

# KILLING AS AN INITIATOR OF SELF-CHANGE: A Symbolic Interactionist Comparison of the Etiology of Dennis Nilsen and Jeffrey Dahmer

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## Abstract

*Using the theories proposed within symbolic interactionism, and concentrating on Erving Goffman's work on the creation and presentation of the "self," we explore how the killings of Jeffrey Dahmer and Dennis Andrew Nilsen were engaged in as part of a process of the killer seeking to become something or someone else. The killings, which resulted in corpses that each man kept with him for a certain length of time, didn't just satisfy an immediate blood-lust in the two men, the killings, and the bodies of the dead men, facilitated an imagined personal change from the men being shy and socially awkward to being romantically and sexually accepted by other men (in the form of corpses) in a longer-term relationship.*

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## **Introduction**

Most people in the USA are familiar with the crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer, the American serial killer well known for cannibalizing his latter-victims. Less well known in North America, but well known in the UK, is the case of Dennis Andrew Nilsen whose crimes were, in many ways, similar to those of Dahmer. This study will attempt to draw both distinctions and similarities between the primary motivations of Nilsen and Dahmer using the symbolic interactionist approach regarding the creation of the killers' reality and their "self." This use of the Symbolic Interaction ( S.I.) approach will exhibit academic, and practical, applications of that paradigm's theoretical approach to explaining the causes of certain anomalous human behaviours: Specifically sexual-motivated serial murders where the bodies are kept by the killer for post-mortem role play.

This analysis will not be a case-study of either Dahmer or Nilsen, both of which have been done *ad nauseam* (with varying degrees of academic usefulness) but will instead be a comparison of documented statements by Dahmer about the element that change (by definition, becoming something new or evolving) played in his serial murders, and statements made by Nilsen, with whom the author has developed a personal correspondence, on the same subject.

## **Literature Review**

This study will primarily explain the process of, and motivation for, seeking some form of personal change facilitated by the crimes of Dahmer and Nilsen, primarily using the theories of the social-psychologist Erving Goffman. However, Goffman's

paradigmatic approach is rooted firmly in symbolic interactionism, and a brief discussion of that approach's major tenets is worthwhile.

The basic principles of symbolic interactionism (Ritzer 2000, Blumer 1969, Manis and Meltzer 1978, Mead 1934, Rose 1962) are generally held to be:

1. Human beings have the capacity for thought, which is shaped by social interaction;
2. People learn and use symbols and their meaning during the course of social interaction;
3. Symbols, and objects as symbols, can be modified and their meanings altered, based on the social context;
4. Individuals are able to alter, and re-define symbols and their meanings, based on their ability to interact with themselves in internal dialogue.

Therefore, as human beings, we create our environment, and those things which are in that environment, based on our understanding of them, and then act within that environment that we have just created, using those elements that we have just defined. Blumer (1969), cited in Ritzer (2000) argues that an object's (an element in the recently defined environment's) meaning comes not from an inherent meaning in the object itself, but is derived from what it means to the actor interacting with the object.

The "objects" discussed in the previous paragraph are generally referred to as symbols within this paradigmatic approach. Charon (2001) writes that "*Meaning does not come from objects*. Instead, we label objects with symbols... the environment is no longer a physical stimulus for us; instead, it is interpreted through symbols we apply

to it. The reality that we act in becomes truly a “symbolic reality” (Charon 2001: p. 61, emphasis in the original). Therefore, the supposition that there is a static external social reality that all actors must agree on in all social situations is contrary to symbolic interactionism. This leads us then to our next significant statement regarding symbolic interactionism: The question of an external social reality.

Symbolic interactionism is divided on the degree to which an external social reality exists, indeed Goffman writes that it exists on a spectrum, but within the paradigm’s related theories we find that what is “real” is determined by the observer. This becomes of paramount importance when we consider the symbolic meaning that dead bodies played to both Nilsen and Dahmer. To them, as we will see in Nilsen’s own words to the author throughout this work, the bodies weren’t regarded as dead or decaying human flesh of the men he murdered; the bodies were symbols that helped create a social situation in which both Nilsen (and separately Dahmer) felt that their inner-self was being fulfilled. Nilsen reinforces this point to the author in his statement “An outside observer might watch, through a two-way mirror, Gein [a necrophiliac who used the skin and body parts of dead women to adorn himself] or Dahmer acting out their tactility... observing the action and thinking that they know what’s going on... and yet completely miss the point... because what Gein and Dahmer are ‘seeing’, thinking and feeling comes from a potent illusion which only has clear meaning inside their own minds... what the observer sees is the physical actions of the ritual without knowing the imagined emotional meaning... to the actor or what he is feeling and what he is seeing” (Nilsen, personal communication, November 2, 2005).

Although George Herbert Mead is considered the father of the symbolic interactionist approach, and certainly there have been significant contributions by others such as Cooley and Blumer, this paper will primarily rely on the creation and maintenance of the self as described by Erving Goffman. We will draw primarily on Goffman's work because, as Ritzer states "The most important work on the self in symbolic interactionism is *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) by Erving Goffman" (2000: p. 362), and it will be that theorist to whom we direct most of our latter attention in this study of Dahmer and Nilsen. In short, Goffman's analytical tools are most useful for analyzing the creation of the self based on rituals and the use of objects.

### ***History***

To begin the comparison of Dahmer and Nilsen with regard to the element that change played in their crimes, we must first consider the subject matter. Let us begin with serial murder, a term which clearly fits both men well.

Serial murder can be defined as "Incidents in which an individual (or individuals) kill a number of individuals (usually a minimum of three) over time" (Bartol 1999: p. 422). Or, "a series of homicides committed by one or more offenders with a cooling-off period between each one" (Davis 2002: p. 233) to which the latter adds the necessary element of sex or sexual motivation, an element with which the present author agrees must be present for the murders to be classified as "serial." For example, a gang member that commits 4 drive-by shootings against rival gang members over a period of 2 years that results in the death of the 4 intended targets,

would not be considered serial murder as the element of sex isn't present in the killings.

As stated previously, this study will not add to the large body of literature on case studies of serial killers, but our purpose is to understand certain key elements as we compare the nature of serial murder as a desired process to bring about a change in the offender. For that reason, we must briefly consider the case histories of the primary subjects.

With the amount of attention paid to the case of Jeffery Dahmer, and the countless undergraduate-level papers turned in by students devoted to summarizing his crimes, we need devote little further attention to the case history itself, and state briefly that Jeffery Dahmer killed approximately 17 young men in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area in the 1980's (Martens and Palermo 2005). His case became infamous when it was revealed that he kept his victim's bodies for sexual use after the murders, and consumed portions of their flesh. Less well known to the layman, but important to our current discussion, is that Dahmer, after satisfying his initial sexual and violent urges, began what he considered the process of changing his victims into zombies (Holmes and Holmes 2002) for continued sexual use, and intended to create a type of shrine in which to practice ceremonies that he believed would make him more socially and financially successful. We don't have the option of interviewing Dahmer directly for this piece as he was killed in prison in 1994, when he was beaten to death by another inmate.

Similar to the case of Dahmer, we now consider Dennis Andrew Nilsen, who killed and dismembered 16 men between 1978 and his arrest in 1983 in London, England. Like Dahmer (Holmes and Holmes 202), Nilsen was a necrophiliac (Hannam 2004), which, to clearly define, means a person with a sexual attraction to dead bodies. A significant difference between the two is that Nilsen continued to have what he considered “social interaction” with the victims post-mortem, where he would bathe with them, watch television with the victim’s corpse, and would generally act as though the victim and he had developed a social relationship. As in many intimate relationships, Nilsen and his partner had sex on numerous occasions, and to say that the fact that his partner was a dead body was irrelevant to Nilsen would be incorrect; it was *because* his partner was dead that the intimacy could occur (this will be explored more later in this work). Nilsen was eventually arrested in 1983 and is now in a prison in North Eastern England for the remainder of his life. He turned 60 years old in 2005, a fact he has pointed out to the author in his most recent correspondence. Finally, as this study uses Nilsen’s own words to the author, a note on his writing style is in order to preserve Nilsen’s original intent. Nilsen tends to separate thoughts with “...” which for others is often used to link to quotes together, rather than using a comma in his text. Nilsen’s words, with the accompanying “...” will be presented in their original as written to the author.

Before beginning the juxtaposition of the element of change in Nilsen and Dahmer’s murders, it is worth noting that both men met other men in predominantly homosexual bars and nightclubs, a similarity that didn’t escape the media at the time of Dahmer’s arrest. Nilsen and Dahmer invited select men home, where some victims left before any sexual act took place, some left after sex with Nilsen or Dahmer, and some were

killed and their bodies kept on the premises for later use. The two chose certain men as victims and allowed others to leave without the knowledge of the murders that had previously taken place in the apartment.

## **Discussion**

The primary element in our current discussion is how the two men saw their killings as precipitators of self-change. Martens and Palermo (2005) also compare the two killers, but look not at change as a linking etiology, but instead consider violent antisocial tendencies associated with each man's intense loneliness. These authors argue that "a person forced to live without company seriously misses the dimensions of distraction, entertainment, and relaxation that are a part of friendship and company... Their loneliness [Dahmer and Nilsen's] caused severe and unbearable emotional pain, and to avoid or overcome these feelings, they gradually came to desire complete control over the lives of others" (Martens and Palermo, 2005, P:304).

This author agrees with Martens and Palermo's first point regarding the necessity of human interaction for normal human development, but any logical jump from loneliness to creating a desire for complete control over the lives of other men does not seem supported. Martens (who was involved in the trial of Dahmer) and Palermo correctly point out, and Nilsen confirms to the author, that fantasy played an important part in the lives of both men, but fantasy itself also does not inherently trigger serial murder.

One might consider the two (living largely in a self-created world of fantasy and violent sexual murder) as multicovariates, with frustrating or intense social isolation

the linking element, but again, there is little empirical evidence of this as a causal relationship to necrophiliac serial murder. However, in defense of Martens and Palermo's (2005) assessment, we can consider Hannam (2004), who also keeps up a personal correspondence with Nilsen and writes, partially quoting Nilsen's early unpublished *Prison Diaries*, "Nilsen's inner loneliness drove him to extremes of behaviour in a 'perverted sort of mating.'" (Hannam, 2004: p. 59), but follows the statement with the line "the lifeless corpses seem to have represented the freedom to express oneself sexually in an uninhibited, unfettered way..." (Hannam, 2004: p. 60), but Hannam attributes this, again, to Nilsen's extreme loneliness and personal emotional isolation. Our current study will explore Hannam's first point, that the corpses represented something symbolic and precipitated change to the offenders as, again, there is little empirical evidence to support a necessary linkage between isolation and necrophiliac serial killing.

As the author and Dahmer had no personal correspondence before his death, we must unfortunately rely on secondary data for information on Dahmer. However, Nilsen's candid letters, as well as the excellent piece that Hannam (a long-time correspondent of Nilsen) recently wrote regarding his discussions with Nilsen that will serve as the primary source of information about Dennis Andrew Nilsen.

According to Nilsen's own writings to the author, as well as Hannam's (2004) psychological study of the man, Nilsen was uncomfortable socially, predominantly because of his homosexual inclinations during his youth and early adulthood. This is similar to what one finds when studying Dahmer, who also was uncomfortable with

his homosexuality as a youth, but eventually accepted it during the period of his murders.

In considering if the murders themselves allowed both Nilsen and Dahmer, as well as the necrophiliac Edward Gein, to accept their desires through the process of the killings, the author asked Nilsen about: "...the subject of how a crime can allow the perpetrator to 'change' or become something they feel they *can't* become without committing the crime." For example, about 50 years ago there was the American case of Ed Gein, who tried to literally change himself into something new with the use of other people's skin. In contrast, Dahmer sought to change himself into something else through a process of creating a throne and altar of bones and skulls in his small apartment. Despite their geographical proximity (both lived in Wisconsin, USA) there is little or no similarity between the two men though, except the element of change.

"You [Nilsen] often mention the word "process" in your writings [to me], and since the main element in process is change, I wonder how you see certain crimes as an attempt to change the person into something that they *can't* become without engaging in the act?" (Author's Correspondence, October 26, 2005).

Nilsen replied on November 2 with:

"You are quite right... 'the main element in process is change' but the process is long and the change comes from the advancing degrees of refinement on a theme which remains basic... the loner and his addictive inner fantasy life. In the case of Gein, his refinements were connected with a ritual acted out... Gein did not imagine the female lover dead, but alive... with him inside her skin [Gein created, among other things, a "woman suit," which he made and sewed together from the bodies of

corpses]... acting out the part within the heat of *his* [emphasis in the original] living body” (Nilsen, personal communication, November 2, 2005).

Rousseau (2002) in a discussion of the primary proponents of the self-creation approach that is a component of the symbolic interactionist paradigm used in this study, describes the standpoint taken by sociologist Herbert Blumer, and later by. Rousseau writes “While we are used to thinking of the self as an entity situated in the body and separate from other selves.... Blumer emphasizes that the self may be more accurately understood as a process rather than as a situated structure” (Rousseau 2002: p. 250).

We can now begin to see how Nilsen, comparing himself to Gein, who used the bodies of recently buried corpses to create an external physical change in the form of his “woman suit,” and other physical vehicles to allow him to alter himself in his eyes, views the act of killing the victim not as an end, but as a beginning of his own transformation into someone or something else. The men were creating a “self” that made them more comfortable and, later in this work we’ll see, more socially relaxed.

Bartol (1999) explains, regarding rapists and one of their motivations for violent attack, as “sexual intercourse is his way of asserting identity, authority, potency, mastery, and domination rather than strictly sexual gratification. Often the victim is kidnapped or held captive in some fashion [in the cases of Nilsen and Dahmer, the victims as corpses certainly applies], and she may be subjected to repeated assaults over an extended period of time” (Bartol 1999, P: 298), which we find in the cases of Dahmer and Nilsen.

As was stated previously, both Dahmer and Nilsen were not accepting of their homosexuality as they matured. Dahmer was brought up in a strict Christian household that was unaccepting of homosexuality, while Nilsen points out to the author that dealing with a believed social mandate of anti-homosexuality was something he was regularly forced to manage:

“In my boyhood my most embarrassing moments... coming thick and fast [the reader should notice the sexual subtext of Nilsen’s choice of those words]... was snide comments about ‘queers’ within my peer group when I knew I was one of ‘them’ but was scared shitless to even admit it or show any sympathy for the ‘condition’.... Laughing at it with the rest of them. This was my juvenile hell... a boyhood of embarrassing moments which hurt deeply and left their mark on me and my psyche.” (Nilsen, personal communication, August 14, 2005).

Further, and again comparing himself to Gein and Dahmer, Nilsen writes about Gein finding himself free, after his mother’s natural death, to pursue his sexual fantasies:

“After this his inner sexual secret world exploded out in the pressure of his traumatically controlless (*sic*) circumstances... the mother image [symbolizing control of “unacceptable urges” for each of the three men] collided with the fantasy ‘lover’ inside his imagination. As children... Gein, Dahmer and me... were getting set in becoming dependent on our inner (self-esteeming) fantasy existence... which evolved into the loner who had become emotionally self-contained... while being drawn further away from empathy with others... hence the inability to form or hold

relationships with individuals of ‘risky’ free will” (Nilsen, personal communication, November 2, 2005).

Those of “risky free will” implies those living who can decide for themselves if they accept Dahmer or Nilsen with their self-perceived inadequacies. Nilsen seems to be arguing that the element of rejection of a possible lover or partner is removed when free will is taken away from the victim (who is now a corpse and can’t reject Nilsen or Dahmer as a lover or intimate partner).

There is a division here though in the nature of the crimes that Dahmer and Nilsen committed. The similarities, as we’ve seen, are of course, obvious:

- Multiple male victims over a period of years;
- Homosexual activity with the victim present before, during, and after the murders;
- Retaining, rather than immediately disposing of, the bodies of the victims;
- Repressed homosexuality as a youth and young adult.

The differences between Nilsen and Dahmer, however, are considerably more subtle when one attempts to explain what purpose the killings fulfilled in each man. Dahmer killed for different reasons at different times (Bardsley 2005). As was stated earlier, this work is not a case study of either man, but there is a certain consistency present in Nilsen’s killings: The killings were acts that allowed him to become physically, and in his mind, psychologically and emotionally “closer” to other men. Nilsen writes:

“I think that there may be three basic (male) appetites to compliment the holist make-up of man in his convolutions of Cerebral Man and Instinctive Man [Mead

(1934), the symbolic interactionist, would refer to this difference as the “I” and the “me”; the subjective and the objective]. There is the appetite of the intellect [clearly still present in Nilsen as evidenced by his writings], the appetite for food, and the appetite for sexual expression” (Nilsen, personal communication, September 5, 2005).

The most significant statement in Nilsen’s previous passage is his qualifier of “expression” after sexual to describe the filling of an appetite. From Nilsen’s letters, it is clear that he is both intelligent and his choice of the word “expression” must be considered deliberate. The term “expression” carries with it the implication of something personal or unique to the individual. When one combines this with Hannam’s (2004) observation that Nilsen was introverted and self-conscious, as well as Nilsen’s own similar statements to the author regarding his retreat into a world of fantasy and “inner self” in multiple letters, we can see the development of a self in Nilsen that is only comfortable around inert others and his own psychological social creations. He writes “those who experience an emotional dysfunction are not that attached to others.... The loner lives in the mind of the ‘self’ and the ‘intellectual’ world inside his head where his emotions are always inwardly directed to the imaginary but potently real ‘He’ (Nilsen, personal communication, August 14, 2005).

From Nilsen’s poignant self-observation, we can use the work of Erving Goffman (Goffman, Lemert, and Branaman 1997) to help in the understanding of the creation of the self. One of the brilliant elements of Goffman, and indeed others in the symbolic interactionist perspective, is his observation that we all create “selves” that we believe are most socially acceptable for a given context, and these “selves” are adaptable to how we understand and define a given social situation.

In the period before their serial murders began, Nilsen was an introvert with a sexual desire for other men, but he lacked the self-confidence required to act on it, while similarly, Dahmer was a loner who was beginning to come to the realization that he derived sexual excitement from the suffering of others, especially men. Both men fantasized for years about their sexual desires, but, as Nilsen points out, and Goffman (1997) explains, there are social restraints put on us with regard to expectations of others and our willingness to be seen as odd, or as Nilsen bluntly puts it, “queer” can be a powerful restraining element.

At the point in the paper, it is now possible to state a primary hypothesis:

*The serial murders of Dahmer and Nilsen partly served the purpose of allowing the killer to change or become something that he couldn't have been without the killings.*

I posed this as a question directly to Nilsen, and his reply dealt with Dahmer's killings, but not his own. Referring to Dahmer, Nilsen wrote “I don't think that he was directed to change himself into something else... [Dahmer's keeping of body parts provided a] three dimensional link... omnipresent.... Of his inner world of ideal and safe 'relationships' which, in tactile form, brought them nearer reality in the shape of passive male bodies” (Nilsen, personal communication, November 2, 2005).

The “omnipresence” mentioned by Nilsen is also appropriate for his own crimes. Nilsen kept the bodies with him or near him for significant lengths of time, and in various locations, in his apartment. Further, Nilsen used the word “tactile” rather than “tangible” which, again, is intentional on Nilsen's part. Tangible would imply

something that physically occupies space, while the essence of “tactile” is the feeling of touch, which is much more common in Nilsen’s situation than in Dahmer’s.

Touching reinforces relationships, such as a handshake or a hug, and Dahmer was less interested in the social/relationship side of his male victims than was Nilsen. To be clear, “tactile,” the term Nilsen used to describe Dahmer’s desire to keep his victims, could more appropriately describe Nilsen’s own desires to retain the victims’ bodies than Dahmer’s.

To understand Nilsen’s retention of, and imagined interaction with the bodies of his victims, we consider Goffman (1959) where he discusses a belief in the part the actor is playing:

‘When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess.... [to consider this further, we look at] the individual’s own belief in the impression of reality that he attempts to engender in those among whom he finds himself’ (Goffman 1959, P:17).

As the shy introvert, Nilsen’s “audience” was the corpses of his male victims that he kept, interacted with (Hannam 2004) by sharing baths, talking to, and going through the actions that one might in a typical social relationship. He was able to change himself, with an audience of a dead corpses, from relatively socially isolated, and certainly socially awkward, to feeling comfortable in the role he was playing, that of the desired sexual and romantic partner of his victims. Goffman sums this up succinctly with ‘...one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act;

he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality' (Goffman 1959, P:17).

With regard to Dahmer, Silva *et al* (2002, p.8) point out that Dahmer: 'viewed male bodies not only as potential objects to promote order and constancy in his life, but also avenues for sexual satisfaction... He viewed his sexual objects largely as physical receptacles for the fulfillment of his own sexual desires and misread their minds as obstacles for the construction of his social world.'

To pursue another symbolic interactionist element common in both men, we note the presence of ritual. In letters to the author, Nilsen often uses the word "ritual" to describe events involving fantasy or imagination. The term "ritual" is different from pattern or habit, in that rituals possess a certain degree of ceremony, rather than a pattern or habit that emphasizes only the repetitive nature of the act. Ceremony, again, has a necessary link to change. For example, a graduation ceremony (certainly ritualistic) marks the change from student to graduate; child to adult. A marriage ceremony can mark the change from one family to another; the change from being single to being part of a couple. Countless other ceremonies, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, birthdays, induction into clubs or organizations, and so on, signify, at their very essence, a change from one thing or type of person or state of being, to another.

In letters to the author, Nilsen uses the term "ritual" on the average of about once or twice for every type-written page. For example, he writes:

“Emotionally dysfunctional individuals... act out their 'addictive sexual/psychological rituals' from the frissons in their inner secret world of

"self" ... they do so from a mental position of powerless inadequacy” (July 17, 2005). And, in answer to a related question posed by the author to Nilsen about why a killer might bite his victims instead of raping them, Nilsen replied: “To divine the organs of the ritualistic behaviour (*sic*) we will have to identify its salient components. These, perhaps, are derived from childhood trauma ... elements coming together over a time to congeal into the potency of the ritual ... imaginary 'longings' translated into the physical ritual ... the full potency of which still needs a human prop... known as the victim” (September 5, 2005).

Here, he uses the term “prop” for a victim, because the victim serves a role in the killer’s creation of a self, while the victim is dehumanized (robbed of their own “self”). Goffman (1959) uses the same term “prop” to mean something used to support a self that one is trying to attain, much the same as Nilsen does in his writings in this context. In Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959: pp. 22-23) he writes:

“First, there is the "setting," involving furniture, decor physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it [in this case Nilsen’s apartment, where the bodies were kept]. A setting tends to stay put, geographically speaking, so that those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance [Nilsen’s change to a social actor, with an imagined sexually interested corpse] cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it.”

Further, Goffman writes in addressing the nature of selecting a self that is augmented, or changed, by the selection and interpretation of an act (1959: p. 29):

‘...if the individual takes on a task that is not only new to him but also unestablished in the society [such as a series of murders in which the body is retained for emotional or sexual comfort in the case of Nilsen], or if he attempts to change the light in which his task is viewed, he is likely to find that there are already several well-established fronts among which he must choose.’

This is useful in understanding how Nilsen attempts to explain another killer’s approach to his female victims:

“...he has nothing personally against her... and, as he lacks empathy... she as an individual means nothing to him. (If he could empathize, then he could never do the things that he... in thrall and emotionally subservient to the ritual [does to the victim].” (Nilsen, personal communication, September 5, 2005).

The victim is, as Nilsen puts it earlier, simply a “prop,” a stage setting in which the key actor, the killer, sees himself as the main attraction (using Goffman’s dramaturgical analogy) of a desired and sexually appealing person. The killings, therefore, facilitate his change from a loner and socially awkward person, to a desired and sexually attractive individual. Nilsen writes;

“Folk... kill in order to assuage feelings of deep personal inadequacy by resorting to the addictive potency of the rituals which have evolved and been refined inside the inner secret life” (Nilsen, personal communication, July 17, 2005).

Another useful tool for understanding the process of change evident in Dahmer and Nilsen's killings can be found in the classic symbolic interactionist piece "the looking glass self" by Cooley (1922). In this writing, which virtually every latter symbolic interactionist, including Goffman reflects on, we find distinct steps that the actor goes through to help define himself ("himself" in this case, as both offenders are male). The actor imagines how he appears to others (in this case there are two "others": both the victims, and those in his daily life outside of the confines of his apartment where the bodies are stored); he interprets the "others'" possible reaction to him, and he formulates some concept of self or engages in a socially-altering act to bring about that which he desires. In this case, both men desired, as do many members of society, to be seen as worthy of a romantic or intimate relationship with another person. What makes Nilsen and Dahmer different from the overwhelming majority of the rest of society, is that they found that they could best create the "self" that we each desire by surrounding themselves with the dead bodies of men they had killed.

At this point, it is necessary to point out that neither man was interested in killing for the thrill the murder itself brought about. Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy both enjoyed the acts of killing, and consequently their number of victims was higher than either Dahmer or Nilsen. Although Gacy disposed of his bodies near or under his home, the corpses meant nothing to him socially and were not kept close by for additional post-mortem social "interaction." This is a marked contrast to Dahmer and Nilsen for whom the murders themselves were often physically unpleasant and were generally performed during periods of deep intoxication, which was becoming more common in both men (Wilson and Wilson 1995, Hannam 2004).

While Nilsen sought a change in his *perception* of self, Dahmer literally attempted to change himself by creating a type of shrine of human skulls and body parts from his victims (Bardsley 2005; Williams 1999) to grant him strength in his daily life and social encounters. His ritualistic use of body parts from his victims can be seen as elements of control, which was a primary desire in Dahmer's life (Martens and Palermo 2005; Silva *et al* 2002). This is not to suggest that this was the primary motivating factor in Dahmer's killings nor was it a thought he considered throughout the years of the killings, but only that, among other needs, the killings (more accurately the body parts the killings resulted in) allowed Dahmer to believe that he could become something more or greater than he could, had he *not* committed the murders.

We can, again, compare the experiences of these two men when we consider the responses by those who came to the realization that their family member or neighbor was a serial killer. In both cases there was shock and, of course, a myriad of questions by neighbors and associates about how such an act could be perpetuated by someone they saw regularly. To understand how the responses of others, we again consider Goffman (1959: p. 209):

‘When an outsider accidentally enters a region [for example, the apartments of the two men] in which a performance is being given... the persons present in the region may find that they have patently been witnessed in activity that is quite incompatible with the impression that they are, for wider social reasons, under obligation to maintain to the intruder.’

In other words, the selves that both men had created could no longer be maintained when the performance was discovered by others.

After their arrests and during the trial, both Dahmer and Nilsen were open about their crimes in court and to psychologists, now that, as Goffman would put it, their performance had been compromised. Both men responded with open admissions of their acts, and Goffman anticipates this when he writes “Criminal trials have institutionalized this kind of open discord... [and the performer] knowingly lowers his defenses in their presence, throwing himself, as we say, on their mercy” (Goffman 1959: p. 211).

In both cases, Dahmer and Nilsen had been, until their act, or actions, were discovered, allowing themselves to be strong, self-assured, sexually desirable men as long as they were in the presence of their victims. Once their performance was compromised, Dahmer’s (Wilson and Wilson 1995) and Nilsen’s (Hannam 2004) responses follow Goffman’s theories almost script-like in their open and candid admission of guilt and their interaction with police and the courts at trial where both men fully accepted society’s castigation and punishment of them. However, a significant difference between the two men arises when one considers what Dahmer referred to as his “experiments” on victims both pre- and post-mortem (Bardsley 2005, Martens and Palermo 2005). In at least two cases, Dahmer drilled holes into the skulls of his still-living, but drugged, victims and poured an acid solution into the brain cavity to create, what he referred to, as a “zombie” or living corpse. There is a degree of what Holmes and Deburger (1988) call the power/control oriented killer in some of Dahmer’s more sadistic murders, such as that which is described in those described in this section. This degree of sadism isn’t present in any of Nilsen’s

crimes, as the murders were a means to an end (the acquisition of a body with whom Nilsen could continue the relationship and further construct himself into his desired self). There is a certain homogeneity in the crimes of Nilsen, while Dahmer's crimes varied in their degree of pre- and post-mortem treatments of the victim. For this reason, it is fair to state that the etiology and methods in the murders were not consistent between the two men, but in both cases we see evidence of, as the primary hypothesis suggested, a desire for the murders and the bodies the killings resulted in, to change the man into something he couldn't have been without engaging in the homicidal act.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Goffman's theories regarding the process of creating a "self," accurately describe how we attempt to create an environment suitable to sustain the self-image we are trying to perform. Nilsen's actions, though he denies this directly to the author when posed the question, show that he clearly attempted to create a new self that was desired by his dead male "companions" (we must recall that Nilsen stressed the importance of fantasy during this point in his life), in word and in deed, by killing and creating imaginary social interactions with the corpses of the deceased victims. Dahmer, through his attempt to gain more power and wealth through using parts of his victims in an uncompleted ceremony, also attempted to create a self that was more similar to that which he sought to be. Further, both men, who were socially withdrawn and aware of their social discomfort, found solace in the inert forms of their dead male victims and used those bodies to facilitate a perceived-change in themselves that, if only during the period they were within their apartments and in front of their "audience" of victims, were socially adept and desirable to others.

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