



## Sexual murder typologies: A systematic review



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### ABSTRACT

Establishing an empirically valid typology of sexual murder is necessary for developing theory, risk assessment, and intervention. Results from all empirical studies conducted between 1970 and 2016, drawing on information pertaining to > 700 sexual murderers, were collated to provide a definitive best evidence synthesis elucidating the overall patterns and motives underlying sexual murder. Three subtypes of sexual murder were consistently found. The term *sexualized murder* is proposed, to refer to those crimes in which killing is functionally related to the sexual element of the offence. *Grievance murder* is driven by angry schema and an excessively aggressive response style. Finally, *rape murder* involves only an indirect association between the sexual offence and killing. Factors distinguishing these subtypes are discussed, and attention is directed towards gaps in knowledge, particularly in relation to biopsychosocial and criminal career factors that remain under-researched.

### 1. Introduction

Person-oriented, as opposed to variable-oriented approaches to understanding similarities and differences within a given population, such as sexual murderers, are useful for clinical descriptions, intervention, and risk prediction (Lussier & Cale, 2014). That is, there are advantages for understanding criminal acts and for advancing scientific enquiry using the configurations of factors offered by a typology. As Lussier and Cale (2014) assert, this is because the profile of factors present has greater explanatory power than any one factor alone, or an accumulation of factors that are not necessarily related at the individual level. In the sexual murder literature, there are a number of widely cited, influential typologies. For example, the organized/disorganized dichotomy identified by Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents (Burgess, Hartman, Ressler, Douglas, & McCormack, 1986; Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988), returned to later in this text. However, limitations related to a lack of scientific rigor have been highlighted (Burkhart, 1989), and there have been few validation attempts that may have overcome such criticisms.

Comprehensive syntheses of various typological descriptions of sexual murderers are available (Beauregard, Proulx, & St-Yves, 2007; Chan & Heide, 2009; Kerr, Beech, & Murphy, 2013). Methodological considerations and associated limitations of the typologies may be discussed, but none of these publications specify any inclusion criteria for the studies reviewed, nor do they describe any systematic approach in terms of literature search strategy or provide any methodical quality

assessment of the studies reported. This means that clinical opinion and theoretically proposed (but not necessarily validated) typologies are presented alongside those derived using multivariate statistical analyses, potentially giving credence to invalid, or at best untested, hypotheses. The purpose of the present review is to address this issue, through an exhaustive review of relevant work determining the state of current scientific knowledge.

#### 1.1. Expert opinion, clinical observation, and theory-led approaches

Canter, Alison, Alison, and Wentink (2004) questioned whether the FBI organized/disorganized typology represented mere myth, or a model that may reliably be used, as it has been, to aid police investigations and inform expert witness testimony. On the basis of 36 cases, the organized offender is described by Ressler et al. (1988) to carry out a planned attack against a targeted stranger, demonstrating control, ritualism, and detection avoidance strategies such as moving the body and disposing of weapons. By contrast, the disorganized offender is proposed to represent a more chaotic type of murderer, who leaves behind a crime scene with little or no effort to remove or destroy evidence. These are only a few of the crime scene characteristics assigned to organized and disorganized sexual murderers, along with a number of proposed psychosocial differences. However, there are numerous problems in the development of the typology, such as sampling bias (over-representation of serial murderers, taken from an opportunity sample), and unclear methodology (lack of standardized

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interview procedure, and categorization of offenders based on crime scene behaviors and selected offender characteristics in a 'top-down' approach, dictated by the expertise of the investigators). As such, external validation is an essential goal for proponents of the organized/disorganized typology, which has not been actualized. On the contrary, [Canter et al. \(2004\)](#) reject the model, finding that organized traits were common across their sample of 100 serial killers. It should be noted that their study relied heavily upon secondary sources of information (journalistic biographies), which as well as the question of the reliability of the data, introduces a problem of sample bias due to being limited to those cases attracting sufficient media attention. However, this reflects similar biases as in the original FBI research. As such, the lack of support for the typology that was found following a scientific method (data analysis through multi-dimensional scaling) must be underlined.

In a theory-led approach [Keppel and Walter \(1999\)](#) extended [Groth, Burgess, and Holmstrom's \(1977\)](#) classification system for rape, pivoting on anger and power as central to the understanding of these offences. Further, [Keppel and Walter \(1999\)](#) aligned their typology to the FBI work, suggesting that an organized crime scene should be left by *power-assertive* and *anger-excitation* sexual murderers, whereas *power-reassurance* and *anger-retaliation* ends with a disorganized crime scene. Demonstration of the typology was presented using case examples ([Keppel & Walter, 1999](#)). However, statistical testing to determine the strength of association between variables that should co-occur within types failed to offer external validation ([Bennell, Bloomfield, Emeno, & Musolino, 2013](#)), suggesting tautology in the categorization of selected cases in the original development of this typology.

Other important efforts to delineate the heterogeneity observed within sexual murderers have been made drawing on a wealth of investigative and clinical experience. Proposed subtypes include the *catathymic* and *compulsive* types of sexual murderer described by [Revitch and Schlesinger \(1989\)](#); elaborated upon by [Schlesinger, 2004, 2007](#), and the *hedonistic (thrill and lust)*, and *power/control* subtypes of serial murderer proposed by [Holmes and DeBurger \(1985\)](#); see also [Holmes & Holmes, 2009](#)). [Malmquist \(2006\)](#) described *rape homicides*, *lust (or sadistic) homicides*, and *homicides to destroy evidence*, and a typology comprising the *sexually motivated murder; sexually triggered – aggressive control; sexually triggered – aggressive discontrol; sexually triggered – neuropsychological dysfunction* was developed by [Clarke and Carter \(2000\)](#). Some common themes emerge in this body of work. For example, a distinction is consistently identified between sexual murderers for whom killing is integrated into sexual fantasies manifesting in a murder typically characterized by sadistic behaviors (compulsive, [Revitch & Schlesinger, 1989](#); lust, [Holmes & DeBurger, 1985](#); [Malmquist, 2006](#); sexually motivated murder, [Clarke & Carter, 2000](#)), compared to those who respond with extreme aggression to either distal or temporal grievance (catathymic, [Revitch & Schlesinger, 1989](#); sexually triggered – aggressive discontrol, [Clarke & Carter, 2000](#)). There are also some similarities between the homicide to destroy evidence ([Malmquist, 2006](#)), and the sexually triggered – aggressive control ([Clarke & Carter, 2000](#)) subtypes, in that for these men the primary motivation appears to be to sexually offend, and killing serves an instrumental purpose.

Despite some overall concordance between the proposed typologies, it is difficult to extrapolate further. That is, the behavioral and psychological characteristics that would have implications for investigators, treatment providers, risk assessors and policy makers remain unclear, due to methodological limitations in the studies. Specifically, classification methods are insufficiently described and rely heavily on expert opinion rather than necessarily being data driven, or were based on small unrepresentative samples. Frequently serial murderers are over-represented or there is a lack of discrimination between serial and non-serial murderers, complicated by the fact that serial murder is defined differently between studies with some accepting a minimum of 2 victims and others requiring a minimum of 3 or 4 ([Kocsis, 2006](#)).

However, serial murder often involves no sexual element, for example those who kill for profit ([Hickey, 2002](#)), and there is sufficient evidence of differences between serial sexual murderers and non-serial sexual murderers ([James & Proulx, 2014](#); [James & Proulx, 2016](#)) to indicate a need for researchers to methodologically control for this.

## 1.2. Current aims and objectives

The present review aims to facilitate ongoing scientific efforts to understand the various types of offence that may be categorized as sexual murder, and the perpetrators of these crimes. As such, it reviews studies of sexual murder, but necessarily it encapsulates studies of sexual murderers. Reference is made herein to both sexual murder, and sexual murderers, depending on the focus of the study being discussed, or the particular variables under consideration.

Given the limitations outlined concerning some widely accepted typologies appearing in the extant literature, the overall objective of the present review was to identify all typologies of sexual murder/sexual murderers that were empirically derived or validated, and assess the quality of the available studies. The review also aimed to synthesize the findings of included studies, such that any overarching themes may be clarified, including the social and psychological characteristics associated with different types of sexual murderer.

## 2. Method

Procedures were followed according to the guidance provided by the [Centre for Reviews and Dissemination \(2009\)](#), and [Petticrew and Roberts \(2006\)](#).

### 2.1. Data sources

Electronic searches of the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews and the Campbell Collaboration Library did not find any systematic reviews of the characteristics of sexual murderers. Following a scoping exercise completed for an indication of the number of potentially relevant studies the period 1970 to 2016 was determined for the literature to be covered, because empirical studies began to appear following [Brittain's \(1970\)](#) clinical descriptions of sadistic murderers ([Carter & Hollin, 2010](#)). Five electronic platforms (Ovid, EBSCO, ProQuest, Thomson Reuters, and EBSCO) were used to search the following databases: PsycINFO, MEDLINE, Web of Science (including the Science Citation Index – Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index, Conference Proceedings Citation Index – Science, Conference Proceedings Citation Index – Social Sciences & Humanities, Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Book Citation Index – Science, Book Citation Index – Social Sciences & Humanities), ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Science Direct, ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts), IBSS (International Bibliography of the Social Sciences), NCJRS (National Criminal Justice Reference Service), PQDT – UK & Ireland (ProQuest Dissertations & Theses), ProQuest COS Conference Papers Index. The Australian Criminology Database was accessed via the British Library online. Additionally, grey literature was searched via the online repository, OpenGrey. Searches were conducted using keywords: sex offences, sadism, or serial, combined with murder, killing, or homicide; and wildcard searches: (sex\* or sadis\* or lust AND murder\* or kill\* or homicid\*) or erotophonophli\* or necrophili\*. Finally, the reference lists of relevant articles were hand-searched for articles not identified in the electronic databases ( $n = 3$ ), and several experts in the field were contacted for additional articles such as unpublished work, which led to the addition of one article. The search was not restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, meaning that book chapters and conference papers were included but reviews and editorials were excluded. No language restriction was made. Articles published in English, French, German, Russian and Czech were included.

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