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Magic and forensic psychiatry: A case study and review of the literature

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Abstract

Forensic psychiatrists routinely appear in courts for crimes that have been perpetrated by mentally ill patients or when the defendant is suffering from a major psychiatric disorder. However, committing crimes under the presumed effects of magic and witchcraft is uncommon. A variety of delusional thoughts and personality disorders have been imputed in aggressive behaviour that might culminate in homicide. The patterns of a premeditated homicide, as well as the aberrations of the interpersonal relations, as a rule require long-term and close contact. As such, the family is a setting where such occurrences have been reported. We describe a case of first-degree murder by a woman who killed her mother-in-law after accusing her repeatedly of sorcery and witchcraft. Such complicated cases cannot be resolved without the help of forensic experts, whose role remains multifaceted and of particular importance.

Key Words: Belief in magic; Witchcraft; Criminology; Forensic psychiatry

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Core Tip: Belief in magic and spelling objects (witchcraft) are rarely object of the prosecutors' investigations, a fact that may be related to the public abhorrence of the phenomenon itself. Family is a highly vulnerable setting, when there are no compensatory mechanisms for altercations and everyday quarrels. Such complicated cases cannot be resolved without the help of forensic psychiatrists, whose role remains multifaceted and of particular importance.

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INTRODUCTION

Belief in magic refers to the persuasive omnipotence of a thought. In other words, if you simply think about something, it may turn into reality. Magic and belief in it, as a normal part of earliest human communities, were once considered as harmless, and the rituals were attributed to well-educated people of a certain reputation. Cultural influences, evolution, societal progression, and age-related changes are some, but not the only factors influencing the popularity of magical thinking^[1,2]. Once considered as a sophisticated way of thinking, the belief that spirits and demons may live within us and cause mental health issues is now abolished and regarded as a mental disorder. In general, societies shifted from sanctifying these practices in the antiquity toward condemning them in the medieval period; even witch-hunt has expanded to local areas, such as Salem in Massachusetts among many examples^[3].

Forensic medicine professionals' opinion, particularly forensic psychiatrists, are routinely summoned in courts when perpetrators act under delusional influences. However, magic does not straightforwardly suggest the existence of a delusional disorder, as a plethora of factors contribute to this distorted way of thinking: Religious delusions can be a very good example^[4,5]. Moreover, cultural background plays a very important role in the overall understanding and explanation of magical practices. Magic was once practiced in well-accepted rituals. Even today, some societies are familiar with these practices or at least have a less rigid view about them due to their harmlessness^[6,7].

Generally, there are various criminological views about this phenomenon. If magic is a distorted way of belief and thinking, it may be explained under anthropological terms and remain an eternal curiosity to the mankind. Renowned anthropologists, including Frazer, Durkheim, and many others, have made substantial contributions in this field^[8,9]. One should pay attention to the medically important fact that if magic and magical thinking still trigger ethnological and anthropological curiosity, they may become a psychiatric concern in Western societies. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) considers magical thinking as the delusional part of an odd belief, which can be classified as a schizophrenic symptom or at least a schizotypal archetype^[10].

The killing of a family member is not an infrequent event. However, in the majority of cases, the perpetrators are charged and sentenced for crimes of futile reasons or impulsively committed. Families under stress are clearly at a higher risk of violence, and frustration can lead to a spiral of interpersonal aggression and violent acts, culminating into a murder^[11]. By studying the traits of murder within a family, one might wonder how easily an everyday situation can degenerate into altercations and use of force. The so-called "ordinary murderer" might be provocative by a simple act that will provoke the tragedy^[12]. Nevertheless, acting under the influence of magic or spells is an exceptional event. Such circumstantial combinations rarely lead to a serious crime, such as killing within the family.

CASE STUDY

The Albanian public opinion was struck some years before from a crime within family, with a mother-in-law ruthlessly strangulated and poisoned with Phostoxin by her son's wife. The case received wide coverage from the media and an important bulk of the crime details (if not its entirety) was published and republished in all local journals and other mass media.

After long and repeated skirmishes and quarrels, the wife of the victim's son decided to come to an end. The perpetrator was a pregnant, newlywed, 26-year-old rural female, who was poorly educated, and easily gullible. With a previous miscarriage and a highly expected progeny, she was convinced that her mother-in-law was responsible for all her unhappiness, including her previous miscarriage, which was extremely unfortunate for herself and her husband. Belief in magic and alleged witchcraft were highly probable causes of crime. After being arrested and indicted

from the state attorney, the perpetrator made the following statements: "...While we were adjusting the water supply in the terrace some months earlier, we found a bottle with a big piece of meat plunged inside...My husband and I immediately doubted that someone was doing witchcraft or some kind of magic spell to make us suffer. We had heard about people doing such things. After that day, we continuously discovered strange objects in our bedroom, including animal teeth over the nightstand, and our suspicion became stronger. Also, I found hanging socks of mine and of my husband at the window with human hair inside...Our marital relationship was getting worse day by day..."

This crime was perpetrated in a rural family with a low-to-middle economic status. The murder was premeditated long before, as the perpetrator had purchased a strong poison (Phostoxin) several days before the crime. She prepared a lemonade drink with the poison diluted and strangled the mother-in-law several minutes after she drank it, to make sure that she was dead. The perpetrator had an unclear psychiatric background. The family attorney tried in vain to raise an insanity defence, but since she was never admitted to a psychiatric facility, the appointed forensic experts excluded any major psychopathology that could have led to the crime. However, some further details, disclosed by witnesses during the trial, revealed her fragile social status and interpersonal relations.

The perpetrator had been sent several times from her relatives (mostly from her sister) to a self-proclaimed medicine man with 'supranatural' healing abilities, and had some "hypnosis sessions" in his office. The medicine man was not certified for such activities, and his practices of divination and healing were not serious or professional. The offered treatment provided few, if any, improvement in the psychic status of the perpetrator.

Finally, the case was brought to the court of law, and she was charged with first-degree murder. Life imprisonment was requested by the state prosecutor. However, pregnancy and birth of her child was considered as a mitigating factor to the jury. She was sentenced to 32 years of imprisonment, with the verdict waiting confirmation in a court of appeal.

DISCUSSION

Family relations are highly vulnerable when there are no compensatory mechanisms for altercations and everyday quarrels. In our case, the perpetrator gave her mother-in-law a poisoned drink, pretending that it was a miraculous drink that could appease them; and at the end she strangled the victim. The pregnant woman in our case, while complaining of her previous miscarriage, was convinced that magic was responsible for it. Meanwhile, she told her husband that, "I feel there is a rabbit in my abdomen", while notifying him of another pregnancy. Among her personal belongings, forensic experts found a file from the Internet, downloaded on her USB flash drive, named "The Killing of the Magician". The objects (meat, animal teeth, human hair *etc.*) allegedly found close to her bedroom or inside it, and which she believed to be witchcraft supplies, are also normal parts of the armamentarium of a sorcerer.

The main question while facing a thought distortion within the context of magical thinking, remains as to whether this phenomenon and magic itself should be considered as superstitions, popular beliefs, or both. Culturally accepted deviations, that in other settings are considered as an abnormal behaviour and therefore not accepted, will not always be granted the status of a mental disorder. Sorcery-related violence and/or magic remains a significant social phenomenon in Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, several African countries, and Canada, to mention a few^[13-16]. The social attempt to end these occurrences and face them legally has led to the promulgation of several laws. The Anglo-Saxon tradition is rich in witchcraft acts and has been adopted step by step in different countries, including the colonies of the British Empire. Some acts of the Scottish Parliament had even considered death penalty ("Anentis Witchcraftis") in 1563, leading to the murder of 2000 people after being sentenced for sorcery in the century to come^[17]. Therefore, this issue has significant social and psychological impacts, causing societies to pendulate between the strong innate belief in supernatural powers and the ad hoc attempts to influence or at least modulate such seemingly out of control powers. This has led to deterministic evaluations of human behaviour as a whole in some theories of psychopathology^[18].

Efforts to approach under a psychopathological perspective the acts of criminal violence involving witchcraft or sorcery are obviously warranted^[10,19]. Philological

contributions are of particular assistance, especially from a psychodynamic/psychoanalytical point of view. Freud pioneered a milestone work, entitled “Animismus, Magie und Allmacht der Gedanken” (Animism, Magic and Omnipotence of Thought) in his “Totem and Taboo” book^[20]. Melvin-Koushki while commenting recently on the work of Günther and Pielow, differentiated a variety of beliefs (Glaube) in German: (1) “Aberglaube” (superstition); (2) “Unglaube” (disbelief); (3) “Irrglaube” (misbelief); and (4) “Volks Glaube” (folk belief)^[21].

The criminologists’ need for the expertise of psychiatric professionals might have reversed the assumption that heinous felonies are perpetrated only from mentally ill persons. Meanwhile, forensic psychiatry has distanced itself from its root disciplines, and while adopting a criminological terminology, one should consider the reasons for such an aberration. However, this might not be only related to terminological choices, albeit they alone can be corruptive^[22]. While summoning psychiatrists in court not unusually judges raise questions on why and how the perpetrator acted: This is a trap that produces aberrating answers. Such an issue, before being a psychiatric dilemma, is a criminological concept that will lead back to pre-classical period of theories, with the devil and demonic possessions responsible of all wrongdoings^[23].

Belief in magic is not only restricted to underdeveloped or suburban areas, but economic hardship also will fuel its popularity. It seems that people still resort to magic, witchcraft, and sorcery as a medium when they feel a situation is out of their control or beyond logical explanations. For example, some tribes still occasionally use magic while fishing in open seas, but not in safe lagoons^[24]. The reason for the use of witchcraft may be as simple as the individual’s attempt to influence things and conditions that are out of control; such choices resemble obsessive ruminations. However, DSM has included magical thinking not only among schizophrenic disorders, but also within a larger spectrum of personality disorders^[10]. Recently, straightforward relationships have been suggested between magical thinking and hallucinations, although again in a schizophrenic background^[25].

A research published in PubMed, with the keywords: “Witchcraft”, “magic”, and “forensic psychiatry”, yielded approximately 24 papers, which is a minuscule figure when compared to the total number of published papers in medicine. Therefore, it is important to expand research in this area to enrich the findings. It is as well possible to integrate other fields of study, such as anthropology, ethnology, philology, and other related studies. It seems that magical thinking has survived in affiliation to delusional disorders, although it is strictly considered only for clinical psychiatric or psychological purposes. However, in courts of law, the belief in magic as a psychopathological phenomenon is regularly rejected, whenever an insanity defense or mental illness are proposed as mitigating factors. Attempts to connect sorcery and magic as being prevalent within some specific religious confessions have been ever since dismissed. In fact, the cultural osmosis and the globalization have universalized even these mental health issues and concerns^[26].

CONCLUSION

The legal authorities will have the final say in such complicated cases, with long-term effects on the families. Magic and spelling objects (witchcraft) are rarely object of the prosecutors’ investigations, which may be related to the public abhorrence on witchcraft, or as an attempt to prevent notorious trials from happening again, such as in the case of Salem and its aftermath^[3]. Generally, experts, including toxicologists, coroners, and psychiatrists, are an important part of investigations^[27].

The concept of evil, once considered as outdated, is resurging in philology, theology, forensic psychiatry, and other scientific areas^[22,28-30]. The background of the expertise might differ: A criminologist will offer a diverse perspective from a forensic psychiatrist. If an overlapping occurs, this is mainly due to the unlucky exchanging of roles, in an era where authorities are downplaying the value of psychiatric opinions thus predicting their demise in criminal courts^[31]. Adopting a criminological terminology is therefore not helpful to psychiatrists. Focusing on psychiatric phenomenology and remaining as descriptive as one can be while reporting a case, is the keystone of a mindful and convincing expertise^[32]. This is even more tangible when the situations involve an intricate mesh of anthropological, social and psychological issues such as when dealing with belief in magic, witchcraft and crime perpetrated under the influence of a delusional state.

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