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The Language of Lust Murder: Investigating Neutralisation Theory and Dennis Nilsen's Paraphilic Disorders

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Citation: Wallace, L., Harris, K., Fido, D. (2023). The Language of Lust Murder: Investigating Neutralisation Theory and Dennis Nilsen's Paraphilic Disorders. Journal of Concurrent Disorders.

Founding Editor-in-Chief: Masood Zangeneh, Ph.D.

Editor: Chris Lo, Ph.D.

Received: 02/23/2023

Accepted: 06/05/2023

Published: 06/24/2023



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Fido, D. Licensee CDS
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Abstract. *Background:* Discursive analyses of commentaries submitted by individuals with criminal convictions suggest they utilise discursive devices to manage blame, responsibility and accountability. Sykes and Matza's (1957) Neutralisation Theory identifies five main techniques these individuals may use to soften or eliminate the impact that norm-violating behaviour can otherwise have upon their identity and relationships. Despite rich evidence, neutralisation analyses of serial killers are rare and neutralisation analyses of serial killers' discourse regarding their paraphilic disorders are rarer still. *Objective:* This study aimed to investigate the applicability of neutralisation theory to Dennis Nilsen, a convicted serial murderer with potential paraphilic disorders not otherwise specified through discursive thematic analysis. *Study Design:* The study sampled nine articles sourced from Nilsen's autobiography, "History of A Drowning Boy", which since its publication in January 2021, has not yet been examined in this light. *Analysis:* The themes identified suggest evidence of two main neutralisation techniques: denial of injury and denial of responsibility, both of which are designed to manage Nilsen's accountability for, and the harm caused by the existence of his paraphilic disorders. These findings may have wider implications for the continued understanding of how serial murderers construct their paraphilic disorders, which may in turn lend insight into how best to identify, treat and further understand one of the most misunderstood groups of psychiatric disorders.

Keywords: Discursive Psychology, Discourse Analysis, Thematic Analysis, Neutralisation Theory, Serial Murder, Sexual Murder, Qualitative, Paraphilias.

Background

Constructionist Discursive Psychology (CDP) is the study of the ways in which people describe and invoke emotions and social actions within everyday talk and text (Edwards, 1999). Wiggins (2016) provides a list of identified discursive devices which act as the core analytical tools of discursive psychology and enable us to examine the discursive production of psychological and social actions. This practice is important and necessary, as CDP has evidenced that language can be used as a tool to manipulate an audience through the invocation of emotion and social action, with a view to inspiring a desired perspective or behaviour within this audience (Harris et al., 2022). As was noted by Edwards and Potter (1992), this field of study is not to be confused with the study of how talk and text may explain or reveal any underlying cognitions within an individual, because CDP treats emotions as being socially constructed, and aims not to view everyday discourse as a pathway to understanding cognition, but rather to focus on the role of discourse in invoking and influencing emotions and social action within others through the use of discursive practices.

Thematic analysis (TA) is a method of identifying patterns of meaning in discourse by illustrating themes in the description of the phenomenon under study (Joffe, 2012). Both TA and CDP are becoming increasingly popular study approaches in the field of forensic psychology (O'Reilly et al., 2021; Willig & Rogers, 2017) when studying the language of criminal offenders in various contexts (Auburn, 2010; Auburn & Lea, 2003; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). CDP research in this field is concerned generally with how offenders make sense of their behaviour (Wiggins & Potter, 2020) and their management of blame, responsibility and accountability (Byrman & Drugge, 2017; Selepe et al., 2020). One theory which embodies this is Neutralisation Theory (NT; Sykes & Matza, 1957), which considers how individuals use language to soften or eliminate the impact that norm-violating behaviour can otherwise have upon their identity and relationships (Piacentini et al., 2012), and identifies the following five techniques as being used to rationalise abnormal or immoral behaviour: [1] denial of responsibility, [2] denial of injury, [3] denial of victim, [4] condemnation of the condemners, and [5] appealing to higher loyalties (Harris & Daunt, 2011; Sykes & Matza, 1957). NT has been applied previously to a variety of offending categories such as domestic violence (Wood, 2004), war crimes (Kooistra & Mahoney, 2016) and sexual violence/murder (Boyle & Walker, 2016). Sexual murder is defined by Chan and Heide (2009) as involving the unlawful killing of another person with apparent or admitted sexual motivation. Whilst it has been proposed that sexually motivated homicides may better be explained as extreme variants of sexual assault (Kerr et al., 2013), this implies a degree of certainty that the act of killing itself must always play a role in the sexual fantasies driving the offender, and this is not necessarily true (Higgs et al., 2017).

It has been noted that neutralisation analyses of serial murderers are rare, despite the obvious presence of neutralisation techniques which appear in widely circulated interviews with well-known serial killers (Pettigrew, 2020).

There is a lack of consensus regarding a uniform definition of the term “serial murder” due to the sometimes vastly different nature of multiple murderers from one offender to the next (Adjorlolo & Chan, 2014; Holmes & Holmes, 1998). Many studies exist which denote their own criteria for constituting serial murder (Egger, 1984; Skrapec, 2001), although this study draws on the widely accepted definition of serial murder given in James & Gossett (2018, p.1124), which refers to serial murder as “three or more premeditated murders that occur, in a civilian context as discrete events with a significant cooling-off period between each homicide event, that are not sanctioned by any political or criminal organisation.”

Neutralisation analyses which do examine serial killers suggest that they use neutralisations to manage their identities, mitigate responsibility and minimise the stigma associated with being labelled a serial killer (Henson & Olson, 2010; James, 2019). However, the findings of these studies reflect only on how serial murderers neutralise their offences and fail to explore how potential predictive or internal factors could contribute to said offences and their neutralisations. This demonstrates a lack of consideration for the way that serial killers construct their offences, which lends little insight into the processes behind the ways in which these individuals go on to neutralise their behaviour.

Literature Review

Existing research tells us that there are a variety of internal factors which may lead an individual to commit serial and/or sexual homicide, meaning that the “cause” of an individual’s offending is difficult to isolate; it likely stems from a combination of neurobiological, psychological, socio-economic and cultural factors (Ioana, 2013).

One of the leading explanations of crime and delinquency is General Strain Theory (GST) (Agnew, 1992; 2006). GST proposes that individuals who experience strain or stress often become upset, and sometimes cope with crime (Agnew & Brezina, 2019). Other risk factors associated with serial/sexual murder include addictive and other harmful behaviours during childhood such as alcohol and drug use, compulsive masturbation, and a preoccupation with death (Reid et al., 2019), as well as social isolation during childhood (Martens & Palermo, 2005). Hickey’s (2016, as cited in Arrigo & Purcell, 2001) Trauma Control Model (TCM) also associated unusually high rates of real or perceived psychological trauma and/or neglect with serial murder, suggesting a desire to reclaim power and control that were absent during childhood due to significant trauma. It has also been reported that sexual murderers with a history of early sexual abuse were significantly more likely to begin fantasizing about rape earlier than those

who were not sexually abused and were also predisposed to developing more severe sexual deviancy (Knoll, 2006).

Individual differences research also indicates that highly developed narcissistic features are often seen in serial murderers, as a means of defending themselves against feelings of inferiority, rejection and insignificance, likely resulting from an abusive home life during childhood (Kernberg, 1992; Summers, 1999). Similarly, a paper by Fox and Levin (1999) argues that there exists a sub-population of males who lack remorse, are unable to form and maintain meaningful long-term relationships, and cannot accept their lack of desirability, leading to a build-up of frustration and arousal that ends with these individuals achieving sexual gratification through violent means.

It is clear based on the existing research that internal factors may play a role in the development of an individual's offending. More specifically, though, one subgroup of internal individual differences that has been associated with serial and sexual offending is paraphilic disorders (Thibaut et al., 2016). Paraphilic disorders emerge when paraphilias - "any intense and persistent sexual interest other than sexual interest in genital stimulation or preparatory fondling with phenotypically normal, physically mature, consenting human partners" - begin to either cause distress or impairment to the individual, or paraphilias whose satisfaction entails personal harm, or risk of harm, to others (DSM-5, 2013, p. 685; Perotta, 2019; Yakeley & Wood, 2014). Examples of paraphilic disorders which have previously been associated with offending include paedophilic disorders (Thibaut et al., 2016), exhibitionistic disorders (Clark et al., 2016) and necrophiliac disorders (Chan & Beauregard, 2016),.

The term "necrophilia" translates literally to "love of the dead" (Vasudevan et al., 2019) and refers to a paraphilia whereby the perpetrator achieves sexual gratification by engaging in sex with the dead (Aggrawal, 2009). In the DSM-V, recurrent, intense sexual interest in corpses can be diagnosed under Other Specified Paraphilic Disorder (necrophilia) when it begins to cause marked distress or impairment in important areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kumar et al., 2019). This paraphilic disorder, particularly connected with sexual homicide, is rare and unique (Stein et al., 2010).

Dennis Nilsen, otherwise known as the "Kindly Killer" or the "Muswell Hill Murderer" was a Scottish serial killer and widely reported necrophile (Cook & James, 2002; Kumar et al., 2019; Vasudevan et al., 2019) who operated in the Cricklewood and Muswell Hill areas of London between 1978 and 1983 before being captured, and later sentenced to life imprisonment in November 1983 (Chan, 2019). He was responsible for the murder and dismemberment of 15 young men (Seltzer, 2013) and made attempts on at least seven other lives during his operating years (Rollin, 1985). Nilsen lured his victims, most of whom were jobless or homeless (Martens & Palermo, 2005) to his flat with the promise of alcohol and/or shelter, before strangling and/or drowning them and performing a ritual of

fondling, bathing, shaving, grooming, masturbating over and sometimes performing sexual acts upon the bodies (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021). The ritual would end with the bodies being concealed beneath the floorboards in Nilsen's flat to be removed periodically at later dates so that the ritual could be repeated, or so that Nilsen could spend time in their company, either watching television and listening to music or conversing mentally with them (Martens & Palermo, 2005; Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021). Nilsen would dispose of the remains either by burning them in his garden, or by flushing the pieces down the toilet (Chan, 2019).

Ritualistic behaviour, like that demonstrated in the case of Dennis Nilsen, has been linked to paraphilic disorders (Arrigo & Purcell, 2001; Shipley & Arrigo, 2008). According to Hazelwood & Warren (2008), when a ritualistic offender is involved in a sexual crime, there is almost always evidence of paraphiliac behaviour. This same paper noted the relationship between paraphilic disorders and ritualistic serial/sexual murder in reference to ritualistic offenders' attempts to recreate a 'situation' first devised within their paraphilic fantasies – e.g., master-slave fantasies wherein victims are held in captivity prior to murder – as well as the contribution of self-perception to spurring on the repetitious sexual fantasies and eventual re-enactments of these fantasies. Hazelwood and Warren (2008) explain this as the individual seeking to experience himself as he is experienced within this erotic context; seeking self-perception as it is being acted out in the crime, not as he might describe or experience himself in everyday life. Ritualistic behaviour of this nature is often linked to a paraphilic desire for domination/subjugation of victims (Purcell & Arrigo, 2006) and an excessive, active retreat into a deviant fantasy reverie, stemming from a deadly convergence of early childhood attachment disruptions, psychopathy and early traumatogenic abuse (Knoll, 2006; Myers et al., 2005).

There are currently no studies which apply CDP and NT to serial murderers' language regarding their paraphilic disorders, nor the relationships between offenders' constructions of their paraphilic disorders and the development of their offending, despite the existence of previous research which demonstrates that paraphilic disorders can be associated with offending (Thibaut et al., 2016). Of the studies rooted in NT which do exist, only two focused significantly on the discourse of Dennis Nilsen (James & Gossett, 2018; Pettigrew, 2020), despite his prolific status as a serial murderer. James and Gossett (2018) reported strong evidence of condemnation of the condemners and denial of injury within Nilsen's discourse as well as reporting that he had an inclination to believe that he was helping certain victims by releasing them from their lives, although this study is criticised because the evidence used was reportedly edited by a third party, and the discourse is not verifiable (Pettigrew, 2020). That said, Pettigrew (2020) similarly reported strong evidence of the same two techniques as well as the presence of denial of responsibility within Nilsen's discourse regarding his offences. Both studies relied on the language used

either in interviews, or police confessions, presumably because these were the only sources available to them at the time.

Nilsen passed away in May 2018, and his autobiography, “History of A Drowning Boy” (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021), has since been published. The second significant gap in the literature exists here because there are currently no existing thematic discursive analyses of Nilsen’s autobiography, “History of A Drowning Boy” (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021), despite its rich detail and potential. This study aims to fill these gaps in the literature by utilising thematic discursive analysis to apply NT to the language used by Dennis Nilsen; a convicted serial murderer with potential paraphilic disorders not otherwise specified, as well as to explore the applicability and linguistic links to related implicit theories. This is carried out with a view to furthering our understanding of the way serial murderers construct their paraphilic disorders, one of the current most misunderstood groups of psychiatric disorders (Lorenzo et al., 2018).

Methodology

Study Design

The study followed a qualitative thematic analysis design which utilised discursive psychology to investigate to what extent NT, CDP and other implicit theories can be applied to the language used by Dennis Nilsen regarding necrophilia and other related paraphilic disorders. The data collected were direct quotes sourced from Nilsen’s autobiography, “History of A Drowning Boy” (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021). Publicly accessible video footage of Dennis Nilsen’s police interviews was also reviewed (Phipps, 2013; Reid, 2021). This was the most appropriate method for this study because the materials needed to gather information directly from serial killers is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain due to incarceration, execution and death (James & Gossett, 2018). The qualitative approach to this research was also advised, because qualitative methods are known to produce more detailed and insightful results, due to the lack of statistic-related limitations often faced by quantitative methods (Forman et al., 2008). Thematic analysis is a flexible and accessible method of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), made more specific and further developed by the application of discursive devices (Clarke & Braun, 2014; Gleeson, 2012) and is therefore a commonly used method for examining neutralisation and offending because it is known to produce results that could not have been produced using quantitative methods (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; McGrath, 2021; Nikki, 2013).

Data and Sampling

Data was sampled directly either from Dennis Nilsen’s autobiography, “History of A Drowning Boy” (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021) or from filmed interviews available to the public online via YouTube and digital news articles (Phipps, 2013; Reid, 2021), as these are the most direct methods of accessing serial killer discourse (James & Gossett, 2018). The

online interviews were selected in addition to the autobiography in order to provide a broader range of instances where Dennis Nilsen has spoken freely and on-record about his offences and his own psychology. The key terms used to search for these interviews using YouTube and Google Chrome were “Real Dennis Nilsen Interview Footage” and “Real Dennis Nilsen Tape”. Dramatic reconstructions of interviews were excluded as they cannot be verified.

Materials

The materials required for this study were a copy of Dennis Nilsen’s “History of A Drowning Boy”, and the two pieces of interview footage (Phipps, 2013; Reid, 2021) accessed digitally via the YouTube search browser and Google Chrome.

Ethical Consideration

This research was approved by a UK institutional ethics committee on the 8th of February 2022. Due to the subjective nature of thematic discursive analysis, results are open to interpretation and thus should be examined with caution. The present study does not aim to make inferences about the factuality of Dennis Nilsen’s words, nor the underlying cognition behind them.

Results

The process of thematic discursive analysis revealed that the most prominent neutralisation techniques used within Dennis Nilsen’s “History of A Drowning Boy” were denial of injury (DoI) and denial of responsibility (DoR). The analysis also allowed for the identification of three main themes, falling under the two categories of “neutralisation of harm” and “neutralisation of responsibility” which are as follows: [1] Depersonalising and Anonymising Victims to Neutralise the Harm Caused by Paraphilic Disorders, [2] Misrepresenting “Harm” as being Tantamount to Killing to Neutralise the Actual Harm Caused by his Paraphilic Disorders and [3] Personifying “The Ritual” and it’s Birth as a Separate Entity to Neutralise Responsibility for Paraphilic Disorders. The police interview footage accessed online (Phipps, 2023; Reid, 2021) was found to be too brief and lacking in detail to carry out significant thematic analysis and was therefore excluded from the analysis.

Discursive devices and neutralisation techniques identified within the extracts from “History of A Drowning Boy” have been highlighted in **bold**.

Theme 1 – Depersonalising and Anonymising Victims to Neutralise the Harm Caused by Paraphilic Disorders:

This section of the analysis considers how the author uses linguistic features and discursive devices to depersonalise and anonymise his victims in order to neutralise the harm caused by his paraphilic disorders and therefore minimise sympathy felt for the victims.

Extract A – **“I remembered no frisson as I strangled Martyn Duffey with a ligature, just a determined expectation charged with great physical strength and energy while being blind to everything else. I was also disinhibited by alcohol, without which I couldn’t summon the courage to do the vital deed. I didn’t see the act as killing Martyn Duffey but a necessary and compulsive act of removing his will and personality from his body so that I could enjoy imbuing it with my own will and my own desires.”** (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021, p. 125).

Extract A begins with a disclaimer designed to minimise the impact had by the statement which depicts the author’s strangling of his victim, by specifying that no sexual gratification was achieved through the act of killing itself. The author then uses mild emotive language to describe his determination, followed by the metaphorical use of DoR depicting himself as being “blind” to everything outside the act of homicide he was committing. This is followed by further evidence of DoR in the form of attributing some of the blame to alcohol; by reminding the reader that he was disinhibited at the time of the attack, Nilsen is able to depict an image of diminished responsibility. Next there is evidence of hedging followed by DoI whereby Nilsen states that he did not perceive the act as murder, as opposed to stating outright that it was not an act of murder. In doing this, he displays a sense of self awareness that aims to encourage readers to identify with him, whilst simultaneously implying that the act itself was somehow less harmful than a standard murder. Nilsen’s next statement involves extreme case formulation through the claim that the murder was “necessary”, as well as “compulsive” which constitutes further evidence of DoR as it depicts Nilsen as being physically unable to prevent himself from committing the homicide. He describes the victim’s identity as being inherently separate from his body, which he refers to as “it”, in order to further depersonalise the victim to therefore reinforce DoI and preemptively minimise any negative feelings such as shock, anger and disgust within readers when the text moves on to describe the acts Nilsen committed upon the deceased’s body.

Extract B – **“... at the moment of his death, he had become the central prop in my fantasy... in the fantasy, someone else had killed him and I was just taking care of the mess... I couldn’t bear to think about the real individual behind the shell of this real person.** That would have been **defensively driven from my consciousness; another retreat from reality.”** (Nilsen & Pettigrew, p.118).

Extract B begins with an immediate pronoun shift in which the author depersonalises and objectifies the victim, reducing him to nothing more than a “prop” existing for the sole purpose of Nilsen’s fantasy. Similarly, to in Extract A, the author goes on to specify using a disclaimer that the act of killing itself is not a stimulating part of this fantasy, followed by minimisation whereby he recites that he was “just” taking care of the mess. This is designed to inspire sympathy and minimise the impact that his recollection of the offence may have on readers by treating the homicide itself as a kind of necessary evil, as something that he would rather not have to do in order to fulfil his fantasies, perpetuating the idea that Nilsen is as much a victim to his desires as the individuals he killed. Nilsen then utilises emotive language to express his distress at the knowledge that the victim in question once had an identity beyond existing as a prop. The referral to the victim’s body as being a “shell” of a “real person” assists this depersonalisation by reinforcing the notion that when a person has died, nothing of their identity can remain, therefore minimising or neutralising the impact of later declarations concerning Nilsen’s behaviour towards the bodies after death. Finally, the extract closes with a metaphor regarding Nilsen’s “retreat from reality”, wherein he explains that the victim’s existence and identity prior to their death would have been “defensively driven” from his mind. This is designed to reinforce the notion that he is a victim of his own paraphilic disorders and that the acts he commits as a result of their influence are almost as harmful to him personally as they are to his victims.

Extract C – “The key indicator that **the tenant had ‘vacated the premises’** was when the bladder or bowels had evacuated in his death throes. **This gave me the ‘excuse’ to wash the body after stripping it free of its soiled clothing and former identity.**” (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021, p.123).

Extract C begins with the author making use of an almost light-hearted metaphor to describe the evidence of death in his victims as being the evacuation of their bowels. The author’s referral to said victims as “tenants” reinforces a degree of anonymity which aims to minimise personification of and sympathy for the victim. The author goes on to explain that this process provided him with an excuse to begin the cleansing stage of his ritual, by “stripping it free of its soiled clothing and former identity”. This choice of words, and the decision to refer to the victims’ bodies as “it” depicts the bodies as being objects without identity, further emphasising their anonymity, much like in Extract B. This choice of phrasing is interesting as it implies that Nilsen is in some way providing an act of service, emancipating them from not only their soiled clothing, but also perhaps their “soiled” lives and the burden of their identities. This extract also ties in with theme 3, suggesting that perhaps by liberating his victims and freeing them of their identities, he is allowing them to be reborn as he was.

Theme 2 – Misrepresenting “Harm” as being Tantamount to Murder to Deny and Neutralise the Actual Harm Caused by his Paraphilic Disorders:

This section of the analysis considers the ways in which the author uses linguistic features and discursive devices to misrepresent “harm” as only having been committed in instances where victims were murdered, in order to neutralise the actual harm caused by his paraphilic disorders.

Extract A – “There were several young men whom **I’d picked up and used as props in my fantasies without them ever coming to any harm**. In the case of one guy named Steve Webster*, I picked him up flat out drunk in the street and... **I simply didn’t need to kill young Steve**... I stripped him naked **but I didn’t bathe him in case he woke up, forcing me to kill him**. I lifted him into my arms... then **fondled and caressed him before gently penetrating him** and ejaculating. **All he remembered was waking up with me** in bed in the morning. **In order that he’d be less likely to suspect any sexual impropriety the night before**, I put his jockey shorts back on him. I had no reason to believe that he was even gay.” (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021, p.129).

Extract A begins with the declaration that Nilsen met with several men for the purpose of carrying out his sexual fantasies, followed by minimisation through the use of the vague phrase “used as props”, which implies that they were harmless, perhaps even uneventful encounters. This also reinforces the notion that the bodies with whom the author interacted were objects as opposed to people, similarly to the objectification seen in theme 1. Nilsen goes on to declare outright that these men never came to any harm – a very prominent example of DoI and also a clear contradiction, for as Nilsen had already explained at length in the earlier chapters, his sexual fantasies regularly involved what can only be described as sexual assault and rape, neither of which can be described as harmless. The author gives an example of the kind of harmless encounters to which he is referring, and he recalls that he “simply didn’t need” to kill the victim in question. Based on the context of this extract and the explanations given earlier in the text, Nilsen’s desire was to have total control over a passive, young, male body, against which he was able to commit sexual offences without detection. This is of course, regardless of whether or not a murder is committed, inherently harmful. Similarly, Nilsen demonstrates DoR through the use of agent-subject distinction whereby he characterises himself as being a passive subject, who would have had no choice but to commit murder in the event that Steve had awoken. The author further describes the encounter which is, by definition, a rape, yet the author uses an interesting combination of emotive language – “fondled and caressed” and minimisation – “gently”, very much in line with the DoI technique of neutralisation, to lessen the negative emotional impact of the crime he is

describing upon the reader. Nilsen appears to take a “what he doesn’t know can’t hurt him” approach to the situation and, as if to prove the point that the encounter was indeed harmless, the author ends the extract with minimisation concerning how much of the assault the victim had remembered, followed by the claim that he had redressed him after the fact so as to avoid the victim becoming suspicious, all with a view to neutralising the actual harm caused by his paraphilic disorders.

Extract B – **“The act of killing was never an end in itself. If I’d had access to some kind of knockout drug then it’s unlikely that there would have been any deaths at all.”** (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021, p.140).

Extract B is brief but rich in evidence of Nilsen’s misrepresentation of harm as a means to neutralise the actual harm caused by his paraphilic disorders. He explains his belief that, had he had access to a means of rendering somebody unconscious not with force, but by drugging them, it is unlikely that he ever would have killed. This example of DoI perpetuates the idea that the use of a knockout drug for the purpose of sexually abusing or assaulting another person is somehow unharmed and is designed to minimise and neutralise not only his behaviour, but the very existence of his paraphilic disorders. There is also an element of DoR present in the extract whereby Nilsen appears to accept a lesser responsibility for his murders by suggesting that they could have been prevented, had he only had access to other methods of incapacitating people in order to achieve sexual gratification.

Extract C – **“At one point, I teetered on the brink of criminality** but drew back, **shocked and afraid by my own ambition**. I imagined that if I hit him on the head from behind and knocked him unconscious, **I could have him to caress...** I had a vision of him lying there, **oblivious to my actions**, as I pulled down his white shorts **and fondled his unconscious body...** **The aim would never have been to harm him but to express tactile tenderness towards his physical body.**” (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021, p.32).

Extract C begins with further use of metaphor when describing the author’s earliest memories of experiencing the urge to commit acts of violence. This is followed by emotive language concerning Nilsen’s shock at his own desires, which may be designed to inspire sympathy within readers and in turn minimise any disdain felt for him thanks to his demonstrating self-awareness. Furthermore, the implication that he was unable to escape these fantasies, no matter how shocking he found them acts as evidence of DoR. Nilsen next states that had he been able to render this person unconscious, he could “have him to caress”, which suggests that this is something the author has previously been deprived of, and longs to have, invoking sympathy. This terminology is also interesting because the use of the word “caress” acts as evidence of DoI by implying a desire to treat the

body gently and with respect rather than to harm it, which in the event that this body was forcefully rendered unconscious by any means, would be a significant contradiction. This evidence is continued when the author later explains that his aim would not have been to harm the victim, but to express “tactile tenderness” – an emotive appeal to the reader – to his body. This is a clear example of the DoI technique and further evidence of Nilsen’s tendency to equate “harm” to “death” in order to neutralise the perceived harm caused by his paraphilic disorders, in blatant ignorance of the fact that by rendering the victim unconscious and then fondling or engaging in intercourse with them against their will, Nilsen would undoubtedly be causing them harm.

Theme 3 – Personifying “The Ritual” and its “Birth” as a Separate Entity to Neutralise Responsibility for Paraphilic Disorders:

This section of the analysis considers the use of linguistic features and discursive devices to personify the author’s ritual, or *modus operandi*, in order to give the impression that the ritual was born and exists now as a separate entity in order to invoke sympathy and understanding within readers and neutralise responsibility for his paraphilic disorders.

Extract A – “Over the years, **the plot became more complex and refined, getting me deeper into it** and, **devoid of remedy**, it **assumed a vital importance** in my sexual and emotional development. There seemed, at the centre, **a longing for tactility but nothing came along to break the cycle.**” (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021, p.32).

Extract A involves Nilsen explaining the development of some of his earlier sexual fantasies, which typically involved him fondling his own body under the imagined pretence that they were not his hands wandering over his own body, but instead the hands of an old man who was groping and fondling the corpse of an anonymous young boy, with Nilsen flitting between imagined perspectives in which he was fulfilling both roles – the old man and the boy. The extract begins with an almost immediate personification of this fantasy, this ritual, describing the way that it evolved into a more complex and detailed fantasy which was “getting him deeper into it”. This piece of discourse acts as an agent-subject distinction wherein the ritual is referred to as an aggressive agent, and implies a degree of force from the ritual, with the term “deeper” painting an image of a distinct pulling or dragging on behalf of the ritual which has led him to the point of no return. This is emphasised further through the author’s use of the phrase “devoid of remedy”, creating the notion that the fantasies he is experiencing are spreading like an illness for which no cure is available to him. This is considered further evidence of the DoR technique – by placing blame upon the fantasies themselves for their evolution and development, as well as by suggesting that the fantasies are something akin to a disease, the author

neutralises any role that he himself may have played in the encouragement of their development. Nilsen goes on to stress that the ritual assumed a “vital importance” in both his sexual and emotional development, implying a limited amount of responsibility for any emotional or sexual issues that came later. The extract ends with emotive language through which the author describes himself as having a “longing for tactility”, which acts as a strong emotional categorisation of loneliness and is designed to inspire sympathy and understanding within readers. This is followed by what could be considered an accusation where Nilsen points out that “nothing came along to break the cycle”, once again driving home the notion that the ritual was growing and developing like an infection, born out of Nilsen’s own emotional anguish, which he alone was not responsible for, and which could potentially have been prevented, had someone or something intervened. The repeated referrals to the ritual in this sense, as though it is a separate entity with a will of its own, are designed to invoke sympathy within the reader and in turn neutralise Nilsen’s own potential responsibility for the development of his paraphilic disorders.

Extract B – “It was **the ritual with a passive male body that I craved. But the ritual had exploded in the face of logic and morality, splitting my life in two**, bearing away all that had gone before into another, **refined configuration beyond and against criminal law.**” (Nilsen & Pettigrew, p.117).

Extract B starts with an emotional categorisation which is not dissimilar to that of Extract A, wherein the author describes a craving for the ritual which dictates his decisions. In this extract, Nilsen is referring to his experiences after committing his first murder. He uses metaphor and DoR to describe the ritual as having “exploded in the face of logic and morality”, which depicts an unexpected and unavoidable transformation for which he cannot accept full responsibility. The metaphor and DoR continue as Nilsen describes the ritual as having split his life in two, bearing away all that had gone before, further reinforcing the notion that somehow the ritual was acting upon him and that he was a victim of it, as opposed to accepting responsibility for the development and encouragement of his paraphilic disorders.

Extract C – “Seeing him laid out in his coffin **brought to me a great earthquake of excitement. I had lost the good aspect of him as well as the painful trauma** of his abuse. I had wished him gone and he had gone and **the guilt came from this and my excitement and sense of loss** at viewing **the mighty fallen**, slumbering in that coffin **in the room where I had been born.**” (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021, p.7).

In Extract C, the author makes clear use of metaphor and emotive language to convey the array of emotions he experienced upon witnessing

his deceased grandfather, who had drugged and sexually abused him regularly during his early childhood (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021). He uses contrast devices and emotive language when describing his feelings of loss, relief from the “painful trauma of his abuse”, guilt and excitement upon discovering that his grandfather had gone, all of which aims to inspire sympathy and understanding within readers. The significance of this extract comes towards its end when the author uses metaphor to depict his grandfather as the “mighty fallen” – creating an image of a large and frightening individual, in turn reminding the reader of Nilsen’s own innocence and inspiring sympathy – slumbering in the room where Nilsen had been born. This is a significant statement because, as is discussed in great detail throughout the autobiography, many of Nilsen’s earliest memories of sexual arousal as well as fantasies later in life, stemmed from scenarios that he experienced during his grandfather’s abuse. There is symbolism in the text here whereby it is implied that as Nilsen’s grandfather died, taking the abuse with him in the very room in which Nilsen was born, it marked the day that Nilsen was metaphorically born again. According to Nilsen, it was after this day that he began to experience recurring and arousing nightmares in which his grandfather would attempt to drown him to prevent him from reaching sexual maturity, as well as the development of his most favoured and intricate sexual fantasies which he referred to as “the old man and the boy” fantasies. These were different variations of the same original fantasy which concerned an old man achieving sexual gratification through intercourse with and manipulation of a young boy’s lifeless body. This implication that the fantasies arose due to his abuse and grew worse after his grandfather’s death further perpetuates Nilsen’s lack of responsibility for the existence and development of his paraphilic disorders.

Discussion

This thematic discursive analysis was concerned with exploring the applicability of NT and other related implicit theories of serial and sexual murder to the language used by Dennis Nilsen in his autobiography, “History of A Drowning Boy” when discussing the existence and development of his paraphilic disorders. Three main themes were identified which fell under two categories: neutralising harm and neutralising responsibility. Themes 1 and 2 fell under the category of “neutralising harm”, and theme 3 fell under the “neutralising responsibility” category. Themes 1 and 3 appeared most prominently within the text.

Theme 1

The first theme identified within the language used in the autobiography was the use of discursive devices to depersonalise and anonymise Nilsen’s deceased victims for the purpose of neutralising the harm caused by his paraphilic disorders and minimising the presence of negative feelings such as disgust, anger and hatred within readers. This was

carried out using various disclaimers, metaphors and emotive language to first invoke sympathy and understanding within readers, followed by the repeated objectification of his victims and their bodies, which typically involved insinuating that after death, they were stripped bare of their identities and personalities. This depersonalisation aimed to pre-emptively lessen the impact that later statements may have upon readers when the author describes the offences he went on to commit concerning the victims' dead bodies. The discursive devices used indicate strong evidence of the DoI technique in instances where it is implied that Nilsen was in some way performing a service, an act of generous liberation whereby he freed his victims of their previously burdening identities, a perspective which was also acknowledged by Mark Pettigrew in the book's foreword when it was noted that Nilsen "would try to believe that he had performed an act of charity in their murder, relieving them from the suffering and misery of their lives" (Nilsen & Pettigrew, 2021, p. xi).

These findings are supportive of the work of Sykes and Matza (1957) and are consistent with the claims made by Henson and Olson (2010) who suggest that serial murderers frequently utilise neutralisation techniques to minimise the stigma associated with their offending, with the present results suggesting that this also extends to the use of DoI to minimise the stigma associated with their paraphilic disorders. The findings also support the work of and James and Gossett (2018) who presented evidence of denial of responsibility and denial of injury within Nilsen's discourse; the present findings indicate that these too extend from denial of injury/responsibility concerning his offences to denial of injury/responsibility concerning his paraphilic disorders specifically. However, the present theme differs somewhat from the previous research because whilst denial of responsibility was found to be present within theme 1, there was no significant evidence of condemnation of the condemners as seen in James and Gossett (2018), nor denial of victim as seen in Pettigrew (2020), within Nilsen's discourse. Theme 1 is also supportive of the claims made by Hazelwood and Warren (2008) who suggested that serial sexual murderers demonstrate ritualistic behaviours in an attempt to recreate a situation from within their fantasies, which in this theme pertains to a fairly general idea of what Nilsen felt would help him to achieve sexual gratification; the control over a passive male body, which ties in too with the work of Purcell and Arrigo (2006).

Theme 2

Theme 2 encompassed the use of linguistic features and discursive devices to misrepresent "harm" as being tantamount to murder to deny and neutralise the actual harm caused by Nilsen's paraphilic disorders. In order to encourage the belief that the existence of Nilsen's paraphilic disorders was not inherently harmful, and therefore minimise the stigma associated with them by readers, DoI techniques were regularly observed within the text. These techniques were seen most frequently in the author's repeated

use of emotive expressions to describe his physical intentions towards the victims, his recollections of encounters in which his victims had survived or escaped him, and when he sometimes stated outrightly, and in stark contradiction of himself, that the victims who he had raped or sexually assaulted whilst they were unconscious or otherwise incapacitated came to no harm, or that no harm was intended when fulfilling his fantasies. There is strong evidence throughout the extracts of this significant misrepresentation of harm, perpetuating the idea that only those of his victims who were murdered at his hands, as opposed to violated or assaulted, were really harmed.

Like the results of theme 1, theme 2 supports the findings of Henson and Olson (2010), James (2019) and Sykes and Matza (1957) in that Nilsen utilises DoI to manage and minimise the stigma associated not only with his offending but also the very existence of his paraphilic disorders, by presenting them as being unharmed. Theme 2 is also partially supportive of the work of Summers (1999) and Kernberg (1992), in that whilst there is little evidence of a narcissistic personality, emphasis is placed on the “need to kill” being the result of a fear of rejection resulting from the abuse Nilsen suffered during his childhood. This theme again supports the claims made by Hazelwood and Warren (2008) which depicted sexual murderers’ aims to recreate situations pre-determined by their fantasies; Nilsen repeatedly refers to his victims as “props”. Finally, theme 2 is supportive of the work of Higgs et al. (2017), who reported that the act of killing itself is not necessarily an integral part of the ritual for sexual murderers.

Theme 3

Theme 3 involved the personification of Nilsen’s ritual in order to minimise disdain felt by readers and neutralise responsibility for the existence and development of his paraphilic disorders. DoR is achieved through the repetitive use of metaphor, agent-subject distinction wherein Nilsen refers to the ritual as an agentive separate entity and stresses the notion that the paraphilic disorders could have been prevented, had someone or something intervened. The author repeatedly makes references to the birth of his ritual to reinforce the notion that it is independent of him, and implies, in a sense, his own rebirth after the emergence of his paraphilic disorders, further establishing DoR for the individual he became as a result of their influence. This implication of a rebirth can also be seen manifesting differently within theme 1 wherein it is suggested that Nilsen is in some way doing his victims a service by freeing them from their identities, perhaps in turn allowing them to be reborn as he was. The author regularly makes use of emotive language when expressing the stress caused to himself by the development of his paraphilic disorders with a view to invoking sympathy and understanding, as well as minimising responsibility for the development and encouragement of his paraphilic disorders.

Theme 3 is very much in line with previous literature concerning NT (Henson & Olson, 2010; James, 2019; Sykes & Matza, 1957) and

supports the presence of neutralisation techniques in a given serial murderer which are utilised for the purpose of managing accountability, social stigma and identity. This theme is also supportive of the work of Fox and Levin (1999) who reported that the offences committed by sexual murderers stem from an inability to build and maintain meaningful, long-term relationships, a shortcoming of Nilsen's which appears frequently within the text as further evidence of DoR; he attributes blame for his paraphilic disorders to his own lack of meaningful relationships, as well of the pull of the ritual, which ties in with Agnew's (1992) GST. Similarly, theme 3 provides evidence which supports the claims made by Hickey (2016) who suggested that psychological trauma and a desire to reclaim power and control lost during childhood are associated with sexual murder. Theme 3 also supports the work of Pettigrew (2020), as it has produced strong evidence of DoR techniques in which innocence is by no means maintained but responsibility is in some way denied. In terms of the research concerning ritualistic behaviours, theme 3 is supportive of the work of Purcell and Arrigo (2006) who associated ritualism with a desire for total subjugation of victims, which is stated outrightly in Extract B when Nilsen describes his craving for a passive male body. These findings back up the work of Hazelwood and Warren (2008) who reported sexual murderers' desire to re-enact a situation from their paraphilic fantasies and perceive themselves differently within this context – in this instance, the situation being Nilsen's "the man and the boy" fantasy, in which he perceives himself as playing the role of both the old man and the dead boy.

The work of Knoll (2006) is also applicable here, as theme 3 supports the claim that ritualistic behaviour of this nature is rooted in early childhood disruptions and traumatogenic abuse, although there is little evidence to support that psychopathy is present here. The personification of Nilsen's ritual as a method of managing responsibility appears to be a previously unreported concept.

Limitations and Implications

This study has two main limitations; firstly, the study may have benefitted from a larger sample of data including digital footage, as there would be opportunities to assess discursive devices seen only in verbal discourse, e.g., pauses and hesitations. In this instance, there is a limited amount of existing footage of Dennis Nilsen's discourse, and the few clips which were available to the public were found to be too brief and lacking in detail to carry out thematic discursive analysis. However, the discourse provided in Nilsen's "History of A Drowning Boy" proved to be rich in detail and therefore allowed for an insightful and representative analysis. Secondly, the study considers the discourse of only one serial murderer. Despite it setting the groundwork, it would be useful in future to compile and analyse the available discourse of other serial murderers with different paraphilic disorders such as paedophilic disorder, for example, to allow for

comparisons and to investigate the applicability of NT to the discourse of these offenders when referencing their paraphilic disorders specifically.

Overall, the study has allowed for the insightful discursive analysis of a convicted serial killer with regards to his paraphilic disorders, a field which has not previously been investigated in depth, particularly in relation to NT. The way that serial and sexual murderers construct their own rituals and paraphilias may provide insight into how best to rehabilitate and treat them, therefore it is clear that the present study demonstrates a need for further investigation into neutralisation theory in relation to offenders' constructions of the emergence and development of their paraphilic disorders, as opposed to focusing solely on their constructions of their offending.

Conclusions

Based on the aforementioned findings, it can be ascertained that neutralisation theory is applicable to the language used by Dennis Nilsen in his autobiography, "History of A Drowning Boy", in regard to the existence and development of his paraphilic disorders. He makes frequent use of denial of injury and denial of responsibility techniques alongside other discursive devices to manage his own accountability for and the social stigma associated with his paraphilic disorders, constructing them as being separate entities who were born and developed out of strain, which could have been prevented, or at least made less harmful, had someone or something else intervened, and are therefore not wholly his responsibility. There is also significant evidence to suggest that Nilsen's discourse surrounding his paraphilic disorders involves the personification of his disorders, his fantasies and his ritual in order to reinforce a diminished sense of responsibility for their existence and continued development. These findings may have wider implications for the continued understanding of how serial murderers construct and neutralise their paraphilic disorders and may therefore lend insight into how best to identify, treat and further understand one of the most misunderstood groups of psychiatric disorders.

Funding

None

Availability of data and material

Data will be made available upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Author's contributions

All authors significantly contributed to the research and preparation of manuscript.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants (or their legal guardians) for being included in the study.

Ethics Approval

This research was approved by the University of Derby: College of Health, Psychology, and Social Care Ethics Committee on the 19th of November 2021. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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