



The developmental and criminal histories of subgroups of sexual murderers engaging, or not engaging, in post mortem sexual interference, compared to rapists



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Identifying factors that may predict sexual aggression in the context of directly sexual murder, indirectly sexual murder, and non-fatal outcomes is necessary for advancing a field lacking a substantiated multifactorial theoretical model.

Methods: Eighty-nine sexual murderers engaging in post mortem sexual interference were compared to 92 non-post mortem sexual interference sexual murderers and 72 rapists on developmental factors, adult lifestyle, and criminal history. An overall model was built using a series of multinomial logistic regression analyses.

Results: Unlike rapists, both groups of sexual murderers experienced a lack of success in sexually intimate relationships. Perpetrators of post mortem sexual interference were rarely necrophiles, but having a history of sadistic behaviors or interests uniquely predicted sexual murder involving post mortem sexual interference. Chronic violent and sexual offending was characteristic of rapists. Psychopathy, measured using the screening version of the Psychopathy Checklist (Hart, Cox, & Hare, 1995), was not predictive of any outcome.

Conclusion: Results support criticism of existing theoretical models; that they do not apply to non-sadistic sexual murder. Findings are discussed in relation to gaps in theoretical understanding of sexual murder, and concerning implications for forensic policies and practice.

1. Introduction

Despite a vast amount of popular and academic interest in sexual homicide and what sort of individual is capable of such an act, several researchers have commented on the problematic nature of the subject as far as robust research methodology is concerned. For example, difficulties remain with definition and objective identification criteria, sample selection bias is unavoidable, base rates are low, and researchers face a particular challenge in the reliability and availability of information pertaining to this population (Chan, 2015; Clarke & Carter, 2000). Recently there have been fruitful efforts to overcome some of these limitations through the identification of larger samples (Beauregard & Martineau, 2013; Stefanska, Carter, Higgs, Bishopp, & Beech, 2015), targeting diverse populations such as sexual murderers of men, and female sexual murderers (Beauregard & Proulx, 2007; Chan & Frei, 2013; Myers & Chan, 2012), and inclusion of non-

sexual murder control groups (Carter, Hollin, Stefanska, Higgs, & Bloomfield, 2016). This leads to a position from which it is possible to reach increasingly reliable conclusions about what is known about those who perpetrate such crimes, as well as providing some clarity around those areas demanding further research attention.

Most sexual homicide is perpetrated by men, against women (Chan, Myers, & Heide, 2010; James & Proulx, 2014). Although sexual homicide has, more so historically, been conflated with serial killing, the two are not one in the same (Proulx, Cusson, & Beauregard, 2007). The majority of sexual murderers do not kill repeatedly (Campos & Cusson, 2007). Maybe they are apprehended before they have further opportunity, but sexual violence recidivism rates appear to be low based on the available post release follow-up data (Hill, Habermann, Klusmann, Berner, & Briken, 2008; Khachatryan, Heide, Hummel, & Chan, 2016). Further, there are several psychosocial, criminal career, and modus operandi factors that appear to differentiate between serial and non-

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serial sexual murderers (James & Proulx, 2014; James & Proulx, 2016). That said, proposed theories of sexual homicide are generally inattentive to this issue. They also suffer a number of other limitations, first and foremost, they tend to be based on little or no empirical data, or have received only limited scientific validation. The problem of knowledge gaps in theoretical models will be returned to, following a brief review of literature that speaks to heterogeneity among offences categorized as sexual murder. This is important, because some of the limitations in current understanding may be overcome through research designed considering the fact that definitions of sexual murder capture different subtypes.

1.1. Typologies of sexual murder

Despite early descriptions of sexual murderers synonymously referring to sadistic murderers (e.g. Brittain, 1970), sexual murder is not necessarily an expression of sexual sadism. There are problems with both conceptual and operational definitions of sexual sadism (Marshall & Kennedy, 2003), particularly when applied to sexual homicide where it appears to have been used as somewhat of a catch-all term for sadism more or less as first defined: “the experience of sexual, pleasurable sensations (including orgasm) produced by acts of cruelty ... may also consist of an innate desire to humiliate, hurt, wound, or even destroy others” (Krafft-Ebing, 1886, p. 53); erotophonophilia (Money, 1990); or lust murder (Myers, Burgess, Burgess, & Douglas, 1999). Nevertheless, a subgroup of sexual killers is typically described as sadistic, or less prescriptively, ‘deviance driven’ (Stefanska et al., 2015). For these perpetrators there is a direct association between killing and sexual arousal (Carter & Hollin, 2014). Arguably, this is the more salient factor, meaning that although a subgroup of sexual murderers may be typically characterized as sadistic, use of the term as a categorical descriptor may require reflection. Under the label *sadistic sexual murder*, the key distinction, i.e. the functional significance of the act of killing, is obscured. In that case, rather than being a defining characteristic, sexual sadism represents an important feature common to what may be described as directly sexual murder. This is in line with the findings of a recent systematic review of sexual murder typologies, which proposed the term, *sexualized murder* to describe the phenomenon (Higgs, Carter, Tully, & Browne, 2017).

Higgs, Carter, et al. (2017) identified a second type of sexual homicide consistently described in the extant literature, characterized by anger (Beauregard & Proulx, 2002; Beech, Fisher, & Ward, 2005; Myers et al., 1999; Stefanska et al., 2015). Perpetrators of these grievance-driven offenses kill in the context of sexual activity, which may or may not be immediately assaultive; often anger precedes or is triggered in a consensual situation (Stefanska et al., 2015). Although some perpetrators may experience sexual arousal associated with the extreme level of violence, typically the link between killing and the sexual element of the offense is indirect.

Finally, some cases meet the broad definition of a sexual murder (minimally, that the victim was found at least partially naked and/or there was evidence of sexual contact; Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988) but the sexual element and the act of killing are clearly only indirectly linked. That is, killing is instrumental following a sexual assault (elimination of the witness), or due to violence augmented by victim vulnerabilities, for example.

1.2. Theoretical models of sexual homicide

Theoretical hypotheses are offered in the trauma-control model (Hickey, 1997, 2002), and the paraphilic model (Arrigo & Purcell, 2001), or derived on the basis of preliminary empirical data as in the FBI’s motivational model (Burgess, Hartman, Ressler, Douglas, & McCormack, 1986; Ressler et al., 1988), and Chan, Heide, and Beauregard’s (2011) social learning-routine activity integrative model of the offending process in sexual homicide. The common theme

within these theoretical models is an emphasis on adverse childhood experiences and the subsequent development of violent sexual fantasies, which are typically considered as the central precipitating factor to sexual homicide.

As such, the existing theoretical models all draw upon theories of social learning (Akers, 1985; Bandura, 1986) and attachment (Ainsworth, 1979), more or less explicitly between authors. In each model, early physical and/or sexual abuse as well as un-nurturing social environments, which fail to provide protection from trauma and foster maladjusted psychosocial development, function as pre-dispositional factors to sexual murder. To some extent, biological factors that may favor sexual aggression are also recognized, as well as operant conditioning that may facilitate the transition from the internal world to the extreme behavior the models seek to explain. However, in some instances there may have been a risk of confirmation bias where possibly unrepresentative samples relied upon displayed similarities to the mostly serial murderer sample of the FBI studies, which is just one possible problem among many difficulties associated with often insufficiently defined and described samples. Also, even the model that was tested on the more representative sample (Chan et al., 2011) was only modestly supported by the data, predicting sexual homicide over non-homicide sexual aggression at around chance level. Moreover, there is no theoretical model of sexual homicide that attempts to explain the different trajectories from pre-dispositional biological and environmental factors and formative events to sexual homicide, which may or may not be driven by sadistic fantasy. For example, there are different pathways to sexual homicide (Stefanska et al., 2015; Vettor, Beech, & Woodhams, 2014), yet there is no multifactorial theory of sexual homicide that deals with the complexities that begin to be drawn out here. Such a theory would necessarily integrate distal and proximal experiences and processes causally implicated in the offense chain. That is, psychosocial factors linked to onset of offending and criminal career. Further, there has been considerable previous research interest in the role of psychopathy in relation to sexual murder, which requires attention in pursuit of a more complete theory. For example, based on the interpretation of correlations between measures of psychopathy and sadism, some researchers suggest that the motivation for sadistic sexual murder is thrill seeking (Porter, Woodworth, Earle, Druge, & Boer, 2003). Others found that sexual sadism and psychopathy have callous lack of empathy as a shared characteristic, but disagree that thrill seeking motivates sadistic behavior (Mokros, Osterheider, Hucker, & Nitschke, 2011). Proulx and Beauregard (2014) discuss their own and other studies examining the role of psychopathy in sexual aggression, concluding that the debate remains open.

1.3. Sexual homicide as a subtype of sexual violence

The question of the distinctiveness of sexual homicide as a discrete type of offending that might require special consideration theoretically and clinically (i.e. for risk assessment and forensic intervention) remains unanswered, in as much as researchers have reported inconclusive or contradictory results (Chan & Heide, 2009; Kerr, Beech, & Murphy, 2013). It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this reflects methodological difficulties including low prevalence rates and sample construction, notably over-representation of serial murderers. Also, many studies examine sexual murderers in isolation, therefore, inferences in relation to what is known about sexual violence more widely are restricted. However, a systematic review addressing the issue found ten articles making direct comparisons between sexual murderers and non-homicide sexual aggressors (Stefanska, Beech, & Carter, 2016). Overall, sexual murderers were found to experience anger, and especially loneliness to a greater degree than sexual aggressors. The groups appeared similar in several domains: family structure, mental health disorders, and criminal history; whereas it remained unclear whether certain characteristics, including own victimization and psychological factors such as self-esteem, may differ

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