

A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY AND ILLUSTRATION OF SCHAHRIAR SYNDROME MODEL IN VERA RENCZI

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Summary

Background: The current study's goal was to demonstrate the efficacy of the Schahriar Syndrome Model by using it to create a psychobiography of a female serial killer. The objective was to identify the social and psychological mechanisms included in the Schahriar Syndrome Model (SSM) of serial killing. The case study also aimed to understand better the motivations of such homicides and the attributes and factors that make a female commit them and it offers a fresh perspective on Vera's life.

Subjects and Methods: The case study used a qualitative single case design that contains the tracking of experiences and events of an individual in a lifetime. It used both historiographic methodologies and psychological models to identify and analyze the development and specific socio-psychological settings of Vera Renczi, a historical serial murderer from the 20th century (1903-1960). This psychobiography includes secondary data about her development and crimes collected from previous research, archives, and books that contained reliable sources.

Results: Vera Renczi demonstrated throughout her life and at several socio-historical junctures, each of the five primal mental processes such as omnipotence, sadistic fantasies, ritualized performance, dehumanization, and symbiotic merger. Vera Renczi's life was impacted by a mixture of socio-historical antecedents including her aristocratic status, the experience of loss and abandonment, and the need for control and devotion.

Conclusion: The Schahriar syndrome paradigm is relevant today, and this study invites relevant fields, such as the forensic sector, to reevaluate its applicability, especially on female subjects. The Schahriar syndrome model may be used to identify the psych mechanism of a female serial murderer. This research adds to the knowledge about Vera Renczi and offers information from new angles and fresh perspectives on how she operated.

Keywords: deviance – primitive psychic mechanisms – Schahriar Syndrome Model – female serial murderer – narcissistic personality disorder

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INTRODUCTION

Psychobiography is the psychological analysis of personality, including psycho-biological development. It is a sub-discipline of psychohistory and includes historiographical methods and psychological models for the lifetime study of a person (Fouche et al. 2015). Howe (1997) defines it as an approach to studying people, particularly those who are seen as outliers on a spectrum of personality development. This paper offers a psychobiography of a particular and rare case of a historical serial murderer who seduced and killed people to satisfy the feeling of exclusivity. This psychobiography used a single-case design in which a variety of events in the life of serial murderer Vera Renczi were studied (Babbie 2020). This research attempts to provide a deeper understanding of the circumstances and events that shaped her as a serial murderer, as well as to investigate and characterize Vera Renczi's psychodynamic life, with a focus on her functioning as a serial murderer, using the Schahriar syndrome model (Claus & Lidberg 1999).

Personality

The search for a criminal personality or super trait has captured the minds and imaginations of academics and the wider community due to a stubborn aversion to the notion that regular people do not commit crimes (Kauzlarich & Barlow 2009). Personality is the main factor in many behaviors, and understanding what makes a person become a criminal must start with the understanding of personality. It represents a person's beliefs and values, their perspective on life, their sense of law and order, and the cultural background that has shaped who they are (Tharshini et al. 2021). Vera Renczi was a serial murderer from Romania accused of murdering 35 people in the 1920s (Tolischus 1925). Due to a dearth of paper-based evidence, it is difficult to discover detailed information on Renczi's early years although personality traits can be detected based on descriptions done by her acquaintances. Her mother is claimed to have died when she was thirteen, and by the age of fifteen, she had regularly engaged in sexual activity with older men. Her

acquaintances described her as an easygoing young lady with an unhealthy craving for male attention. They also characterized her as being exceedingly suspicious and jealous (Kelleher & Kelleher 1999).

Jealousy is a multifaceted cognitive, behavioral, and emotional phenomenon that can be observed throughout a person's lifetime in different contexts where there exists a competition element, such as in romantic life (Hobson 2010, Sybil & Maria 2010). Jealousy was a big part of Renczi's life; this can be observed more clearly by the time she reached twenty. Renczi married Karl Schick, a wealthy, considerably older Austrian banker, and they had a son named Lorenzo. It is believed that she poisoned his wine with arsenic when she discovered that he might be unfaithful to her. After a year Renczi remarried, but she fought jealousy once more, believing her new husband was also having extramarital relationships (Scott 2005).

To further comprehend Vera's behavioral manifestations, the signs of a narcissistic personality disorder must be explored. Narcissistic personality disorder represents a pattern of need for admiration and a lack of empathy for others. According to Alwin et al. (2006), a person with NPD may have a great sense of self-importance and entitlement and take advantage of others while they exhibit difficulties in many social areas of life. People with NPD are also characterized by loneliness and high expectations to be recognized as superior without achievements that prove it. Other characteristics may include fantasies about success, power, perfect mate, and disappointment when the required admiration is not received (American Psychiatric Association 2022, Caligor et al. 2015).

In homicides involving narcissism, the main motive is usually the pursuit of internal benefit rather than seeking retribution. Louis B. Schlesinger (1998) found that those with violent inclinations need to control and establish dominance over others to satisfy their desires. Vera Renczi exhibited many similar characteristics (Scott 2005), she was desired for a variety of reasons, including her beauty and wealth; nonetheless, her behavior is consistent with a narcissistic mentality forcing her partners to be completely committed to her love to escape suffering the ultimate price. She required a lot of attention before she could be satisfied.

Further investigation into the underlying causes, which may include childhood and society as a whole, might be sparked by a more profound knowledge of the myths surrounding the motivations of serial killers. Vera Renczi might have had a narcissistic personality disorder which could have been the underlying cause of her behavior. Vera Renczi has shown a severe desire for attention. The issue arises when attention-seeking actions are brought on by feelings of low self-esteem,

jealousy, loneliness, or a mental illness. Additionally, attention-seeking conduct that is persistent, manipulative, severe, or passive-aggressive can alienate others and damage or end relationships (Don et al. 2019). Severe attention-seeking behavior, particularly when caused by a personality disorder, can occasionally make it difficult to be a functional member of society. (American Psychiatric Association 2022). Vera Renczi was not known to be socially active; she was described as interacting only with gentlemen whom she used to invite to join her for dinner or sexual activities.

Sexual Motives

It was debated whether Renczi's crime could be categorized as a sexual homicide due to her motives that involved more the desire for exclusivity rather than satisfying physical desires. The paper "The Nature and Dynamics of sexual homicide" investigated the definition of sexual homicide and concluded, based on cases over the last 30 years, that a sexually motivated murder did not always involve sexual physical activity and that there were underlying variables that made such crimes more complicated (Meloy 2000). The crimes committed by Vera Renczi can be classified as sexual homicides based on their sexual components characterized by fixation and narcissism. Unlike other sexual criminals who dismembered and made their victims suffer, Renczi demonstrated a much more subtle approach to killing her victims, which can be a way of expressing her personality. Renczi poisoned her lovers, suggesting that she felt a certain level of caring or a way of murdering them without a physical encounter. The lack of exploration regarding the disparity between societal perceptions of women in general and those of female serial killers constitutes a comparable constraint observed in prior articles on the subject. There is a necessity for more in-depth research to address this gap (Meloy 2000).

The goal of the study

The purpose of this research is to provide a perspective on the usage of the Schahriar syndrome model and to provide a psychobiography of Vera Renczi using it to disclose her psychological functioning. The goal of this psychobiographical study is to show the value of the Schahriar syndrome model in identifying and elucidating psychological mechanisms even in cases where detailed information is lacking, and it invites forensic disciplines to consider it when analyzing female offenders. This study aims to enhance our understanding of the factors and occurrences that played a role in shaping Vera Renczi into a

serial killer. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to a deeper comprehension of the motives behind female killers.

Schahriar Syndrome

Schahriar syndrome model was introduced in 1999 by Claus and Lidberg, and it represents a framework for the methodical explanation of serial killers. The model is named after the Persian king Shahriar from the famous collection of folk tales from the Middle East and South Asia “One thousand and one nights”, who killed a new wife every night to protect himself from infidelity (Claus & Lidberg 1999). The Schahriar syndrome model contains five primitive psychic mechanisms that are thought to be present in serial murders such as (1) omnipotence, (2) sadistic fantasies, (3) ritual performance, (4) dehumanization, and (5) symbiotic merger. Vera Renczi was chosen as the subject of this case study due to her originality and obsession with loyalty and the numerous unanswered questions about her life.

METHODS

The case study used as a method for the life history research of Vera Renczi with a qualitative single case design that contains the tracking of experiences and events of an individual in a lifetime (Babbie 2020). The qualitative case study is exploratory-descriptive and descriptive-dialogic (Edwards 1990) by providing a description of the person’s development gained from a socio-historical context (Fouche & de Vos 2005). The data that was used for the case study was collected from previous research, archives, and books that contained reliable sources.

To extract and analyze the data, it was used the two analytic strategies of Alexander (1988): (a) questioning the data and (b) letting the data reveal itself.

- (a) Questioning the data included steps of reading information that is necessary to create the model and verifying the reliability of the source.
- (b) The second strategy focused on selecting data that specifically contains information that can be used for further investigation.

Additionally, a framework was formulated to systematically categorize and partition significant historical data and events following the Schahriar syndrome model. The literature review of the life of Vera Renczi revealed 5 important historical interrelated periods that highlight the development of the subject. The periods are (1) Early Childhood (2) The male attention-seeking teen, (3) The jealous wife, (4) The murders, and (5) The trial & death.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented in chronological order in terms of the 5 primitive psychic mechanisms that are interrelated with the extracted and analyzed biographical data of Vera Renczi’s life using the Schahriar syndrome model (Table 1).

Background

Vera Renczi was born in an aristocratic Hungarian family in 1903 in Bucharest, Romania. The first part of her life is not well-protected due to the loss of paper-based information. During her teenage years, she was on the front pages of newspapers due to her deviant behavior. The earliest report published about the case of Vera Renczi under the name Madame Renici was in May 1925, in the USA by Otto Tolischus which contained interviews offering descriptions regarding her personality and details about her murders (Tolischus 1925).

Table 1. Demonstrative table of SSM

Historical Periods	Primitive Psychic Mechanisms of the Schahriar Syndrome Model				
	Omnipotence	Sadistic Fantasies	Ritualized Performance	Dehumanization	Symbiotic merger
Early Childhood	█				
The male attention-seeking teen				█	
The jealous wife	█				
The murders	█				
The Trial & Death	█				

The reason for her crimes was stated to be her desire to remain the last woman in men's lives. Vera Renczi was motivated by jealousy and the desire for exclusivity. Being pathologically jealous, suspicion was the trigger for her first crime (Kelleher & Kelleher 1998). The modus operandi consistently employed poison as the primary tool for criminal activities, and the geographic profile remained unchanging, with victims being enticed to her mansion. Unlike other female criminals, her motivation was not a financial one, and the victims were not posing as husbands except in the first two crimes. Her emotional immaturity was evident from an early age, compensating for her father's absence with her excessive sexual behavior (Butoi 2003).

Vera Renczi initially married Karl Schilk with whom she had a child, Lorenzo. Karl vanished after a year, and Vera said he perished in a tragic vehicle accident. Renczi remarried soon after learning of her first husband's car accident. The marriage was turbulent, and Renczi was once again haunted by suspicions that her new spouse was having an extramarital relationship. The man vanished after barely four months of marriage, and Renczi claimed to have received a letter from her spouse declaring his desire to leave her forever. Renczi did not remarry, but she spent the next years having affairs, mostly with married men, continuing to fabricate stories about them leaving her or being unfaithful (Jones 2002).

One evening, Sergey Miloard's wife followed him to see where he was going and discovered that he was heading for Vera's place. Following his inexplicable disappearance, his wife informed the police and revealed her findings. Upon searching Renczi's wine cellar, they discovered 35 unburied, zinc-lined coffins. Renczi was arrested and taken into police custody, where she confessed to having poisoned the men with arsenic, including her two husbands and her son when she suspected they had been unfaithful to her or when she believed their interest in her was waning (Scott 2005). The victim's ages varied between 23 and 30. It was stated that she confessed all murders and her answers to questions reveal an appalling cynicism. Asked why she killed so many men, she replied: "Out of jealousy, for I know that tomorrow they would run after another woman. So I said to myself they had a better sleep quietly in my cellar without having to excite themselves." (Tolischus 1925).

Omnipotence

The omnipotence aspect refers to being all-powerful (Claus & Lidberg 1999, Pearce & Pruss 2012), and it refers to someone with unlimited power or control over someone's life (Ramsland 2006). According to Claus and

Lidberg (1999), serial killers may commit their crimes to feel power over someone's life, suggesting that they are superior to other people (Warren et al. 1996). Vera Renczi's murders and actions are considered to be done as a rage out of jealousy, but this can be interpreted as acts of control and power. The omnipotence factor is present in all historical periods of Renczi. The first sign of omnipotence was in her early childhood when her father told Vera that he had to search for a new owner for her dog due to their relocation to Bercicherecul Mare. Vera decided to kill the dog and bury it, telling her father that she would rather see the dog dead than have another owner (Tolischus 1925). This act shows that even as a young child, Vera knew she could have power and control over a living creature. By age 15, she exhibited sexual behavior, being in the center of famous sexual scandals with well-known people, from businessmen to professors. This did not affect her and she seemed to enjoy the attention received, continuing to do the same acts. Her sexual behavior can be explained by the passivity and absence of her father in her life, which resulted in constant need and sexual attraction to older men. Neglect or abuse can lead to an insecure attachment style, which can lead to jealous feelings and mistrust (Kim et al. 2021). Vera was in lack of both her father's emotional attention and her mother's presence, and she needed to create the need for control by seeking appreciation from other males (Newton 2000). In the subjective dimension of sexual arousal, a person is experiencing an intimate world of erotism, where the physiological responses act together with the psychological factors through the manifestation of emotional and physical desires. Through sexuality, people explore fantasies, not only physical but also emotional (de Jong 2009).

Omnipotence was actively present in Vera's life. Another situation where it can be observed was in her marriage period. Vera was married to the wealthy Austrian banker Karl Schick and later to another wealthy man closer to her age Joseph Renczi. Vera suspected the two of them of infidelity and poisoned them with arsenic while lying to people that they had left her and run away with another woman. (Scott 2005) The omnipotence factor comes from her confidence and knowledge regarding her status. Vera was considered a noble person, and she believed that people would not consider her deceptive and that she could show herself as a victim in front of people. Vera Renczi was a dark empath and knew how to use empathy with the people to her advantage, not to be needed to offer more information regarding her husband's disappearance. In a pre-trial interview, she stated, "My second husband did not last long. I was obligated to

kill him after four months because he talked to another woman.” (Newton 2000). This statement shows the omnipotence factor that was present in her. She considered that her husband’s life depended on her decisions and that she had no other choice.

Vera Renczi demonstrated that she had power over the life and death of the following victims, including her son Lorenzo from her first marriage. She argued that her son was blackmailing her, and she decided to kill him to avoid suspicions. During a pre-trial interview, she stated that the reason for killing her victims was to be the last woman in their lives. This statement can be interpreted as a desire for control and power, not only over someone’s life but also over the circumstances in which she could take a person’s life, not considering the relationship status she had with them. Vera was convicted of 35 murders and sentenced to death, but the law in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later Yugoslavia, did not allow the execution of women, and she was transferred to life imprisonment. Later she was transferred to a psychiatric facility due to her symptoms of dementia. It was argued that she did not fear imprisonment and that she knew that the law would not allow her to be sentenced to death. This can be interpreted as she could feel empowered knowing that she can have unlimited power without a death sentence (American Weekly 1925).

Sadistic Fantasies

Numerous studies have shown that some serial killers have sadistic fantasies (Johnson & Becker 1997, Warren et al. 1996). These fantasies refer to causing another person’s physical or mental suffering to have a type of pleasure, most commonly being a sexual desire (Glasser 1996). However, the studies are not necessary to explain female sadistic fantasies because the research that had been done had mainly male subjects. In Orlando’s research conducted in 2003, an examination of the sexuality of sadistic women revealed that 90% of the participants were aware of their sadistic tendencies from an early age (Orlando 2003). Sadistic fantasies are not exclusively physical but can also be manifested through verbal or emotional abuse such as manipulating others through fear, shame, or humiliation (Myers et al. 2006). Vera expressed herself among all the historical periods that were divided for her analysis that she desired the death of her victims. Firstly, she stated that she saw her dog dead rather than have another owner, followed by the evident period where her sadistic fantasies converted to reality by murdering her intimate partners. She was convicted of murder by poisoning, and some people stated that she was using poison to make the victims feel numb

to torture them, but there is no sufficient evidence to support this statement (Newton 2000). As previously mentioned, sadistic fantasies are not necessarily exclusively expressed through physical pain. Her desire to be the last woman in men’s lives, including her son’s, can also be interpreted as a sadistic fantasy due to its deadly effects. Although Renczi did not remarry, she spent the following years carrying out several affairs that were mainly with married men (Newton 2000). One hypothesis can be that she chose strategically married men, knowing that they could not risk people knowing about their affairs, which made her planned murders efficient due to the lack of information regarding her involvement in the man’s life. Another interpretation of this situation can be her desire to replace the role of a mistress by making other women suffer, which would bring her psychological satisfaction by inflicting emotional pain on others. This strengthens the possibility that her fantasies also entailed murder and emotional torture.

Ritualized Performance

Ritualized performances include acts performed when murdering a victim does not feel sufficient for the offender. They serve as psychological gratification (Bezuidenhout 2020, MacCulloch et al. 1983, Schlesinger et al. 2010). The ritualized performance evidence was during her murdering acts that involved poisoning with arsenic and fitting the bodies of her victims into a zinc-lined coffin. This signature can be synonymously used with rituals (Keppel 1997). Another ritualized performance can be deduced from the findings of the police in the basement of her house that included an armchair between the coffins and an empty champagne bottle. She confessed to the police that, on occasions, she liked to sit there and be surrounded by her former suitors. Her ritualized performances can be viewed as a recreation of earlier inner conflicts and desires with significant others, including husbands, sons, and lovers.

DEHUMANIZATION

Dehumanization is classifying others as subhuman and viewing them as objects, animals, or machines (Zimbardo 2011). According to theory, dehumanization empowers serial killers to torture, rape, and kill their victims by seeing them as inanimate objects (Claus & Lidberg 1999, Levin & Fox 2007, Heflick & Goldenberg 2014). There are some indications of dehumanization that are present in the nature of Vera Renczi’s murders. The first aspect that must be noticed is her exaggerated sexual

behavior, which has been present since she was 15 years old. Vera probably viewed her victims not as humans but as sexual objects and a source of gratification. The practice of considering a person only as a sexual object is known as sexual objectification. In a broader sense, objectification refers to using someone as a commodity or an item without considering their personality or dignity (Szymanski et al. 2011). Further evidence of dehumanization in her behavior is her desire to kill her partners. Such a lack of remorse might result from dehumanization that enables the serial murderer to overcome the forces of conscience (Levin & Fox 2007).

Symbiotic Merger

The term describes the effort of the serial killer to become or fuse one with the victim and it may include sexual intercourse or keeping parts of the victim (Claus & Lidberg 1999).

According to Mahler and McDevitt (1968), the infant and mother symbiosis plays a crucial role in achieving object constancy (Mahler & Furer 1968). A disrupted symbiotic process has a detrimental impact on achieving object constancy and gives the person a troubling perception that things will vanish (Mahler et al. 1975). Vera's biggest desire was to be the last woman in the man's life. This can be translated as the desire for absolute loyalty. After her mother died, she did not want her dog to have another owner but rather kill it. The context of her murders shared the same attributes, the trigger always being the fear of losing the person to someone else. The symbiotic merger factor can be seen in how she operated and disposed of her crimes. She did not incorporate victims by eating them but instead kept them in coffins in the basement as they remained with her. The armchair that was present in the basement can be an indicator that she used to also spend time there together with her victims. A further aspect of her behavior that regards the symbiotic merger is her sexual activity with the victims before poisoning them, which involves merging the bodies as a ritual of gratification for her.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Vera Renczi demonstrated each of the five primal mental processes, but she did so throughout her life and at several socio-historical junctures. Vera Renczi's

psychobiography serves as an example of how the SSM can be applied and valued to uncover female serial killers' disrupted primitive psychic mechanisms throughout their entire lives, owing to the study's foundation in historiographic and psychobiographical methodology, which enables the discovery of plausible socio-historical and psychological roots in the etiology of female serial murderers.

The Schahriar syndrome paradigm is relevant today, and this study invites relevant fields, such as the forensic sector, to reevaluate its applicability. The Schahriar syndrome model may be used to describe how a female serial killer thinks and feels. This research adds to the knowledge already known about Vera Renczi and offers information from new angles on how she operated. Many papers about Vera Renczi's biography were destroyed due to Yugoslavia's political upheavals, which complicated the task of researching her life and killings. Vera Renczi's biographical information that is now accessible is primarily centered on her homicides.

Vera Renczi's life as a serial murderer was impacted by a mixture of the following socio-historical antecedents, according to psychobiographical data:

- (1) An attitude of superiority stemming from her affluent and aristocratic status
- (2) Experiencing loss and abandonment, such as her mother's death and her father's neglect, has resulted in a challenge to uphold a coherent interpersonal connection.
- (3) The need for control and devotion as a female in a male-dominated environment

It was emphasized that Vera was categorized as a cold-blooded criminal, which just categorized her traits as a planned serial killer. Vera's life is given a fresh perspective in this case study, which ideally illuminates her as a person rather than just another evil character. It is advised that future psychobiographers consider using more female offenders as their psychobiographical subjects because this domain lacks research (Cheze 2009).

Ethical Considerations: Does this study include human subjects? YES

Authors confirmed the compliance with all relevant ethical regulations.

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