



Impulsivity as an etiological factor in sexual homicide

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The goal of this study is twofold: the continued isolation of theoretically relevant factors associated with sexual homicide and to continue bringing the academic study of sexual homicide into the realm of mainstream criminology by applying the well-known criminological concepts such as impulsivity.

Methods: The sample is comprised of nonhomicidal sex offenders (NHSOs) who inflicted severe physical injuries ($n = 146$) and sexual homicide offenders (SHOs) who killed their victim ($n = 83$). Logistic regression analyses were constructed to investigate the impact of impulsivity on sexual homicide.

Results: While controlling for theoretically relevant factors, impulsivity is an important concept to sexual homicide. Specially, the findings of this study suggest that sexual murderers present personal characteristics that differ from nonsexual homicide offenders.

Conclusions: Sexual murderers present personal characteristics different from nonhomicidal sex offenders – even the violent ones – and it is important to continue investigating this line of inquiry. Although some sex offenders may be largely influenced by situational factors and end up killing the victim, the results show that personality traits such as impulsivity may also explain why some sex offenders kill their victims.

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1. Introduction

DeLisi and Wright (2014) have highlighted the fact that mainstream criminological research has by and large refused to scientifically investigate sexual homicide. The result of this large slight has been an almost quasi absence of sexual homicide research by mainstream criminologists. Reasons for the exclusion of sexual homicide from the mainstream lexicon include the inability of many current criminological theories to explain severe sexual violence (low base rate of sexual homicide and by extension the reactive infrequency of sexual homicide cases in traditional criminological datasets; DeLisi & Wright, 2014).

As mention above, perhaps one of the largest obstacles in empirically studying sexual homicide is the base rate of sexual homicide and its related decreasing trend over the past several decades. For example, the prevalence of sexual homicide in the U.S. has declined from 0.8% to 0.2% from between 1976 and 2011 (Chan & Heide, 2008; Meloy, 2000; Myers, Chan, & Mariano, 2016; U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). Similarly, in Canada, between 1974 and 1986 sexual homicides comprised 4% of all homicides (see Roberts & Grossman, 1993), but this proportion fell to 3% between 1985 and 1995 (Statistics Canada, 2013), and reached its lowest point at 2% between 1991 and 2001 (Kong, Johnson, Beattie, & Cardillo, 2003). Interestingly, these numbers are similar in the United Kingdom (2.5% - Francis et al., 2004; 1.2% - Greenall, 2005), Australia

(0.9% - Mouzos, 2003), Finland (2.8% - Häkkinen-Nyholm, Repo-Tiihonen, Lindberg, Salenius, & Weizmann-Henelius, 2009), and Jamaica (5% - Lemard & Hemenway, 2006).

Yet, despite the disinterest from criminology various other disciplines, including psychology, psychiatry, and even law enforcement, continue to study sexual homicide and develop theoretical models. The current study aims to contribute to the ever growing body of literature on sexual homicide. Specifically, this study will address some of the limitations of criminological research identified by DeLisi and Wright (2014) by exploring the impact of impulsivity, as conceptualized by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) on sexual homicide while controlling for empirically related factors recently shown to be important in the prediction of sexual homicide.

1.1. Sexual murderer as a different type of sex offender

More recently, several studies have suggested that sexual homicide lies on one end of a sexual violence continuum (DeLisi & Wright, 2014). This continuum ranges from less violent forms of sexual assault, whereby the offender uses instrumental violence, to extreme sexual violence, such as sexual homicide, whereby the offender uses expressive violence. Proponents of this view have begun to investigate the differentiating characteristics associated with these qualitatively different offenders (Chan & Heide, 2016; Healey & Beauregard, 2015). Interestingly enough, although many of these recent studies point to few criminological or psychological differences between sexual

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homicide offenders (SHOs) and non-homicidal sex offenders (NHSOs; see Proulx, Beauregard, Cusson, & Nicole, 2007 for an extensive review), other researchers have found distinguishing characteristics. For example, Chan and Heide (2016) compiled the information from 17 studies on SHOs and NHSOs and found that, SHOs had more problematic childhood and adolescence, were more frequently diagnosed with antisocial and schizoid personality disorders, had more maladaptive personality traits, sexual sadism, and paraphilias compared to NHSOs (see also Chan & Beauregard, 2016). Also, SHOs were more likely to live alone at the time of offence, they had fewer intimate relationship experiences, and were less likely to be married compared to NHSOs. The SHOs were also more likely to have sexually deviant fantasies, consume alcohol during the crime, to select victims who lived alone, and with whom they had no prior contact (Healey & Beauregard, 2015).

Notwithstanding these differences, few studies have considered the heterogeneity in the NHSO group and failed to account for its composition of non-violent as well as violent sex offenders. Failure to realize any potential criminological differences between non-violent and violent NHSO undoubtedly introduces noise into any analyses and subsequently the findings. Addressing this concern, Beauregard and Martineau (2016) began by separating non-violent NHSOs and violent NHSOs, and compared them to SHOs. NHSOs and violent NHSOs were separated so as to better understand the factors that could lead sex offenders to kill, while some others would inflict severe but not fatal physical injury. Beauregard and Martineau's (2016) study showed that SHOs presented distinct developmental (e.g., social isolation, poor self-image, physical and sexual victimization during childhood), sexual (e.g., prostitution, using pornography, going to stripjoints), personality (e.g., schizoid, borderline personality disorders, deviant sexual fantasies, paraphilias as juvenile and adult), contextual (e.g., generalized conflict with women, victim intoxicated during the crime, alcohol and drugs prior to the crime) as well as modus operandi (e.g., crime committed at night, crime lasts >30 min, victim selected, use of a weapon, victim abandoned completely naked) characteristics compared to NHSOs and violent NHSOs. In another study, Beauregard, DeLisi, and Hewitt (2016) looked specifically at the criminal career of SHOs. Their findings revealed that compared to violent NHSOs, SHOs were more likely to present prior convictions for armed robberies but less likely to present prior convictions for assault. Moreover, SHOs were less likely to present prior convictions for assault and sexual assault compared to NHSOs but they were likely to have prior convictions for homicide and kidnapping. Finally, the study showed that SHOs were more likely to present a versatile criminal career while the NHSOs were more likely to show specialization (Beauregard et al., 2016).

1.2. Theoretical models of sexual homicide

Considering that SHOs seem to constitute a group on its own of sex offenders, different theoretical models have been proposed over the years to explain sexual homicide. The motivational model is often considered one of the first empirical models of sexual homicide despite never having been tested (Healey & Beauregard, 2015). Based on a small sample of 36 serial sexual murderers, the model is composed of five interacting factors: (1) ineffective environment, (2) child and adolescent formative events, (3) patterned responses to these events, (4) resultant actions toward others, and (5) the killer's reactions to his killings via a mental "feedback filter" (Burgess, Hartman, Ressler, Douglas, & McCormack, 1986; Ressler et al., 1988). According to the model, sexual murderers come from criminogenic environments where there is either an absence of bonding or problematic bonding between the offender and his caregiver. Problematic bonding occurs when a child is not consistently provided with the necessities of life, a nurturing environment and a sense of security. These elements are required to allow for a secure attachment to form and for prosocial development. When a caregiver is neglectful, abusive (physical and sexual), and inconsistent a child's development can be impeded, resulting in a child who is hostile

and socially isolated. It is difficult for the negative consequences of these events to be adequately addressed by the offenders' social environment. Due to feelings of isolation and helplessness, the offender retreats into a world of deviant sexual fantasies, which are thought to be a mechanism by which the budding offender regains control of his life and achieves dominance, both of which are missing from his reality. The model predicts that due in part to traumatic events; the fantasy life of the child is sexually violent and has themes of power, dominance, and revenge. Consequently, the child is unable to develop prosocial bonds and becomes increasingly dependent on his deviant sexual fantasies for both his sexual and emotional needs. This is also why these offenders develop negative rather than positive personality traits (e.g., social isolation, rebelliousness, aggression, chronic deceitfulness). The rich fantasy life of the offender becomes increasingly ineffective at satisfying his needs, and the offender begins to act out, committing violent crimes, escalating from crimes such as arson and animal abuse in childhood to abduction, rape, and nonsexual murder in adulthood. According to the model, this escalation in violence reaches its pinnacle when the offender experiences a significant stressor in his life (e.g., interpersonal conflict with a female partner). This stressor causes the offender to reach his breaking point. He subsequently releases his pent up rage in the form of sexual homicide. Following the crime, the "feedback filter" helps the offender to justify and evaluate his actions. He assesses his behavior in terms of its congruence with his fantasies and considers how to navigate any obstacles within the external environment (e.g., avoiding punishment, detection).

Similarly, the trauma control model presented by Hickey (1997) has never been subjected to empirical validation (Healey & Beauregard, 2015). Hickey (2002) does not suggest that any one factor is more important than another. However, he does suggest that some factors, such as sociological (e.g., dysfunctional home environment), psychological (e.g., mental illness, personality disorders), biological (e.g., extra Y chromosome syndrome), or a combination thereof, are the foundation of serial/sexual homicide offender development. Individuals with these factors, and who also experience traumatization (e.g., death of a parent, physical abuse, corporal punishments, or any other negative event), are at a greater risk of becoming serial/sexual murderers. The traumas experienced at a young age develop into feelings of low self-esteem, inadequacy, and helplessness. The combination of low self-esteem and trauma cause the child to psychologically dissociate because he does not have the skills to cope with the pain and negative feelings. Because he is unable to effectively cope with his negative feelings, the child develops sexually violent fantasies. Although it is unclear as to the exact mechanism of how and why sexually violent fantasies develop, rather than nonviolent fantasies, the model predicts that the offender's fantasies will escalate and become increasingly violent. Facilitators (e.g., alcohol, drugs, pornography) serve to concurrently increase the offender's feelings of low self-esteem/violent fantasies, and disinhibit the offender, causing him to act on his fantasies (i.e., commit homicide).

The integrated paraphilic model (IPM) of sexual homicide proposed by Arrigo and Purcell (2001) and Purcell & Arrigo (2006) is an extension of Hickey's trauma control model and the FBI's motivational model of sexual homicide. Arrigo and Purcell (2001) emphasize the developments of paraphilia in addition to existing innate factors and criminogenic families, and suggests that fantasy and compulsive masturbation are essential features in the development of paraphilic behavior in general, and in the development of lust murder specifically (Arrigo & Purcell, 2001).

Chan, Heide, and Beauregard (2011) have proposed an alternative model, which combines two different criminological theories: social learning and routine activities theories. The offenders learn attitudes and behaviors conducive to sexual offending in two primary ways: through the interaction with primary groups and through emulation of primary role models' behavior. Parents and primary caregivers are important sources of role modeling for these children. Aside from direct

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