions to this field of study. He highlights that these factors, depending on the type of violence being considered, have varying roles to play in explaining how violence is precipitated. However, in this book Cartwright only considers situational elements in terms of their impact on the internal world of the individual. Cartwright uses applied psychoanalytic research focusing on the Psychoanalytic Research Interview (Cartwright, 2000), an approach developed to explore intrapsychic processes and unconscious meaning derived from core narratives of the interview.

The first chapter explores the way the concept of aggression has been used in psychoanalysis. Cartwright outlines how most models lack clarity in distinguishing between different forms of aggression and violence, and how this leads to differences in the psychodynamic origins of specific behavioural manifestations of aggression. He points out that the dichotomy in the debate around the instinctual and reactive origins of aggression has prevented further clarity in distinguishing between different forms, by perpetuating the idea that aggression has only one origin. Cartwright sees violence as essentially defined by the physical act and its destructive intention, conscious or unconscious. Cartwright also points to violence as having a tangible, physical end that emphatically imprints on external reality. He understands this imprint as forcing us to bring the relationship between psychic reality and external reality into full focus.

The second chapter explores possible intrapsychic factors that translate into physical violence. The aim in this second chapter is to develop a template of intrapsychic dimensions that could be used to explore different kinds of violence. Dimensions like representational capacity, phantasy, and the quality of object relations shift in particular ways, and have varying significance, depending on the type of violence considered.

The final chapters set out to explore the internal world of those who have committed acts of murder. Cartwright is concerned here with questions about what it means, at an intrapsychic level, to commit an act of murder. His focus is on what it means to commit murder *in this way*. He does not make a claim that a single personality type or psychodynamic profile can account for all acts of explosive violence. He is interested in a particular group of offenders who have rigid, encapsulated personalities that make them vulnerable to rare, but extremely damaging, shows of violence.

The puzzle Cartwright presents to us is the individual who appears to live a normal, and even good, life until provoked into murder by events that may superficially appear almost inconsequential. The possible role of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, psychotic disorders, intellectual functioning, and alcohol/drug abuse are critically considered. Cartwright argues that although some forms of psychopathology may be indicated in some cases, these still remain in the minority. This seems to be consistent with findings that describe such offenders as “apparently normal”. In an attempt to explain this further, the character profile and psychodynamics of personality are reviewed. Cartwright shows how a specific personality type may be partially vulnerable to such ultimately destructive attacks of rage. A pattern of over-control is isolated as a key theme that best explains the “apparent normality” of the rage-type offender.

The relevance of the DSM-IV classification system of personality disorders for understanding this kind of criminal is considered. It is argued that a particular type of borderline personality organisation, not isolated by the DSM-IV system, best explains this character pattern. Cartwright links the personality structure to borderline functioning in a highly original way, using the concept of the “narcissistic exoskeleton” – an apparently stable personality characterised by a particular kind of defensive splitting which functions to keep idealised good objects and an internalised bad object system apart. The idealised object system itself appears to serve a defensive function here and requires constant attention to ensure that bad objects, associated with aggression, remain unarticulated and split-off in the psyche. There are evident links here to

Winnicott's concept of the false self, but it is a self that is genuinely experienced as outside of the self-structure.

Other factors such as poor representational capacity, the absence of violent phantasy, the absence of a clearly defined paternal object, and the way particular situational factors impinge on the individual are discussed as significant features of the offender's psychological make-up.

Cartwright's proposed model provides a good phenomenological account of many aspects of violent crime, in particular the dissociative experiences linked with rage-type murder and the lack of remorse experienced by murderers who strangely continue to feel that they are not responsible for the act they actually committed. Cartwright points to the cause of the murder as the collapse of narcissistic defences, triggered by events or actions that, at times, have only subtle links to these defensive structures. He has placed the experience of shame at the centre of his theory of violence. An ephemeral internal state created by the phantasy that the murderous action has achieved an evacuation and destruction of shameful "bad" parts of the self. It appears that the collapse of narcissistic defences, exposure to unbearable shame, and the use of evacuative projective identifications best explain the process. Unless particular intrapsychic factors and external reality come together in a particular way, at a particular point in time, murder will not take place. The predisposing factors Cartwright highlights are best understood as being vulnerability factors that may not always lead to violence.

Cartwright concludes by briefly recommending that in treating these patients the therapist should work towards getting the patient to be able to see a "third position" and entertain the possibility of alternative interpretations to their own.

In conclusion, this book provides an essential and provocative psychoanalytic contribution to the study of why acts of extreme violence occur. It is full of illuminating and relevant case studies. It also has clinical relevance with recommendations for people working with such individuals. Cartwright's approach is an eloquent combination of object relations and relational technique. In sum, this book provides valuable insight into the conundrum of how we can commit murder in an uncontrollable explosive rage with a lack of any apparent motive or plan. A must read for those of a psychoanalytic bent.

REFERENCES.

Cartwright, D. (2002). The narcissistic exoskeleton: The defensive organisation of the rage-type murderer. **Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic**, 66(1), 1-18.