Sexual Homicide: Definition, Motivation & Comparison with other Sexual Offenders

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“One sin, I know, another doth provoke; murder is to lust as flame to smoke”

(Pericles, Prince of Tyre, I)
Part One
Defining Sexual Homicide
Defining sexual homicide

• Despite increased academic interest, there is no universally accepted definition of the term ‘sexual homicide’
• Many definitions are offered in the literature:
  A) One person killing another in the context of power, control, sexuality & aggressive brutality (Burgess et al., 1986)
  B) The intentional killing of a person during which there is sexual behaviour by the perpetrator (Meloy, 2000)
  C) A breakthrough of underlying sexual conflicts or where the killing itself is sexually gratifying (Schlesinger, 2004; 2007)
Definition cont...

• Grubin (1994) makes a distinction between ‘sexual homicide’ (where the motivation for the homicide has a sexual element) and ‘homicide associated with sexual activity’
• Folino (2000) is also of the view that killing after a sexual act to destroy evidence should not be considered a ‘sexual homicide’
• But even in so-called classic cases of serial sexual homicide the function of the killing appears completely separate from the sexual act (e.g. John Wayne Gacy)
The literature uses differences in terminology. Examples of terms include:

- Lust Murder (Kraft-Ebing, 1886)
- Sadistic Murder (Brittain, 1970)
- Sexual Murder (Schlesinger, 2004)
- Sexual Homicide (Ressler et al., 1988)
- Erotophonophilia (Money, 1990)

These terms are often used interchangeably, but do not necessarily mean the same thing.
FBI criteria

Sexual Homicide

- The victim is found totally or partially naked
- The genitals are exposed
- An object has been inserted into a body cavity
- The body is found in a sexually explicit position
- There is evidence of substitutive sexual activity
- There is evidence of sexual contact

Ressler et al. 1988
Incidence

- Between 1985 & 1994, 4860 people in England & Wales were found guilty of homicide. Only 178 (3.7%) of these were identified as having sexual circumstances (Francis & Soothill, 2000)
- The 3-4% estimate is consistent with research from Germany (Spehr et al., 2010), Finland (Hakkanen-Nyholm et al., 2009) and Canada (Porter et al., 2003)
- Overwhelming majority of perpetrators are male who kill adult females
- Most sexual homicide offenders do not kill multiple victims
Formulation is crucial

Situational context

Sexual arousal

Sexual Homicide

Lethal Violence

Situational context
Part Two

Motivation
Sexual homicide & mental illness

- Mental illness is rare in people who commit sexual homicide
- Proulx & Sauvêtre (2007) found that only 6.6% of their prison-based sample of sexual homicide offenders had a diagnosis of a mental illness
- Even in forensic psychiatric units incidence of psychoses has been observed as low as 15% (Firestone et al., 1998)
- In a qualitative study, positive symptoms did not appear to play a direct role in the commission of offences (Kerr & Beech, 2015)
Sexual homicide & personality disorder

- Firestone et al., (1998) found that 52.1% had been formally diagnosed with at least one DSM-IV PD with ASPD being the most common (35.4%)
- Hill et al., (2007), found the frequency of PD to be as high as 78.3%. ASPD (27.1%) BPD (18.7%) most prevalent
- There may be diagnostic differences when self-report assessments are used
- Proulx & Sauvêtre (2007) and Oliver et al., (2007) used the MCMI-III to assess for PD in sexual homicide offenders
- Most common PDs included Dependent, Avoidant and Passive-Aggressive
- According to Proulx & Sauvêtêre (2007) formal diagnoses rate the offence rather than the person
Sexual homicide & psychopathy

• Hill et al., (2007) observed mean PCL-R scores of 16.5 in single SHO and 20.2 in multiple
• Firestone et al. (1998) a mean PCL-R of 26.6
• Psychopathic killers were significantly more likely to engage in sadistic & gratuitous forms of violence.
• It is the profound lack of affect/empathy combined with the thrill-seeking propensity of the psychopath, which best explains his use of violence during & after attack.
Sexual homicide & paraphilia

- Paraphilias are very common in sexual homicide offenders
- Firestone et al. (1998) reported a prevalence of 79.2%
- Hill et al. (2007) reported 73.3% in their sample
- Most commonly diagnosed paraphilias in SHO include: fetishism, exhibitionism, voyeurism & sexual sadism
- Paraphilia-Related Disorders are also common (Hill et al., 2007)
Types of sexual homicide offender

- **Pragmatic Approach**
  Based on offence demographics

- **Clinical Approach**
  Based upon clinical opinion

- **Statistical Approach**
  Based on multivariate statistics

- **Theory-led Approach**
  Using existing theory

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Blackburn (1993)
Types of sexual homicide offender

- Sexual Motive
- Anger Motive
- Sadistic Motive
Sexually-driven killer

- Sometimes referred to as the power assertive killer
- This person is motivated to have sex whatever the cost
- The violence used in such cases is instrumental - the homicide does not serve an additional psychological purpose
- Death usually results due to the offender applying too much force in his restraint OR in order to silence the only witness to the crime
Sexually driven sub-types

Sexual

Panic/Overuse of force

Evidence Destruction

Homicide during consensual but dangerous act
Anger-driven killer

- Sometimes referred to as ‘anger-retaliation’ or ‘grievance motivated’ killer
- Anger may be outwardly directed (e.g. Grievance towards women) or inwardly directed (catathymic)
- The more stab wounds inflicted upon a victim, the more likely it is that a sexual motive exists for the killing (Radojević et al., 2013)
- Mechanism by which anger is connected to sex may be close - excitation transfer theory (Zilmann, 1989)
Catathymia

- Literally means according to emotions or temper
- First used by Hans W. Maier (1912) – as a psychodynamic explanation for the development of the content of delusions
- When applied to sexual homicide, it is used to describe a struggle with a deep sense of inferiority that extends to sexual identity
- The individual resorts to sudden & extreme violence when their sexual competence is challenged
- After the emotion has been discharged, there is a return to quiescence
Anger-driven sub-types

Catathymic

Affective dysregulation

Grievance
Sadistic fantasy-driven killer

- Sometimes referred to as ‘calculated pain injury’, ‘compulsive’ or ‘lust murderer’
- Offences may be planned or unplanned
- Understanding the nature of the person’s fantasy system is crucial
- Detailed fantasies consist of: demographic, relational, situational, paraphilic, & self-perceptual elements (Hazelwood & Warren, 1995)
- This type of offender is more likely to repeat his or her offence
Deviant fantasy

- MaCullocch et al. (1983) suggests that early fantasies often give rise to ‘behavioural tryouts’, which are precursors to criminal behaviour.
- Grendliner & Byrne (1987), found that 54% of men who had never committed a sexual assault fantasized about forcing sex on a partner.
- Maniglio (2010) suggests that “deviant sexual fantasy can promote sexual homicide when combined with early traumatic experiences, especially child sexual abuse, social withdrawal and/or sexual difficulties” (pg. 299).
- But at what point does the fantasy alone stop working for the individual?
Sadistic driven sub-types

- Necrophilia
- Erotophonophilia
- Evidence Destruction
Part Three
Comparison with other Sexual Offenders
Comparison studies

- Is sexual homicide a unique type of offence or is it better explained as an extreme variant of sexual assault?
- There have been at least 17 studies investigating the differences between sexual homicide offenders with sex offenders who have not killed.
- Two reviews were published in 2016 – Chan & Heide and Stefanska, Beech and Carter.
- Chan & Heide (2016) note that findings “vary considerably and at times even contradict one another” (p. 149)
Distinguishing characteristics?

- Sexual homicide offenders were more likely to:
  - Live alone at time of the offence
  - Have childhoods that were more problematic
  - Posses maladaptive personality traits
  - Voice deviant fantasies prior to the crime
  - Select victims with whom they had no prior contact and not based on their attractiveness
  - Engage in non-controlled violence and inflict multiple wounds on victims
  - Consume alcohol during the offence

Chan & Heide, 2016
Situational factors

• Chene and Cusson (2007) suggest that situational factors are important when determining the outcome of a sexual assault
• Factors such as availability of a weapon & especially verbal/physical resistance from victim may predict outcome in sexually violent crimes
• If such variables are present then homicide is more likely to occur
Emotional loneliness

- Milsom et al. (2003), Higgs et al. (2015) found that sexual homicide offenders reported higher levels of emotional loneliness than other sex offenders
- Grubin (1994) and Chan (2015) found that sexual homicide offenders were more likely to have had no intimate partner at time of killing
- According to Grubin (1994) this is related to either abnormal personality or abnormal affect
- Kerr & Beech (2015) found this to be significant in their study and related to deviant sexual fantasy
Summary I

- Still a relatively new area of psychological enquiry
- A universal description of the term ‘sexual homicide’ is still lacking
- In some cases, there may be no evidence of any overt sexual activity at the time of the homicide
- Differences between sexual homicide offenders and sex offenders who do not kill are emerging, but the research is not consistent
Summary II

• Personality pathology & sexual deviancy is common in SHO, mental illness is not
• At least 3 general types of SHO have been found: Anger, Sadistic & Sexually driven. These can be sub-divided further
• However, each case needs to be seen through a unique lens and motivation established through detailed formulation using multiple sources of evidence
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