



The modus operandi of serial and nonserial sexual murderers: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

The goal of this current systematic review was to describe the characteristics of the modus operandi of serial and nonserial sexual murderers, and the contextual and situational factors associated with them. It analyzes detailed data on 1836 sexual murderers (serial sexual murderers = 176; nonserial sexual murderers = 1660) taken from 45 empirical descriptive studies carried out between 1985 and 2013. In order to better characterize serial sexual murderers (SSMs) and nonserial sexual murderers (NSMs), four categories of variables were established: precrime variables; crime scene and modus operandi variables; postcrime variables; and victimology variables. Sexual murder possesses specific choice-structuring properties, and interactions between internal constraints and external constraints produce a limited number of crime scripts. SSMs' modus operandi reflects sadistic sexual fantasies, sexual sadism, and organization. SSMs plan their murders in order to make them as congruent as possible with their fantasies. NSMs' modus operandi is the result of an explosion of anger. These sexual murderers are impulsive and extremely violent, and use sexual murder to diminish their internal tension

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1. Introduction

James and Proulx's (2014) recent systematic review of the psychological and developmental characteristics of sexual murderers suggests that serial sexual murderers (SSMs; three or more victims) are clearly different from nonserial sexual murderers (NSMs; one or two victims). While SSMs are characterized by psychosexual problems (e.g. compulsive masturbation, paraphilias, sadistic sexual fantasies) and the early development of coercive sexual behaviours, NSMs are characterized by antisocial traits (e.g. impulsivity and hostile attitudes). The psychopathological and developmental profiles of SSMs and NSMs correspond to the profiles of *sadistic sexual murderers* and *angry sexual murderers*, respectively, reported in the literature (Beauregard & Proulx, 2002; Beech, Fisher, & Ward, 2005; Clarke & Carter, 2000; Keppel & Walter, 1999; Kocsis, 1999; Meloy, 2000; Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988). However, James and Proulx (2014) did not examine the characteristics of SSMs' and NSMs' modus operandi, which Douglas, Burgess, Burgess, and Ressler (1992; p. 260) define as "the offender's actions during the perpetration of a crime". In addition to this definition, which focuses on the behaviours of the murderers during the crime, we added variables related to murderers' internal state, namely cognitions and emotions during the crime. This provides an extensive portrait of the murder and the murderer. The modus operandi variables are clearly distinct from the precrime characteristics and postcrime characteristics of the murderers, which are not part of modus operandi but provide valuable contextual information that permits a better understanding of modus operandi.

This systematic review was undertaken to complete the profile of SSMs and NSMs, more specifically to identify the key elements of each group's modus operandi. To provide a coherent framework for understanding the results of the various studies of sexual murderers' modus operandi in this review, the key features of criminological and psychological theories of modus operandi developed with sex offenders (including sexual murderers) will be presented below. In general, these theories have been developed in isolation from each other, although several authors have emphasized the need for an integrated approach (Chan, 2015; Proulx, Beauregard, Lussier, & Leclerc, 2014; Ward & Beech, 2006).

1.1. Criminological theories of the modus operandi of sexual aggression

It is only recently that criminological theories have been applied to the study of sexual aggression (Beauregard & Leclerc, 2014). These theories posit that the nature of the modus operandi is related, both directly and indirectly, to the environmental context of the aggression (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993; Piquero & Tibbetts, 1996), and that each type of crime possesses its own script shaped by the crime's choice-structuring

properties (Cornish, 1994a, 1994b; Cornish & Clarke, 1987, 2002). Thus, modus operandi is shaped by external constraints, such as victim resistance and third-party intervention, situational factors, such as the location of the crime and the aggressor's lifestyle, and internal constraints, such as the aggressor's beliefs and attitudes (Beauregard & Leclerc, 2007; Proulx & Beauregard, 2009).

Blanchette, St-Yves, and Proulx (2009) analyzed the relationship between sexual aggressors' modus operandi and lifestyle, and identified three profiles: *isolated*, *orderly*, and *festive*. *Isolated* aggressors have a lifestyle characterized by the avoidance of interpersonal relationships, and a planned modus operandi that encompasses a wide range of sexual acts. *Orderly* aggressors have an ostensibly conventional lifestyle and a planned modus operandi (e.g. victim preselection) that includes the use of a weapon and the humiliation of the victim. *Festive* aggressors are sensation seekers and have a modus operandi characterized by lack of premeditation, alcohol and drug consumption, and severe victim injury.

Modus operandi may be related not only to lifestyle but also to events in the hours preceding the sexual assault. For example, in one study of 118 rapists, an association was observed between situational factors, such as alcohol consumption, and the level of coercion and injury (Beauregard, Lussier, & Proulx, 2005). Although precrime variables may influence aggressors' decision making, they do not completely explain aggressors' behaviours during the commission of their crimes. For the analysis of these crime-phase behaviours, the rational choice perspective provides a useful framework.

The rational choice perspective focuses on the criminal's decision-making process during the commission of a crime (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Cornish & Clarke, 1986, 1987; Piliavin, Gartner, Thornton, & Matsueda, 1986). Although sexual murderers may make some choices that appear irrational (e.g. dismembering the victim's corpse), their decision making is indeed rational (e.g. hindering identification of the victim, acting out sexual fantasies), and helps them attain their goals (e.g. avoiding police detection, obtaining sexual satisfaction) (Clarke & Cornish, 1985, 2000; Cornish & Clarke, 1986). Thus, by analyzing intentional factors (e.g. anger, deviant sexual fantasies) and situational factors (e.g. victim resistance) of the decision-making process of 141 sexual aggressors against women (101 rapists and 40 sexual murderers), Chéné and Cusson (2007) demonstrated that the circumstances of the crime (i.e. precrime affects, consumption of alcohol, relationship to victim, victim resistance, use of a weapon, duration of crime) are key determinants of the nature of modus operandi. The integration of criminological theories into research into sexual aggression has led to the identification of the influence of contextual and situational factors on the commission of sexual crimes. However, these criminological theories pay minimal attention to the influence of sexual aggressors' affective and cognitive processes on the playing out of the modus operandi.

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