Psychopathic Sexual Sadists

The Psychology and Psychodynamics of Serial Killers

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This article examined serial murderers, who violated their victims sexually, as reported within the journalistic, academic, and law enforcement literatures. The study focused on the practical application of the clinical criteria of Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) and Sexual Sadism as defined in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV.

The goal of this study was locating within clinical literature specific references of behavior which could be utilized in "predicting future dangerousness" of serial killers who were described as "psychopathic sexual sadists."

LITERATURE DEPICTIONS OF SERIAL MURDERERS AS "PSYCHOPATHIC SEXUAL SADISTS"

Among the number of paraphilias discussed in De River's (1958) often cited work "Crime and the Sexual Psychopath," is sexual sadism. De River speaks of sadism as a compelling element in some lust murders; in others, arousal is not derived from the infliction of pain and suffering of the victim but rather from the act of killing itself. In this latter case, however, as with necrophiles, De River recognizes that even though the offender may not witness any prolonged degree of suffering on the part of the victim, he is likely to "[call] upon his imagination and fancy to supply him with the necessary engrams to satisfy his craving for his depravity." (p.41) This is not unlike lust murderers who torture victims before killing them, and then recall "an after-image (engram) of the sensation produced by the physical torture and mutilation, extending beyond time and space." (p.276) In each instance, lust murders are viewed as behaviors of sadistic sexual psychopaths.

According to Vetter (1990), serial murderers are almost routinely characterized in media accounts and much legal documentation as "psychopaths" or "sociopaths," which he notes are terms that were superseded by the diagnostic category "antisocial personality disorder" by the psychiatric community in its 1968 revision of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

Cartel (1985) outlines the crime patterns, biographies, detection, and case processing of 21 serial killings. He notes that in addition to the apparent lack of guilt or compassion for their victim, serial murderers claim to experience euphoria during their murders. These observations are consistent with the aforementioned aspects of antisocial personality disorder. The intense arousal derives from the torture and/or killing of victims which Lunde
(1976) identifies as sexual sadism, "a deviation characterized by torture and/or killing and mutilation of other persons in order to achieve sexual gratification" (p.48). A reading of Brittain's (1970) work on the sadistic murderer reveals that such individuals are unconcerned with the moral implications of their brutality. They are excited by the sight of suffering and helplessness of their victims, whom they experience as objects. They usually kill by strangulation, apparently because of the total control over the victim that this method offers them.

Since it appears that a substantial proportion of male serial murderers violate their victims sexually, it is important to examine the role sexual behavior has in the killings. In the broader arena of sexual aggression -- not limited to serial murder -- clinical studies of sexually aggressive men have shown sadism as a dominant feature of their sexual arousal patterns.

Dietz (1986), like Brittain before him, contends that the paraphilia most frequently associated with sex murders is sadism. In fact, of serial killers, Dietz states, "[w]hile every serial killer is mentally disordered, nearly all are psychopathic sexual sadists, and few, if any, are psychotic. Psychotic offenders rarely have the wherewithal repeatedly to escape apprehension." (p.483)

Meloy (1992) describes Theodore Bundy as "a contemporary sexual psychopath" (p.108). Moreover, he speaks of other sexually psychopathic serial murderers and entertains the contention by Lunde (1976), among others, that there is a temporal coupling of erotic stimulation and violence in the childhood histories of what they call sexually psychopathic serial murderers.

THE RESEARCH

Examination of the case studies published on male serial killers reveals that the majority of those known to us violated their victims sexually. It is not uncommon to read of offenders who physically and/or sexually tortured their victims. These killers are often portrayed as "sexual sadists."

The author conducted this study from a clinical perspective utilizing behavioral criteria found in DSM-IV.

The practical application of this study can be found in assessing the future dangerousness of these type of killers who can be diagnosed as suffering from Antisocial Personality Disorder and Sexual Sadism. Given the frequent reference in the academic literature as well as the popular media to serial murderers as "psychopathic sexual sadists," the author examined the extent to which clinical criteria for Antisocial Personality Disorder and Sexual Sadism were met by a sample of serial murderers whose cases were documented in the journalistic, academic, and law enforcement literatures. This study examined the research on serial murder in an attempt to locate Antisocial Personality Disorder and Sexual Sadism as psychopathologies of serial murderers who had violated their victims sexually.

This study examined the crime scene behaviors and case histories of a sample of serial murderers in an effort to identify commonalities in the psychological makeup and personal background of these offenders that are consistent with clinical criteria. This approach provided the basis for inferences regarding psychodynamic aspects of the offensive behavior. These psychodynamics, which are the conscious and unconscious mental processes and emotive energies that interact and underlie human behavior, may suggest particular
psychological traits indicative of specific psychopathology.

*Criminal investigators will attest that, in general, the greater the psychopathology of the offender, the more distinctive his/her criminal behaviors tend to be.* This may be plausible given the repetitive nature of sex-related offenses. Research indicates that a reliable basis from which to predict violent behavior does not exist beyond the increased probability that an individual who has been violent in particular circumstances in the past will be violent in the future given the same conditions. [Monahan, J. 1981).

The repetitive nature of sex-related serial murderers may, as such, render these offenders somewhat more "predictable." Patterned behaviors such as those observed in sadistic encounters can be used to develop investigative profiles of the kind of person most likely to have committed a given series of crimes.

**THE SAMPLE**

The author compiled the most current listing of serial murderers within the United States using the following operational definition: *three or more separate murder events with an emotional cooling-off period between the homicides.* The base population was 387 serial murderers, who killed *(under various motivations)*, three or more persons over a period of time with cooling-off periods between the events. The author identified 232 male serial murderers who violated their victims sexually. The author employed a case history evaluation protocol based upon the DSM-IV criteria of Antisocial Personality Disorder (301.7) and Sexual Sadism (302.84) to examine the population of 232 serial killers, who had violated their victims sexually.

**ANTISOCIAL PERSONALITY DISORDER (Psychopathy)**

According to the DSM-IV, the essential feature of the disorder is to be found in patterns of irresponsible and antisocial behaviors beginning in childhood or early adolescence and continuing into adulthood. Lying, stealing,truancy, vandalism, initiating fights, running away from home, and physical cruelty are typical childhood signs. In adulthood the antisocial pattern continues and may include failure to honor financial obligations, maintain consistent employment, or plan ahead. These individuals fail to conform to social norms and repeatedly engage in antisocial behaviors that are grounds for arrest, such as destroying property, harassing others, and stealing. Often these antisocial acts are committed with no seeming necessity. People with antisocial personality disorder tend toward irritability and aggressivity, and often become involved in physical fights and assaults, including spouse and child beating. Reckless behavior without regard for personal safety is common, as indicated by driving while intoxicated or getting numerous speeding tickets. Frequently these individuals are promiscuous, failing to sustain a monogamous relationship for more than one year. They do not appear to learn from past experiences in that they tend to resume the same kinds of antisocial behaviors they were punished for. Finally, they seem to lack feelings of remorse about the effects of their behavior on others. On the contrary, they may feel justified in having violated the rights of others.

**SEXUAL SADISM**

Meloy (1992) defines Sexual Sadism as "the conscious experience of pleasurable sexual
arousal through the infliction of physical or emotional pain on the actual object." (p.76)

DSM-IV describes Sexual Sadism as follows: Over a period of at least six months, recurrent intense sexual urges and sexually arousing fantasies involving acts (real, not simulated) in which the psychological or physical suffering (including humiliation) of the victim is sexually exciting to the person. These behaviors are sadistic fantasies or acts that involve activities that indicate the dominance of the person over his victim (e.g. forcing the victim to crawl, or keeping the victim in a cage), or restraint, blindfolding, paddling, spanking, whipping, pinching, beating, burning, electrical shocks, rape, cutting or stabbing, strangulation, torture, mutilation, or killing.

THE ORGANIZED OFFENDER

In the author's experience, most serial killers are classified as "organized offenders." The organized offender is usually above average in intelligence. He is methodical and cunning. His crime is well thought out and carefully planned. He is likely to own a car which is in good condition. The crime is usually committed away from his area of residence or work. He is mobile and travels many more miles than the average person. Fantasy and ritual are important to the organized type offender. He selects a victim, which he considers the "right" type, someone he can control (either through manipulation or strength), usually a stranger. Most of his victims will share specific traits. He is considered socially adept. He uses his verbal skills to manipulate his victims and gain control over them until he has them within his "comfort zone." The organized killer is fully cognizant of the criminality of his act and takes pride in his ability to thwart the police investigation. He is likely to follow news reports of his crimes and will oftentimes take a "souvenir" from his victim as a reminder, that may be used to relive the event or augment the fantasy surrounding the killing. For the organized offender the souvenir constitutes a "trophy." He is excited by the cruelty of the act and may engage in torturing the victim. Sexual control of the victim plays an important part in this scenario.

The organized offender usually brings his own weapon to the crime scene and avoids leaving evidence behind. He is familiar with police procedures. The body is often removed from the crime scene. He may do this to "taunt" the police by leaving the corpse in plain public view, or to prevent its discovery by transporting it to a location where it will be well hidden. (Geberth, 1990)

It should be noted that the disorganized offender evidences the exact opposite characteristics of the above described organized type.

The series of criminal behaviors of this type of offender are suggestive of an individual with an antisocial personality disorder to the extent that repeated behaviors are immoral and marked by pronounced irresponsibility. His essential problem appears characterologic in nature. He appears to lack remorse or shame and is seemingly lacking in empathic response to others. This is the type of offender who was the focus of this research.

CONCLUSION

The offenders in this study displayed aggressive and antisocial behaviors during their childhood which escalated and took on elements of sexual sadism in adulthood. There was also a style and pattern to their killings which involved domination, control, humiliation and
sadistic sexual violence. The murders were committed without the least sense of guilt or shame and the killers displayed a total lack of remorse. The victims were chosen at random and the murders carried out in almost an obsessive manner. According to Hare (1993) "If you are dealing with a true psychopath it is important to recognize that the current prognosis for significant improvement in his or her attitudes and behavior is poor." (p. 205) According to Monahan (1981), "The repetitive nature of sex-related serial murderers may, as such, render these offenders somewhat more predictable."

The application of such criteria could allow for the identification of potential serial killers and, hopefully, lead to proper assessment of future dangerousness and treatment strategies.

According to DSM-IV "When Sexual Sadism is severe, and especially when it is associated with Antisocial Personality Disorder, individuals with Sexual Sadism may seriously injure or kill their victims." (p.53 )

The implications of this study were that subjects who are identified as psychopathic sexual sadists, based on the objective criteria of DSM-IV are extremely dangerous to the well being of a civilized society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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