A Psychological Analysis of a Dostoyevsky Character: Raskolnikov's Struggle for Survival

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As numerous as are the characters in Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, so too are the conceptual frameworks in which to understand the principal character, Rodion Romanovitch Raskolnikov.

The focus of this article will be on the psychological disintegration of Raskolnikov prior to, and continuing after, the murder of the old, widowed pawnbroker and her step-sister. His motives and explanations of the murders will be examined as they relate to his profound struggle against his own death wishes. The process of the disintegration of Raskolnikov’s psychological structure will be explored to show the means he utilizes to protect himself against total self-annihilation. The final section will be devoted to his potential for growth and positive integration following his “vicarious suicide” experience.

...I wanted to murder for my own sake, for myself alone!
...It wasn’t to help my mother....I didn’t do the murder to gain wealth and power....
...Did I murder the old woman?
I murdered myself, not her!
...I crushed myself once and for all, forever.

With these words Raskolnikov reveals to his young prostitute friend, Sonia Semyonovna Maraveladov, and to himself the unconscious motives for murdering the old pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna, and her step-sister, Lizaveta. Until this critical moment, Raskolnikov deludes himself into thinking that the murders were a means of testing out his Napoleonic theory of superiority, that the murders were a way of determining whether he was “a man or a louse, like everyone else.” Sensitive to the frightening realization of how thoroughly he despises himself. His self-hatred and self-contempt are of such magnitude as to cause him to wish for death.

Giovacchini (1972) notes that there is a need for an external object onto which a person such as Raskolnikov can project inner destructiveness (death instinct) and finds the old pawnbroker suitable for this purpose. She is a harsh, miserly old woman (the bad mother), who treats her step-sister shamefully. Thus, Raskolnikov’s self-hate becomes externalized and projected onto the pawnbroker. In killing her he commits a symbolic suicide. It was not her death he really sought so much as relief from his intolerable rage at the introjected “bad mother” from whom he learned the concept of “bad self” and self-contempt.

As the story unfolds, we learn a great deal about Raskolnikov’s mother, Pulcheria Alexandrovna Raskolnikov. She is unable to facilitate or allow Raskolnikov’s separation-individuation because of her own firmly entrenched narcissism. As Brody (1965) observes, the mother’s own need for nurturing and caring gets projected onto the young infant. She feeds him when she herself feels inner hunger; she fondles him when she feels the need for closeness and comfort. Thus, a poor differentiation develops between mother and infant. Indeed, the infant is merely an extension of the mother, made in her “image and likeness,” existing to satisfy her needs.

We can surmise that Raskolnikov’s oral needs as an infant were not satisfied. If they had been, Raskolnikov would have been in a position of equating the “good feeding mother with the good satiated self.” But, because he was dependent upon a woman whose oral needs had probably not been satisfactorily responded to in early life, he was not satiated. His emotional deprivation, coupled with his private world being continuously intruded and impinged upon, paved the way for the development of aggressive energies. While being fed he introjected the aggressive impulses and emerged from these early experiences with the concept of “bad mother equalling bad self.” He despises and is furious with this intrusive woman.

Unable to distinguish himself as separate from the mother, Raskolnikov develops a deep-rooted sense of self-hatred which influences his future life experiences. He fears abandonment and an-
nihilation, feelings which such a narcissistic mother easily imparts and nurtures. He keeps his rage directed at himself, since this is safer. He then spends the rest of his life trying to expiate his dual sin: That of being furious at his mother for not satisfying him; that of being such a greedy child who really deserves nothing better.

The murders represent a “vicarious suicide” and a defense against very real suicidal potential. (Kilpatrick, 1948) To understand Raskolnikov’s potential for suicide, it will be useful to look at the personality of the suicidal person. Tabachnick (1961) identifies three major components in the personality structure of the suicidal person: infantile dependence, masochism, and a history of sado-masochistic relationships.

Raskolnikov’s behavior is replete with manifestations of infantile dependence. Raskolnikov expects others to take care of him and when they fail to do so, he regresses: he does not eat, or change his clothes, or seek out the company of others. His very presence in St. Petersburg is the result of two women, his mother and his sister, Dounia, who sacrifice their energies and money so that he can continue as a student at the university. He becomes bitter when the money is not forthcoming, but rather than assert himself and find ways of earning money he passively waits for the next letter and the next allotment of funds. His infantile dependence is also demonstrated in his relationship with the landlady. She feeds him and sees to it that his room is cleaned. When he stops paying his rent, and she stops bringing him food, he makes no move to fend for himself. He resorts to rationalizations to defend his passivity; he cannot continue at the university because he has no money, he cannot give lessons because he has no books or boots.

Raskolnikov is also masochistic. The greedy dependent child in him is furious at the withholding mother and landlady. He feels frustrated yet is inept at expressing his anger in a forthright, object-related manner. This, too, is understandable if we recall the shadow of abandonment under which Raskolnikov spent his earliest years.

For the child, the mother’s deafness and blindness to his spontaneous, noncongruent behavior verify his terror of abandonment. (Brody 1965, p. 183)

For Raskolnikov to verbalize directly to the mother, “You are not feeding me; you are wicked,” requires a degree of separation and ego development that Raskolnikov is only beginning to work toward. It is still too risky for him to be that conscious of his rage. Again his anger is redirected inward so that the “bad self” suffers rather than the object (person) whom he feels is responsible for his miserable condition. He chooses isolation and the pain of loneliness rather than coming to grips with why he deprives himself of the comfort and solace of human companionship.

Tabachnick (1961) also observes that suicidal persons enter into sado-masochist relationships. Raskolnikov seeks out others who are more than willing to give and who allow him to lean heavily upon them. He punishes them not only by inordinate and, at times, sadistic demands, but also by letting them know quite...
clearly that they have caused him to suffer. It is interesting to note that Raskolnikov reacts to his friends in ways he would probably like to react to his mother. His needs are insatiable and he conveys the message to his close friends, Razumihin and Sonia, and indirectly to his mother: “You are a failure. You have caused me to suffer.” (Tabachnick, 1961a) He manipulates Razumihin into taking care of him. Although his regression, confusion, and depression drain the resources of his friend, Razumihin willingly joins this alliance and accepts Raskolnikov without complaint, doing all in his power to satisfy the greedy child. Sonia serves a similar function, but her role is much more expansive and, in the long run, therapeutic to Raskolnikov’s growth.

Given the facts that Raskolnikov’s psychic and physical deprivations are of long standing, and there is a profound sense of introjected aggression and self-contempt from infancy, how is it at this point in time that Raskolnikov’s defenses begin to crumble and disintegration appears inevitable? The hypothesis I suggest here is that Raskolnikov’s object relations are suddenly altered, and old unresolved conflicts are rekindled.

The landlady’s daughter, Natalya, with whom Raskolnikov had an object relationship, dies quite suddenly. The death occurring as it does at a transitional period in Raskolnikov’s life, strains an already delicate psychological balance. Stunted though his ego growth has been, Raskolnikov is bordering on the adolescent phase of development which, under the best of circumstances, is a period of great turmoil. As Blos (1962, p. 173) observes:

The onset of puberty brings with it a quantitative increase of instinctual drive energy. A recathexis of pregenital instinctual positions occurs which in many ways resembles drive diffusion. Component instincts come blatantly to the fore, the attempt to control them is evidenced by . . . shyness, embarrassment . . . sadomasochistic trends to impassivity and indifference. . . . All pregenital impulses, in their aims of incorporation, seem to possess a certain destructive component . . . experience of frustration greatly increases the destructive element.

There is a massive attempt by the ego to tame the aggressive drive during early adolescence. Natalya, herself a masochistic adolescent of unknown age, exerts a stabilizing influence on the youth, Raskolnikov, in his tender adolescent strivings. The story does not identify many components of their relationship, but we may conjecture that their alliance marked the onset of Raskolnikov’s move toward heterocentricity. Aside from the masochistic reasons for seeking out Natalya, the occasion affords the opportunity for ego growth by containing and redirecting his aggressive and destructive instincts. They discuss his theory of murder and of being above the law, but as long as she lives, it remains just that, a theory.

With Natalya’s death comes the infamous letter from Raskolnikov’s mother announcing that there is no more money and that Dounia will be marrying an older, well-established, but evil man, Svidrigailov. The letter serves as a catalyst. It sets into motion all the unresolved conflicts between son and mother, and brother and sister. The adolescent process grinds to a halt and all the old feelings of the greedy child, angry at the withholding mother, surface. Raskolnikov’s feeling of frustration and rage are compounded by the renewal of the oedipal conflict and his sexual feelings toward his sister, Dounia. Stripped of the supportive and stabilizing influence of his close friends, Razumihin and Natalya, and true to his suicidal profile, he deepens in his self-contempt and regresses to a more primitive level of dependency. In a desperate attempt to put an end once and for all to the “bad self,” he is forced to respond to the unconscious demands of the “idealized image.” (Kilpatrick, 1948)

Thus Raskolnikov resolves to restore his self-pride. He will test out his Napoleonic theory that any means justify the ends of a man of genius — and sometimes he believes himself to be a man
of genius — which is representative of the "idealized self" who is above the law and beyond the grips of the narcissistic mother. The murder of the pawnbroker is an inevitable effort to punish the "bad self" so that the "idealized self" can live. The murder of the pawnbroker's stepsister, Lizaveta, though not consciously planned, is also inevitable. She is not evil like the pawnbroker, i.e., like him or his mother, but she symbolizes his weakness and his inability to cope in the real world. Weakness, like his rage, is intolerable and does not fit into the "idealized image." How can she survive without the pawnbroker? She must be spared the suffering he has had to endure.

Suicidal behavior includes the components of "hostility, with the wish to kill, guilt feelings, with the wish to be killed." (Rykken, 1966) These components are present in Raskolnikov. His psychic forces had once adequately contained "the striving, conflicts and impulses," but the crisis brought on by alteration in object relations at a transitional point in his life (early adolescence) culminates in "disharmony and fragmentation." (Dabrowski, 1966) Thus, his suicidal behavior, i.e., his murders, his depression, and his regression, are indicative of the disintegrative process.

Raskolnikov's disintegration begins before the murders and continues long afterwards. When the process begins and ends for Raskolnikov cannot be pinpointed, but it is clear that his disintegration is marked by acute dissatisfaction with his life and circumstances, and by an increasing weakening of the self-preservation instinct. Dabrowski (1966, p. 249) notes:

We may distinguish between positive and negative disintegration by the presence or absence, respectively, of self-consciousness and self control, i.e., how the person handles his automatic responses.

We know from the story that Raskolnikov does not take his life, thereby indicating some measure of self-control. Consciousness of his behavior is often clouded by fugue states, but from time to time we have glimpses of his awareness of his acute misery and his hope for transformation. One fact which reverberates throughout his struggle between life and death is that he employs protective devices (like regression) to avoid permanent injury or death to himself. Activity is replaced by inactivity, which imposes limits upon the expression of instinctual drives, e.g., drives toward self-destruction.

The murders represent an attempt to conquer his fear of death at the hands of his mother. (Pearce, 1963) Through externalization and projection of his self-hate onto the pawnbroker and her step-sister, he seizes the fear of death and allows others to die in his stead. This process indicates a measure of conflict about his wish to die. Had he not been in conflict there would be no question about his inability to survive. He would have thrown himself into the Neva river and drowned. Instead, he enters into the fugue state from time to time which protects him from his death wishes and, in essence, gives him more time to choose between living and dying.

Stengel (1971) observes that for such a person, suicidal behavior stands for death, and sur-
vival, and a new beginning. This indicates conflict about the wish for death as a "finality."

It is at this point that his friend, Sonia, begins to exert an all important influence on Raskolnikov. He is drawn to Sonia who accepts him as he is. She is capable of accepting his "good self" and his "bad self," and is neither repulsed nor overly frightened by his conflicting feelings. Because she possesses the capacity for concern and accepts him as he is, and where he is in terms of ego development, he is able to establish an enduring and supportive object relationship with another human being. She capitalizes on his conflict with the unspoken expectation that in time he will be able to transcend the death wish and strive toward integration at a higher level of functioning. She survives his aggression thereby allowing for development of concern and the lessening of fear of aggression within him.

Sonia represents a positive, life-oriented force. She and Svidrigailov, Dounia's fiance, pull Raskolnikov in opposite directions. Svidrigailov epitomizes evil and in some ways the "idealized image" that Raskolnikov seeks to liberate. He is sociopathic. He sexually Assaults a young girl who then commits suicide. Also, he drives his servant to suicide and murders his wife, Marfa Petrovna. None of this is met with retribution. Indeed, he appears to be above the law — a position that Raskolnikov attempts and fails to attain. The major difference between Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov is that Svidrigailov can commit horrendous crimes without guilt and anxiety. He does not suffer for his crimes, whereas Raskolnikov after his murders is tormented and anxiety-ridden and accepts punishment. Svidrigailov's orientation toward destruction brings him to the supreme act of will, suicide.

Sonia's orientation toward life wins out. Her interest and genuine concern make it possible for Raskolnikov to overcome the strong pull toward death, which Svidrigailov symbolizes. Thus, by casting his fate with Sonia, Raskolnikov is able to move forward toward rebirth. Dabrowski (1966) observes that the differentiation between a positive and a negative disintegration can only be proved by examination of the eventual outcome of the process.

Trust ing and believing in Sonia, though not yet at the point of trusting and believing in himself, Raskolnikov accepts his eight-year sentence to Siberia. Prison represents a type of freedom — a reprieve from his suicidal impulses. He admits that he had no right to murder and recognizes his criminality. He asks himself why he had not killed himself. Why had he stood looking at the river and preferred confessing rather than dying? "Why was the desire to live so strong and why was it so hard to overcome it? Had not Svidrigailov overcome it?" With these questions Raskolnikov enters into the long hard struggle toward integration. Sonia's belief in him and his potential for reintegration provide the essential ingredient in this process.

At one point during his prison sentence, Raskolnikov has a dream. The dream is filled with fighting, death, and abandonment, and reveals that: "all men and all things were involved in destruction. Only a few men could be saved in the whole world. And they were a pure chosen people ... but no one had seen these men, no one had heard their words and their voices." Although the dream is replete with references to a "superior race," Raskolnikov's resultant behavior and attitude toward Sonia indicate that the dream represents a loosening of his delusion of superiority. Perhaps, after all, he is not one of these chosen people.

By relinquishing his obsession with the preservation of the "idealized image" Raskolnikov has gained the capacity to look beyond the narrow confines of the conflicted self and begin to experience Sonia as an object separate from himself. For the first time he recognizes his need for her and is distressed by her absence, marking the beginning of his consciously accepting his dependency on her. (Sonia followed Raskolnikov to Siberia, where she stayed in a village near the prison camp.) However, Sonia can now be valued for herself and not merely for what she provides.
him. He no longer needs his all-consuming, all-protecting egocentricity. Thus, intellectual theorizing gives way to experiencing life. He begins to feel.

Like Lazarus raised from the dead after days of decay so, too, is Raskolnikov transformed by his experience with disintegration. Sonia facilitates this rebirth by being the constant object available to him. That which had its tenuous beginning with Natalya, was interrupted by her death and his symbolic death, begins again with indications of integration at a higher level. Thus, the entire painful and confusing experience can be viewed as a source of enrichment for Raskolnikov, the man who survived it.

References
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**A Masters Program in Primary Care Nursing: Child and Adolescent Mental Health**

Herbert H. Lehman College of the City University of New York

- A new masters program to prepare nurses to function in the prevention and treatment of emotional illness of children, adolescents, and their families began accepting students in February, 1976. Designed to prepare nurses in ways of achieving and maintaining optimal child development through the use of developmental assessment, physical examination, and health maintenance skills, as well as in ways of actively engaging in and utilizing the role of advocate to help meet the needs of the child and his family, the program will qualify its graduates to function in a variety of settings as clinical specialists in child psychiatric nursing.

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