

## CRIME AS A PERVERSE ACT: ANALYSIS OF LETTERS FROM SERIAL KILLERS

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**ABSTRACT.** This work is part of the theoretical field of psychoanalysis and aims to discuss, from the concept of perversion, the relationship between the perverse act and serial murders, through the communications that certain authors of this type of crime made with the media and with the forces of the law. To achieve this objective, a content analysis was carried out, according to Bardin (2011), on thirty-five letters sent by seven different serial killers to the mainstream media or the police. As a result, there is the fact that the structure of these documents is quite similar and presents descriptions of their crimes, their mental states, in addition to threats to the population and a debauchery directed at the authorities and police forces. Finally, it is noted that the structure of the perverse act, as thought by the theories of Freud and Lacan, is present in the studied letters, which belong to different times and places, and whose authors had no direct contact with each other.

**Keywords:** Serial killers; perverse act; psychoanalysis.

## O CRIME COMO ATO PERVERSO: UMA ANÁLISE DAS CARTAS DE ASSASSINOS SERIAIS

**RESUMO.** Este trabalho se insere no campo teórico da psicanálise e tem por objetivo discutir, a partir do conceito de perversão, a relação entre o ato perverso e os assassinatos em série, através das comunicações que certos autores desse tipo de crime realizaram com a mídia e com as forças da lei. Para realização desse objetivo foi feita uma análise de conteúdo, segundo Bardin (2011), em 35 cartas enviadas por sete assassinos em série diferentes para a grande mídia ou para a polícia. Como resultado, encontra-se o fato de que a estrutura desses documentos é bastante similar e apresentam descrições de seus crimes, seus estados mentais, além de ameaças à população e um deboche direcionado às autoridades e forças policiais. Por fim, nota-se que a estrutura do ato perverso, conforme pensada por Freud e Lacan, está presente nas cartas estudadas, que pertencem a épocas e lugares distintos, e cujos autores não tiveram contato direto entre si.

**Palavras-chave:** Assassinos em série; ato perverso; psicanálise.

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## EL CRIMEN COMO UN ACTO PERVERSO: UN ANÁLISIS DE CARTAS DE ASESINOS EN SERIE

**RESUMEN.** Este trabajo es parte del campo teórico del psicoanálisis y tiene como objetivo identificar los comportamientos comunes que están presentes en diferentes actos perversos, más específicamente en las comunicaciones que los asesinos en serie llevan a cabo con los medios de comunicación y las fuerzas de la ley. Para lograr este objetivo, se realizó un análisis de contenido, según Bardin (2011) sobre 35 cartas enviadas por siete asesinos en serie diferentes a los principales medios de comunicación o la policía. Como resultado, existe el hecho de que la estructura de estos documentos es bastante similar y presenta descripciones de sus crímenes, sus estados mentales, además de las amenazas a la población y un libertinaje dirigido a las autoridades y las fuerzas policiales. Finalmente, se observa que la estructura del acto perverso, como lo piensan las teorías de Freud y Lacan, tiende a repetirse en los sujetos estudiados, que pertenecen a diferentes tiempos y lugares y que no tuvieron contacto directo entre sí.

**Palabras clave:** Asesinos en serie; acto perverso; psicoanálisis.

### Introduction

This article aimed to discuss the concept of perversion from a psychoanalytical point of view through the analysis of thirty-five letters from seven notorious serial killers. For this, these letters underwent a qualitative content analysis, as thought by Bardin (2011), to assist in the research on the perverse act. Content analysis was used as a tool for understanding the contents of these correspondences and to elucidate the patterns found in the acts of these seven subjects.

Invariably, perversion is associated with cruelty and immorality. That is why it is so common to hear that perpetrators of barbaric crimes are perverse. This understanding is the result of constant misunderstandings that surround the complex concept of perversion (Santos & Campos, 2017). As much as we find authors who work well on the subject, the fact that neurosis and psychosis are more frequent objects of study is undeniable, as we can see when examining publications and research in the field of psychoanalysis. Therefore, it becomes necessary to deepen the research of perversions to dissipate hasty or inappropriate conclusions, which by chance may harm the clinical and theoretical construction of psychoanalysis.

Psychiatric, sociological, and legal biases relate perversion to subjects understood as evil or cruel, whose deviant and anti-social acts act against moral laws. Such an understanding, however, refers to perversity. Perversion, according to psychoanalytical precepts, concerns, in general, human sexuality (polymorphous perversity) and the subjectivation arising from the oedipal dialectic (perverse structure).

In addition to the polymorphous perversity and the perverse structure, perversion also appears in psychoanalysis through the perverse act, perverse jouissance, and perverse substitution. Here, the proposal is to think about the perverse act, which, in a way, does not exempt us from approaching, even if succinctly, the other forms of perversion.

The theory of sexuality was a very important psychoanalytic subversion, as it demonstrated, through the concept of drive, that we are not at the service of the maintenance and preservation of the species. Therefore, everything that was configured as deviation, wandering, or aberration according to instinctive logic, was part of human

sexuality for Freud. Sexuality, with its polymorphous perverse structure, no longer responded to a naturalistic condition of desire (Mendonça, 2018).

Perversion is also treated in psychoanalysis as a clinical structure, as well as neurosis and psychosis, that is, as a result of subjectivation arising from the oedipal dialectic. The perverse, faced with castration, denies it (*Verleugnung*), avoiding at all costs placing themselves as a subject, as this would imply being at fault, divided, and castrated.

However, it is not just a perverse subject who commits a perverse act. It is by pondering over the acts – ‘psychoanalytic act’, ‘acting out’ and ‘passage to the act’ – that we will elucidate the perverse act. For this, it is necessary to reflect on desire and jouissance, after all, Lacan (2008b) named a perverse jouissance, alongside the mystical, the feminine, and the phallic.

## The Acts

In the lecture of February 22, 1967, Lacan (n.d., p. 216) warns, first, that the act is signifier. He adds that it is a signifier that repeats itself. The act, still, is the establishment of the subject as such: “[...] by a true act, the subject appears different, due to the cut, its structure is modified”. Finally, he addresses the limit imposed on the recognition of the act in the subject. ‘Its *Repräsentanz* in the *Vorstellung*, in this act, is the *Verleugnung*’, that is when the subject does not recognize themselves in their true inaugural reach. It should be noted that, in an act, the subject can deny their representation.

Acts, in psychoanalysis, admit some dimensions. From the psychoanalytic act itself – the title of one of the Lacanian seminars –, to the passage to the act, acting out, and the perverse act.

The psychoanalytic act institutes the beginning: it is authentic and founding. Dissez (2005) points it as the record of a desire responsible for changes in the subject that constitutes a true beginning. Lacan (2008a) thinks about the effects of the introduction of psychoanalysis on subjectivity, that is, on the Freudian act with the establishment of the unconscious. The Cartesian formulation ‘I think, therefore I am’ indicates the act of establishing the unconscious as a break with the cogito.

To introduce the analytical act, Tolipan (1991) talks about preliminary interviews. This essential time of analysis aims at changing the subjective position and establishing transference. The change in subjective position transforms any demand into a demand for analysis, linking the subject to a symptom, anguish, or inhibition that affects them. “The first analytical act constitutes the very authorization to start an analysis” (Tolipan, 1991, p. 87).

It is with the analytical act that repetition is avoided and something new is created. Every act marks a beginning, something that alters the subject after it occurs, making them no longer the same; in that sense, something starts. The act subverts the subject’s relationship with knowledge. When the acts are faulty or symptomatic, there is the emergence of a repressed signifier unknown to the subject. Already in the analytical act, a new signifier is inscribed.

The passage to the act and acting out are solutions to avoid anguish. They denote the existence of a relationship between the subject and ‘object a’. Returning to Lacan (2005) in his seminar on anguish, what makes a barrier to anguish is the symptom and, when it fails, the acting out and the passage to the act are like the last attempt to bar it.

However, these acts are different responses to anguish. Acting out is “[...] in essence, the exhibition, the showing, undoubtedly veiled, but not veiled in itself” (Lacan, 2005, p. 138),

in other words, it is addressed to the Other, while the passage to the act is in exit from the scene when the subject is completely erased, without addressing the Other. “Acting-out is a repetition in an act. It is a corrective to the analyst. It is something in the subject’s conduct that essentially shows itself to a spectator. The accent is on the demonstration towards the Other” (Tolipan, 1991, p. 89-90). Freud (2006a) clearly explains this demonstration to the Other, this repetition as a corrective to the analyst, in his text on transference love, commenting that if the analyst responds to the patient’s advances, the treatment is compromised.

She would have succeeded in what all patients strive for in analysis – she would have succeeded in acting out, in repeating in real life what she should only have remembered, reproduced as psychic material, and kept within the sphere of psychic events (Freud 2006a, p. 183).

The passage to the act, in turn, sometimes has a tragic and definitive character, such as suicide, for example. In the passage to the act, there is an exit from the scene: the subject identifies with the object as a function of rest and falls (Sequeira, 2016). “The subject appears totally erased by the bar that divides them” (Tolipan, 1991, p. 91). Exit from the scene distinguishes the passage to the act from acting out, and in this context, the analyst can do nothing; the subject just withdraws.

This brief explanation of the acts that constitute the psychoanalytic clinic and theory serves as a path to launch ourselves on the perverse act. The perpetrator of the perverse act is not necessarily a structural pervert, and a perverse act does not correspond to polymorphous perversity.

In his seminar on the logic of fantasy, Lacan (n.d.) places the perverse act at the level of the question about *jouissance*, while the neurotic act has the purpose of sustaining the effect of desire. If we recall that, in the face of castration, the neurotic recognizes him/herself as a subject of the lack and seeks a complementarity in the Other ( $\$ \diamond a$ ), in perversion, the subject places him/herself as ‘object a’ and supplements the Other with *jouissance* ( $a \diamond \$$ ), dividing his/her partner between submission to the imperative voice and revolt against the mistreatment inflicted. It does not matter to the pervert whether his/her partner consents to the position of submission: he/she has to divide him/herself, debate him/herself, be anguished, that is, be the subject of the lack, which is exactly what the pervert denies in him/herself. With this, we demonstrate that perversion has an intimate relationship with *jouissance*.

As for the perverse subject, desire takes place as a subversion and support of a law. As much as the perverse is the one who seeks endless pleasures, this satisfaction is not lawless.

If there is one thing that we know today about the perverse, it is that what appears externally as an unbridled satisfaction is a defense, as well as the exercise of law, insofar as it restrains, suspends, detains the subject in the path of *jouissance*. The will to *jouissance* in the perverse, as in any other, is a will that fails, that faces its limit, its brake, in the very exercise of desire (Lacan, 2005, p. 166).

The field of *jouissance* is not tied to the tripartition of clinical structures. Lacan, when elaborating his table of the quantum formulas of sexualization, proposes forms of *jouissance* that are possible to be deduced from these formulas, such as phallic *jouissance*, feminine *jouissance*, mystical *jouissance*, and also perverse *jouissance*. Briefly, we remember that the phallic *jouissance* is related to the word. Through the signifier, total, unlimited *jouissance* is barred, while at the same time providing another.

Both feminine jouissance and mystical jouissance are in  $S(A)$  and, unlike phallic jouissance, they are in the body, they are ineffable and unspeakable. As for perverse jouissance, Lacan (2008b, p. 82) says of:

[...] people who were also not so bad on the mystical side, but who were more on the side of the phallic function, Angelus Silesius, for example – mistaking his contemplative eye for the eye with which God looks at him, this must, by force, be part of perverse jouissance.

If fantasy operates on all relations between the subject and the 'object a' (Lacan, n.d.), Alberti and Martinho (2013) state that in the case of Angelus Silesius, mystical jouissance is confused with the perverse because what is interposed between the subject and God is the object a of fantasy, the gaze of God.

As Valas (2001) recalls, Lacan wanted the field of jouissance to be called the Lacanian field, considering this to be his most important contribution. For him, 'Totem and taboo' (Freud, 2006b) is the Freudian myth of jouissance, which came to complete the Oedipal myth of desire and the Law. This Freudian myth of jouissance is located in Lacan in the jouissance of the Other, the original, mythical jouissance that is in the Thing. It only has its meaning retroactively, through the incidence of the signifier  $S_1$  that blocks access to the subject.

The entry of the signifier into the real, into infinite jouissance, produces, at the same time, a loss and a subject. This significant mark that 'inaugurates' the subject of the unconscious comes from the Other and structurally inscribes castration, the bar on the subject, signaling the origin of the economy of jouissance. Through repetition, the subject tries to recover a loss - object a - to access unlimited jouissance.

In the seminar dedicated to the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, Lacan (1973) will develop the necessary operations for the constitution of the subject: alienation and separation. While alienation is subjection to the Other, to the field of language, separation is the operation that allows the subject to access desire. In the movement of alienation and separation,

[...] there is an extraction of the object that is neither placed in the field of the subject, nor the field of the Other, but precisely in an intersection that points to the object as what is lacking in both, making it possible, due to this very lack, to establish a bond with the Other (Calazans & Bastos, 2010, p. 249).

In psychoanalysis, the possibility of a discourse – a social bond – is driven by lack.

Calazans and Bastos (2010) state that in the passage to the act there is no distinction between the places of the subject, the object, the Other, and anguish. When Lacan (2005) places the object a as a function of rest on the side of the subject in the passage to the act, without an intermediation with the Other, it is precisely this lack of distinction that is being addressed. In acting out, in turn, the subject does not fall together with the object and maintains the place of demand and transference. This transfer is called 'savage' by Lacan (2005). Acting out is anchored in the symbolic and it is not resolute. Therefore, there is no destitution of the Other's place, but a demand for them to remain in its field.

Some questions can, however, be raised from the distinction between the passage to the act and the acting out. The passage to the act, as it is an act in which the discourse with the social bond is left aside, is usually noisy – as suggested by the notion of unmotivated crimes. However, as indicated by some authors, it can lead to pacification of the subject and, consequently, stabilization (Calazans & Bastos, 2010, p. 251).

And when these unmotivated crimes are serial and have the objective of showing off and addressing the Other? If the authors of these crimes seek to supplement the Other with

jouissance, dividing their victim? In this case, the victim could be the public, terrified, and anguished, with such an act. The unmotivated crimes, in a serial character, and with the characteristics presented by the content analysis of the letters of these serial killers (discussed later, in the 'results' and 'discussion' sections), suggest an act of addressing the Other and a subject who sustains a demand and a transfer to divide the Other through it. The act here only has value if it produces an effect of recognition to the author, guaranteeing, in turn, his/her share of jouissance. There lies the perverse act, which does not necessarily mean a criminal act, but certainly, some crimes represent the height of a perverse act.

From what has been exposed, we would place the perverse act closer to acting out, once as much as it compromises the social bond and the transference relation, addresses and responds to the Other. The perverse act has to do, of course, with perversion. However, it is not just a pervert who commits such an act. A subject who, in an act, places him/herself as an object and obtains jouissance at the expense of other subjects, performed a perverse action (Mendonça, 2015).

Susini (2006), in *O autor do crime perverso*, purposely coined the word author due to the relationship between this type of crime and a theatrical play. They are part of a show and are specifically aimed at audience reaction.

The author exposes a differentiation between crimes committed at random, in which the author tries to hide his crime, and perverse crimes, the minority in criminal statistics, which are provocative, and whose author wants to turn into a masterpiece. This type of killer is what causes great fascination in the public and the media, and their names become widely known. We must pay attention that the author of the perverse crime is not, necessarily, a pervert. Neurotics and psychotics can commit a perverse act as well as a perverse crime. As much as the author frequently uses the term 'perverse criminal', we believe that the specificity of perversion, in these cases, is linked to the crimes, and not to their authors.

One of the differences between common and perverse crimes would be precisely the reaction caused in the public. Despite causing disgust, amazement, and fear, perverse crimes also gain great popularity, finding their target audience regardless of the time in which they occur.

Susini (2006) cites the term serial killer. The author explains that it is necessary to capture the logic of the act, which is common to the series, to understand the actions of this type of killer. Gilles de Rais, Jack the Ripper and Landru are cited as examples of such criminals who have had their names perpetuated throughout history.

Gilles de Rais demarcates, according to the author, the historical birth of the perverse criminal. In 1440, Rais claims to have killed more than two hundred children for pleasure and details his sexual practices and the pleasure he felt when cutting the throats of boys. This man managed to make his testimony leave the courtroom and reach the public on the street, creating a spectacle and passing on a message that "[...] there is a crime caused by the pursuit of pleasure, there is a crime in which jouissance is added" (Susini, 2006, p. 17). This sexual crime would have been left in the background by the demonic explanation typical of the Middle Ages.

Jack the Ripper acted in 1888 disemboweling several prostitutes, mutilating their bodies, and leaving traces for them to be found. He sent several letters to the police calling himself The Ripper, even sending the kidney of one of the victims to the head of a surveillance committee set up on his behalf. These letters were pasted on the walls of London, causing terror in the public and making the show happen.

Susini (2006) compares perverse crime with a theater play structure, divided into four acts. The first is the crime, carried out behind the scenes, but always with a tendency to be revealed. The second act is the discovery of the body and the crime, which despite being hidden, seems to have been placed to be found, removing the author from his anonymity. The third act is the judgment of the author, when he appears before his audience, usually in the courtroom, which already has a theatrical air. The fourth and final act is the execution of the author, where he manages to perform his last big scene. The emotions generated in the spectator by his performance are foreseen, part of his great show, in order to reach his jubilation, his *jouissance*.

This explanation of the spectacle of perverse crime brings to mind Dennis Raider, or BTK (bind them, torture them, kill them), as he preferred to be called. Married for many years and with children, he worked for twenty years killing families in the neighborhood. He often took 'souvenirs' from his victims' homes and left semen samples, as crime turned him on. As he sought recognition for the murders, he posted letters in public places, call the police, or even send poems to a newspaper taking responsibility for his actions. When he was arrested, the jailers forbade him to see the propagation of his crimes on the penitentiary television. That did not stop him from realizing the dimension of his accomplishments, because he knew that if they forbade him to watch television, it was because they were talking about him.

We also remember the movie *Seven* (1995) (Kopelson, Carlyle, & Fincher, 2017), whose plot revolves around two police officers who are tasked with investigating a serial killer who follows the order of the seven deadly sins. Provoking horror and fascination in the population with his way of killing, John Doe, the murderer, surrenders to the detectives, reporting that he already has the two bodies that were missing to complete his work, which would be the one of envy and the one of wrath, hidden in places that only he knew.

On the way to those bodies, Doe reveals to the detectives that he sees himself as the Sword of God, making every sin turn against the sinner.

We all see a deadly sin around every corner, in every home. We tolerate it because it's a common thing. But that stops the moment I'm setting an example. Everything I'm doing will be decoded, studied, and imitated by other followers (Kopelson et al., 2017).

Arriving at the indicated place, a package addressed to one of the detectives is opened by the other. This contains the severed head of the pregnant wife of the officer to whom the package was sent. Doe then confesses that he personifies envy 'for not seeing the world the way you do'. It is up to the detective, the husband of the dead woman, to assume the wrath and kill Doe and, thus, consecrate the serial work based on the deadly sins. As much as he knew that the best punishment to be imposed on the murderer was to keep him alive, the policeman, like a good neurotic, is intensely torn between letting him live or carrying out his wrath. He ends up killing John Doe.

This character is welcome in the illustration of the perverse act, because, structurally, we would perhaps place him in the psychotic structure, but we can call his murders in series of perverse acts.

The perverse practice in a psychotic structure has already been pointed out by Maleval (2007). He relates the case of Mr. M., described by M'Uzan, to a perverse substitution in psychosis rather than a masochistic perversion, as was commonly understood.

As Godoy points out in the presentation of the text by Maleval (2007), an extreme practice such as that of Mr. M. (in addition to homicides, self-, and hetero-mutilation,

cannibalism, necrophilia, etc.) occurs in subjects with a triggered psychosis, where these practices operate as a substitute. In this category, there are many cases of famous serial killers. For Maleval (2007), when a psychotic seeks analysis and there are no hallucinations or delusions, he often has one of the following characteristics: the tendency to write, psychosomatic disorders, or an association of perverse practices with the psychotic structure. Paradoxically, a psychosis associated with perverse defenses can sometimes lead to more dangerous behaviors for society than clinical psychoses.

Continuing with the criminal theme, Schurman-Kauflin (2000), in her book *The new predator: women who kill - profiles of female serial killers*, demonstrates the differences in the criminal acts of male and female serial killers. As much as they make up the minority, this population has been increasing (a third of all female serial killers on record began their crimes in the 1970s). Their acts are more careful, and more difficult to recognize, as they usually kill by suffocation or poisoning, unlike men, who kill with blows, stab wounds, strangulation, etc. Furthermore, women do not tend to flee or go to another city after a death as in the case of men, they remain active in the same community. Moreover, these female criminals usually kill defenseless people (children and the elderly) or people who devote a lot of trust to them. "Women serial killers act like chameleons who bond with their victims and seem to be the last person anyone would suspect" (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, p. 19).

Susini (2006) also addresses the perverse crime author's dominance over the scene and the public. Journalists would have the role of mediation between the murderer and the public, publicizing the spectacle, and the police would have the role of discovering the masterpiece. The judge pronounces the verdict. The audience in this story takes on the role of the victim, identifying with him/her and being divided.

When a perverse crime is committed, an audience is already imagined, like a film that cannot be made without first thinking about what kind of audience to reach. The assumption of an audience and the dominance over it are essential. With this, the public ends up becoming a partner of the author of the perverse crime.

The perverse act, as we perceive, compromises the social bond, but does not break it, and is addressed to the Other, in an attempt to divide it to guarantee the author of the act, more jouissance. The cited examples corroborate the idea that perverse acts, ultimately, can turn into crimes, however, those who commit a perverse crime are not necessarily perverse. However, in addition to a polymorphous perverse sexuality, a mode of jouissance is identified there, unique to each subject, and which, emerging in an act with such predicates, could be configured as a perverse act.

## **Method**

This documentary research analyzes letters sent by serial killers to the police and the media during their period of criminal activity. Because they are data linked in books and websites, the research waived the approval of the Research Ethics Committee and complies with the resolution of the Brazilian National Health Council 510/2016.

The corpus of this research consists of thirty-five letters from seven serial killers, bearing in mind that the letters selected for analysis were written and sent during the period in which they were carrying out their crimes, excluding all letters written after they were arrested. Letters that did not mention the crimes committed were also excluded, as well as those that dealt with diffuse themes or were incomprehensible.



The letters chosen for this analysis were written and sent by Jack the Ripper (Whittington-Egan, 2019), the Zodiac Killer (Mooney, 2019), David Berkowitz (Son of Sam) (Burling, 2019), Dennis Rader (B.T.K) (Williams, 2017), Albert Fish (Parker, 2016), the Axeman of New Orleans (Davis, 2017) and Joseph James DeAngelo (the Golden State Killer) (Phillips, 2018).

The treatment of data collected for this work was carried out using content analysis as thought by Laurence Bardin (2011), which consists of using a set of qualitative and quantitative methods for the analysis of textual and visual documents, with the objective of understanding, systematizing and interpreting the content of these documents.

The letters were gathered, translated, and transcribed in full and then a pre-analysis (Bardin, 2011; Mendes & Miskulin, 2017) of all transcribed material was carried out, which consists of a general and dynamic reading of the data set to create an interpretation. Content analysis offers a series of possibilities and in this research, we adopted thematic analysis, where the corpus is divided into meaning units, which are the smallest units with meaning in a document, which are grouped into themes, which are subsequently categorized.

The sample chosen for this work is significant in relation to all these documents, considering that letters written by serial killers are not so common and are not easily available. The sample also seems to meet the criteria of representativeness, pertinence, homogeneity, and completeness proposed by Laurence Bardin (2011).

This method of analysis does not belong to a specific theoretical perspective and serves as a bridge between untreated textual data and systematized data that can be given meaning according to concepts derived from any theoretical perspective of the human and social sciences. In this work, we used the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, as presented in the previous topics, to understand the results of the content analysis proposed here.

In the content analysis, the thirty-five selected letters were divided into seven hundred and thirty-one meaning units, and each of these units was classified into twenty-one themes that were then grouped into six categories. The results are presented in the following section so that in the discussion they are related to the proposed theory.

## Results

The presentation of results is made by categories, which as presented are six, and are listed in the table below:

The category 'Descriptions of crimes committed' contains the units that refer to crimes committed by the serial killer who is writing the letter. Themes of descriptions of modus operandi, victims, the position of the bodies as left in the scenes of the crimes, cannibalism, torture, and also events that followed or preceded the criminal act are included. It is the category most present in the letters and, in general, it presents a revisitation of the crime committed, providing details that aim to shock the reader and also, in some situations, can serve as proof of the authorship of the crime by the murderer. This revisitation does not seem to be simply the telling of a story, given the richness of details that go back to the moment of the committed crime, which almost proposes a continuity or a vivid reprise of these moments.

**Table 1.** Content analysis of letters from serial killers

Categories	Themes	Freq
Descriptions of crimes committed (F=220)	Description of living and dead victims	77
	Description of how the crime was committed	46
	Description before and after the crime	39
	Description of the crime scene and weapons used	37
	Motivation for the crime	21
Self-description (F=189)	Descriptions of own thoughts and feelings	109
	Identification of oneself for the crime committed	43
	Desire for recognition for the crime	27
	Request for help to stop killing	10
Messages directed to the police (F=115)	Provocation to the police	56
	Instructions to the police	55
	Feelings about the police	4
Descriptions of crimes that will be committed (F=100)	Threats	50
	Description of how the crime will be committed	36
	Description of the crime scene and weapons	13
	Motivation for the crime	1
Writing styles (F=51)	Encrypted or poetic language	39
	Document opening and closing	12
Messages directed to the media and society (F=56)	Instructions to the media and society	42
	Provocations to the media and society	9
	Demonstration of goodwill with the population	5

Source: The authors.

Note. Some units did not fit into the above categories and are not included in the analysis (18 units of meaning about frustrated crimes that did not happen).

The second category, 'Self-descriptions', talks about the mental characteristics of murderers and also the feelings that come to the surface when they commit murder. In this category are feelings of desire for recognition and fame and frustration when this desire is not met.

The third most frequent category of the analyzed letters are messages from the killers addressed specifically to the police or police officers, and most of these messages have a

provocative or mocking tone concerning the work carried out by the police. Here, indications of mistakes made by the police and instructions sent to the police on how to release letters to the press or on paths they should look for to find corpses and evidence of crimes committed can be found.

The fourth category of descriptions of crimes that will be committed addresses mainly the threats made by these murderers to guarantee that they will commit crimes again. These threats are not simple and have rich details about the crimes that have not yet been committed, demonstrating a great imaginative and fantasy process about these crimes that would still be to come. It is known that many of the crimes described here did not actually occur, not least because of the almost unreal ingenuity that some of the descriptions contained.

These are the four main categories that appeared in the letters analyzed and, therefore, they largely summarize the meaning found in these letters from serial killers. In general, these categories appear in basically all the analyzed letters, from Jack the Ripper, a murderer in nineteenth-century England, to Dennis Rader, a murderer arrested in the United States about a hundred years after the crimes committed by Jack.

The other two remaining categories are no less relevant to our analysis, but they have a much lower frequency than the four already described and are not as representative of the content of these documents. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny its pertinence, since together with the other four forms all the content found in the analysis process proposed here.

The fifth category is called 'Writing style' and contains phrases at the beginning and end of letters and encrypted or poetic passages that are difficult to assign meaning to. It is not a very relevant category for the analysis proposed herein, considering that many phrases are merely protocol in any correspondence, except those that aim to mock the recipient or that aim to reinforce a reference name for the murderer.

The category of 'messages directed to the media and society' has, almost exclusively, instructions for the publication of the letters or for how they should portray the crimes. In addition, it contains a few provocations to the media and also an indication of publication errors. When these provocations are compared to those addressed to the forces of law, the latter case abounds much more in the letters and, therefore, they are more significant in the analysis. Some messages did not fit into the above categories and are not included in the analysis, with 18 units of meaning about frustrated crimes that did not happen.

An external factor to the written content of the analyzed letters that must be taken into account here is that in many cases they were sent with significant attachments. Let us look at the cases of two letters, one from Jack the Ripper and the other from the Zodiac Killer, where in the first case a piece of a woman's kidney was sent to the police, and in the second case the killer sent a bloody shirt as proof that his letter was true and that, in fact, he was the one who committed the crime the correspondence was about.

In Jack's letter referenced above we find the excerpt "Mr. Lusk (Police Chief), I send you half of the kidney I took from a woman and kept for you, the other piece I fried and ate and it was very good". There is a clear intention here to shock the recipient of the letter. In the case of the Zodiac Killer, a bloody shirt is sent, as he writes: "I am the murderer of the taxi driver on Washington Street last night, to prove it here is a piece of his bloodstained shirt". This attached element serves as a means of proving the authorship of the previous murder.

## Discussion

There are many common elements in the letters sent by serial killers. Not only in the textual content they present but also in the way they are sent and in their symbology. It is understood here that these similarities do not speak about the subjects who wrote the letter, but demonstrate the common aspects their actions have and can present.

Unmotivated crimes can have a stabilizing effect on the subject and configure a passage to the act. Nevertheless, serial crimes tend to be closer to acting out, as they generally carry an address to the Other. These crimes are configured in a perverse act when they gather particularities that are linked to perversion, although the perverse actions do not predict a structure.

The perverse act does not break the social bond, and its keynote is the demonstration towards the Other. Crime as a perverse act does not only have a calming effect on the subject because, for him/her, the crime itself is not enough. It is necessary to announce it, publicize it, and be recognized by it. The analyzed letters are a clear demonstration that the accomplishment of the crime was not enough for their authors. Murder was a means of reaching the Other, literally and symbolically addressing letters to it. The author of the perverse act cries out for the Other, as this is the only way he/she can be marked by the act.

In the perverse act, the subject seeks to extract as much *jouissance* as possible through, above all, the division of the Other. However, *jouissance* is subjected to the law of the signifier and is therefore forbidden. Even so, he/she always moves forward, for transgression is also a place of *jouissance*. Inevitably when faced with the structural lack the subject starts again, characterizing serial behavior. The perverse act seeks at all times to transpose the law and establish an Other law.

All six categories arising from the content analysis of the letters present elements that configure the acts of these murderers as perverse acts. In 'Descriptions of crimes committed', the authors seek to provoke their audience, dividing it between disgust and fascination, through a detailed and grotesque account of their murders. In the parts 'Self-description' and 'Writing style', they express their desire for fame and notoriety, linking recognition to their act. In this regard, this category is intertwined with 'Messages directed to the media and society', in order to corroborate that the murders themselves were not enough for these subjects. The act only has, in fact, the value of an act if it produces an authentication effect, elevating it to the predicament of a perverse act.

The specified address to the police or police officers demonstrates the relationship of the act with the law, which is always summoned to be transgressed. The inevitable lack that appears in this operation of *jouissance* is the engine of its repetition, establishing the serial character, as announced in the category of 'crimes that will be committed'.

Therefore, Jack the Ripper, the Zodiac Killer, David Berkowitz, Dennis Rader, Albert Fish, the Axeman of New Orleans, and Joseph James DeAngelo, regardless of their clinical structures, are authors of perverse acts - in these cases, criminal acts - compromising the social bond, but not breaking it, as they are always addressed to the Other, seeking recognition. In order not to divide themselves, they divide the other, reaching *jouissance* at their expense.

## Final considerations

Perversion is an intricate and poorly studied topic, compared to publications in psychoanalysis dedicated to the fields of neurosis and psychosis. One of the factors for this is the difficulties surrounding the perversion clinic. However, Freud, Lacan, and their

followers devoted themselves to the conceptualization of perversion, whether through polymorphous perversity, perverse structure, perverse jouissance, perverse substitution, and to a lesser extent, the perverse act.

Perversion is present in all of us because it belongs to the structure of sexuality. By introducing the concept of drive, Freud refutes the reductionist and biologizing knowledge of his time, demonstrating that sexuality goes beyond sex and the reproduction of the species, an idea based on the human being as an instinctive being. Because of the concept of drive, any object can be raised to the category of an object of desire.

In addition to being an original and universal trait of the human being, perversion appears as a structure through the negation of the castration of the Other. In perversion, there is a specific type of negation (*Verleugnung*), which comes close to 'disavowing'. It is as if the subject knew of the existence of what he/she refuses, but persists in denying its presence.

Passing through perverse substitution (when perversion is a defense in a case of psychosis) and perverse jouissance (which is related to mystical jouissance, but is located closer to the phallic function), we enter the perverse acts. The acts themselves mark a before and an after. While in the passage to the act, there is an exit from the scene, a rupture with the social bond and the identification of the subject with the object – as a function of the rest –, in acting out, the subject does not fall with the object and maintains the place of the demand, demonstrating it towards the Other. It is a repetition in action.

The perverse act is close to acting out in its aspect of summoning the Other and not breaking the social bond. However, in a particular way, the perverse act operates through the lack intrinsic to the social bond and tries to overcome it, which, in turn, ends up accentuating its faulty character. By the perverse act, its author reaches jouissance by supplanting the law, however, for that, he/she needs to admit it.

The perverse act is also configured by the validation of the act, that is, the act itself is not enough as an address to the Other: it only has value if it produces an effect of recognition in the subject. Perverse acts carry attributes of perversion but do not structurally qualify the subjects of these acts.

The authors of the serial crimes reported here belong to different times and places and did not have direct contact with each other, yet the letters they wrote carry very similar structures. The thirty-five correspondences by seven different notorious serial killers demonstrate six thematic contents, namely: descriptions of crimes committed, self-descriptions, messages directed to the police, descriptions of crimes that will be committed, writing styles, and messages directed to the media and society.

As already discussed in previous topics, these letters represent an evident address to the Other. Their authors try in every way to dominate the scene and provoke their audience, either through graphic and detailed descriptions of their crimes or by reporting their future intentions. The criminal act by itself is not valid, the subject needs to be recognized by it, and therefore they describe themselves in the letters. Their messages aimed at society, the media, or the police are always intended to divide and distress the Other, to recognize the law to transgress it, and their audience accompanies them every step of the way with attention, apprehension, and even a certain fascination.

In this way, this article is expected to contribute to the advancement of studies on the intricate field of perversions, helping to categorize the perverse act, in addition to fostering a greater interest in Brazilian psychology on the forensic theme and also advancing studies on criminalistics.

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