

A Study of Dennis Nilsen

Behavioural Approach

Reasons for Actions

Dennis Nilsen had many accounts as a child, and in his teenage years that, all in turn, contributed to his abnormal adulthood.

Firstly, his parents had an unhappy marriage, full of conflict from his father's drunkenness and long absences. His parents then separated, and therefore his mother brought him up. This could have affected his behaviour in later life, because he did not have a father figure as a role model only a grandfather and an older brother.

The strongest influence over Nilsen was that of his stern grandparents. This could be applied through Adorno's theory that if a child is brought up very strictly, they could grow angry at the grandparents for the rules, and repress emotions, which cannot be taken out on the grandparents, because of the obvious consequences. This anger would therefore express itself on other people in later life.

Another theory that could be applied is classical conditioning. The young Dennis Nilsen could have feared his grandmother and then got angry with her, and therefore associated being nervous or scared with anger.

Dennis especially loved his grandfather, Andrew Whyte, but when Dennis was only six, Andrew died. Without telling Dennis what had happened, his mother took him in to see the corpse, lying in a box on the dining room table. This triggered a terrible awareness of devastating loss. He says in retrospect that it caused a sort of emotional death inside him. It was possible for these emotions to have been repressed by Nilsen, which could have developed dramatically over time, especially seeing as after the incident he became withdrawn and a loner.

When he was eight, he nearly drowned in the sea, and was rescued by an older boy who was playing on the beach. Nilsen's exhausted body must have aroused the boy, for he removed his clothes and apparently masturbated onto him. Nilsen awoke to find a sticky white substance on his stomach. This could have triggered off his homosexuality. He confessed that he found dead bodies arousing and he would perform sexual acts on them to. He may have thought (when he was younger) that this act to be acceptable and justifiable. He would also drown various victims.

Loneliness remained a constant factor to Nilsen as he grew up. He began to rely on alcohol to stave off loneliness, although he kept his distance from others.

Possible Treatments

Token Economy

Nilsen could have been institutionalised whereby he is rewarded for his positive actions. Hopefully he could slowly learn other pleasures and

associate behaving well with rewards. He would be given tokens (coloured counters) for behaving appropriate ways. These would then be exchanged with privileges, e.g. playing snooker, or cigarettes). The tokens act as reinforcement or reward.

Cognitive Approach

Reasons for Actions

It is difficult to determine whether Nilsen was sane or insane. Some argued that he was committing these acts without having any emotional responses. When killing, he could dehumanise his victim, making the kill easier. He had an impaired sense of identity and was able to depersonalise (not treat people as people, but as components of his fantasy) others to the point where he did not feel much about what he was doing to them.

Nilsen had not shown any remorse when performing a kill. Nilsen had always had trouble expressing his feelings. He had the ability to separate his mental and behavioural functions to an extraordinary degree, which implied diminished responsibility for what he was doing.

Nilsen often spoke of his acts in discuss and horror, as if he couldn't believe he did them. For example, he said: "I stood there amazed. I found it all to hard to believe, that I, Dennis Nilsen, had actually done all that."

Possible Treatments

Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy

This would aim to make Dennis Nilsen to think more rationally, and therefore, according to Ellis, Nilsen should begin to act more rationally. This may be an ambitious objective, as this therapy isn't really designed to cope with the minds of serial killers.

However, perhaps over time using this therapy could raise his rational thought processes.

Beck's Restructuring Therapy

The therapist would teach Nilsen to recognise his maladaptive thinking patterns, and show him how to replace them with more adaptive ones. This would require the cooperation of Nilsen, which seems quite easily achievable judging by quote from him in shock.

They would work together to set new goals for Nilsen in order that more realistic and rational beliefs are incorporated into their way of thinking.