

Offender and Offense Characteristics of Sexual Sadists: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT: This paper compares the offender and offense characteristics of 30 sexually sadistic criminals studied by Dietz et al. with those of 29 sexually sadistic criminals and 28 nonsadistic sexual offenders from the Royal Ottawa Hospital. We examined whether the characteristics noted by Dietz et al. would be found among a less violent group of sadistic offenders and also to what extent these characteristics were specific to sexual sadism. Results suggest some offender and offense characteristic are specific to sexual sadism and that others appear to be common to sexually aggressive offenders more generally. In addition, there were a number of characteristics found exclusively among the most violent offenders described by Dietz et al. An explanation of these results in terms of a biopsychosocial understanding of sexual sadistic offenders is provided.

KEYWORDS: psychiatry, sadism, offender characteristics

Sexual sadism refers to a continuum of behaviors, ranging from emotional coercion to physical aggression. It involves the wish to control another person "by domination, denigration or infliction pain, for the purpose of producing mental and sexual pleasure" [1]. The DSM III-R criteria for sexual sadism include:

A) Recurrent intense sexual urges involving acts in which the psychological or physical suffering of the patient is sexually exciting to the person over a period of at least six months.

B) The person has acted on these urges, or is markedly distressed by them [2].

Sexual homicide represents the most pathological expression of sexual sadism [3-5].

Despite considerable media attention to sexually sadistic homicide, there has been comparatively little scientific literature on the topic. This may be, in part, a reflection of the relative infrequency of sexually sadistic homicide. Previous studies have been descriptive in nature and have included the profile of a sexual murder [6], three case studies of sadistic homicide [7], and a report on 16 sadistic criminals, some homicidal [1].

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The descriptive study of 30 sexually sadistic male offenders by Dietz et al. has been the most comprehensive to date [8]. The subjects were selected from the pool of cases referred to the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime between 1984 and 1989, and included some of the most violent sexually sadistic offenses ever recorded. 73% of the offenders murdered one or more victims and 56.6% committed serial murders (three or more victims). The offenders all met the DSM III-R criteria for sexual sadism. A complete description of offender and offense characteristics including methods of torture and causes of death can be found in Tables 1-4.

The study by Dietz et al. raises some interesting questions.

1) *To what extent will these offender and offense characteristics including methods of torture and causes of death be found among nonsadistic sexual offenders?*

2) *To what extent will these same characteristics be found among a group of sadistic offenders who have committed less severe offenses?*

In this study, we attempt to address these questions by comparing the characteristics of the 30 sadistic sexual offenders in the study by Dietz et al. with (1) the characteristics of 29 non-sadistic sexual offenders and (2) the characteristics of 28 sadistic sexual offenders with less severe pathology.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were selected on the basis of a retrospective chart review. Charts were examined of all patients ($n = 59$) admitted to the Forensic Unit of the Royal Ottawa Hospital (ROH) between 1982 and 1992 who (i) had attempted or committed homicide and (ii) had undergone a sexual behavior assessment either prior to trial or during incarceration. The latter criteria indicates that the crime appeared to be sexually motivated. At minimum, a sexual behavior assessment included penile tumescence testing.

The charts were then carefully reviewed to determine if the offenders met the DSM III-R criteria for sexual sadism. This determination was made based on data collected from at least two of the following documents contained in each chart:

- a police report
- a full psychiatric history
- forensic reports pertaining to the alleged offense
- consultation with other psychiatrists.

On the basis of this data, the subjects were divided into two groups. The first group, *sadists (ROH)*, contained those individuals who met the criteria for sexual sadism ($n = 28$). The second group, *nonsadists (ROH)*, was composed of patients who did not meet the DSM III-R criteria ($n = 29$). For the purposes of this study, the subjects from the study conducted by Dietz et al., selected from the pool of individuals referred to the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, will be designated *sadists (NCAVC)* ($n = 30$).

Procedures

Data regarding the frequency of offender and offense characteristics (including methods of torture and causes of death) was collected from both the sadists (ROH) and the nonsadists (ROH). The Yates' Corrected Chi-square test was used to determine whether

- (1) the sadists (NCAVC) and the sadists (ROH)
- (2) the sadists (ROH) and nonsadists (ROH)

differed significantly. A P value of $<.05$ was deemed significant.

Interpretation of Findings

Offender Characteristics

The offender characteristics in Table 1 have been organized into three categories:

i) Characteristics associated with sexual sadism, found among the sadists (NCAVC) and the sadists (ROH) and less frequently among the nonsadists (ROH):

- *physically abused in childhood*
- *known cross-dressing*
- *known history of peeping*
- *telephone calls or indecent exposure*

These commonalities are not specific to sexual sadism and are found among paraphilic behavior more generally. The association with "physical abuse" and the presence of other paraphilic behavior "cross-dressing," "known history of peeping," "telephone calls or indecent exposure" that is, the multiplicity of paraphilic behavior, are all features noted among paraphilic perpetrators more generally [8,9]. Therefore, individuals identified as sexual sadists showed features of having a paraphilic disorder that were not found among the nonsadists.

ii) Characteristics associated with sadists (NCAVC), found significantly more frequent in sadists (NCAVC) than in sadists (ROH) and nonsadists (ROH):

- *married at the time of offense*
- *military experience*
- *education beyond high school*
- *established reputation as a solid citizen*
- *incestuous relationship with own child*

TABLE 1—Offender characteristics.

Characteristics	Sadists (NCAVC) %	Sadists (ROH) %	Significance	Sadists (ROH) %	Nonsadists (ROH) %	Significance
Physically abused in childhood	7 23.3	12 42.9	n.s.	12 42.9	4 12.9	$P < .05$
Known cross-dressing	6 20.0	11 39.3	n.s.	11 39.3	2 6.5	$P < .01$
Known bx. of peeping, telephone calls or indecent exposure	6 20.0	12 42.9	n.s.	12 42.9	3 6.5	$P < .01$
Known homosexual experience	13 43.3	17 60.7	n.s.	17 60.7	5 16.1	$P < .005$
Married at time of offense	13 43.3	2 7.1	$P < .05$	2 7.1	8 25.8	n.s.
Military experience	10 33.3	0 0.0	$P < .05$	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Education beyond high school	13 43.3	1 3.6	$P < .005$	1 3.6	2 6.5	n.s.
Established reputation as a solid citizen	9 30.0	0 0.0	$P < .01$	0 0.0	3 9.7	n.s.
Incestuous relationship with own child	9 30.0	1 3.6	$P < .05$	1 3.6	1 3.2	n.s.
Shared sexual partners with other men	6 20.0	0 0.0	$P < .05$	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Excessive driving	12 40.0	1 3.6	$P < .05$	1 3.6	0 0.0	n.s.
Police 'buff'	9 30.0	0 0.0	$P < .01$	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Parental infidelity or divorce	14 46.7	14 50.0	n.s.	14 50.0	14 45.2	n.s.
Sexually abused in childhood	6 20.0	8 28.6	n.s.	8 28.6	4 12.9	n.s.
Drug abuse (other than alcohol)	15 50.0	14 50.0	n.s.	14 50.0	17 54.8	n.s.
Suicide attempt	4 13.3	3 10.7	n.s.	3 10.7	3 9.7	n.s.

- *shared sexual partners with other men*
- *excessive driving*
- *police "buff"*

Sadists (NCAVC) frequently exhibited a number of characteristics associated with adaptive social functioning (for example, "married at time of offense," "military experience," "education beyond high school," and "established reputation as a solid citizen"). By contrast, sadists (ROH) exhibited these characteristics less frequently. It would therefore appear that the sadists (NCAVC) were in general higher functioning than the sadists (ROH).

"Incestuous relationship with own child," "shared sexual partners with other men," "excessive driving and police buff" were rarely found in the sadists (ROH). This may be, in part, due to an interview bias, as these characteristics are not routinely queried in a psychiatric assessment.

iii) Characteristics found in all three groups:

- *parental infidelity*
- *sexually abused in childhood*
- *history of drug abuse (other than alcohol)*
- *history of suicide attempts.*

These characteristics do not appear related to sexual sadism and may instead be related to aggressive or sexually aggressive behavior. These characteristics are associated with a chaotic childhood upbringing (i.e., parental infidelity or divorce or childhood sexual abuse) or features associated with impulsivity and instability (drug abuse and suicide attempt). (Sexual abuse has also been noted among paraphilic individuals but in this analyses appeared more generally to be associated with sexually aggressive behavior [8].)

Offense Characteristics

The offense characteristics in Table 2 are organized in four groups:

i) Characteristics associated with sexual sadism:

- *careful planning of the offense*
- *victim taken to preselected location*
- *unemotional, detached effect during the offense*
- *intentional torture*
- *victim beaten*
- *sexual dysfunction during the offense*

Commonalities in the offense characteristics of sadistic offenders can be understood as an expression of sexual sadism. This paraphilic disorder is characterized by fantasies of inflicting suffering on the victim and the offenses themselves represent an enactment of these fantasies. Therefore, among the sadistic offenders, there were a number of features associated with premeditation (for example, "careful planning of the offense," "victim taken to preselected location," and "intentional torture"). Furthermore, in terms of the nature of offenses, there were a number of acts associated with controlling and degrading the victim (for example, "victim beaten," "forced anal sex," "forced fellatio," and "intentional torture").

Finally, the last characteristic, "sexual dysfunction during the offense," may be explained as follows. Sexual sadists appear not to be aroused by the sexual act itself. Rather the sexual act seem to be used as vehicles for the degradation and control of the victims. Therefore, many of the sexual sadists reported sexual dysfunction

during the sexual act. This contrasts with the nonsadists in which sexual difficulties were not as common.

ii) Characteristics associated with sexual sadism but more common in sadists (NCAVC) than sadists (ROH):

- *anal rape*
- *forced victim to perform fellatio*
- *victim bound, blindfolded, or gagged*

These characteristics involve the humiliation and degradation of the victim and related to the degree of sexual sadism. The greater frequency of "anal rape" and "forced fellatio" as compared to "vaginal rape," even among heterosexual offenders, suggests that these acts are intended to be degrading to the victim [9].

iii) Characteristics found almost exclusively in the sadists (NCAVC):

- *partner assisted in the offense*
- *impersonation of the police officer*
- *victim kept in captivity for 24 hours or more*
- *told victim what to say during the assault*
- *sexual bondage of the victim*
- *variety of sexual acts with the victim*
- *recorded the offense*
- *concealed victim's corpse*
- *kept personal item belonging to the victim*

These characteristics are found only in the most severe sexually sadistic offenses.

iv) Characteristics found in all three groups:

- *vaginal rape*
- *foreign object penetration*

Methods of Physical Torture

Table 3 presents data on the methods of physical torture. In general, this did not appear useful in distinguishing among the three groups. Only one method of physical torture, instruments, was found more frequently among sadists than the nonsadists.

"Asphyxiation until victim unconscious" was found in 46.4% of sadists (ROH) compared to only 5% of nonsadists. Among sadists (NCAVC) it was found in only 13.3%. The disparity between sadists (ROH) and sadists (NCAVC) may largely be the result of different selection criteria. Dietz et al. excluded individuals who rendered the victims unconscious by asphyxiation, before physically assaulting them. On the other hand, we included these individuals (that is, offenders who physically assaulted unconscious victims) because in our opinion, both the act of rendering the victim unconscious and the subsequent physical assault of the victim reflect sadistic tendencies. Asphyxiation, as a method of torture, may be associated with sexual sadism because it enables the offender to exert greater control and power over the victim.

There a number of methods of physical torture that were found in sadists (NCAVC) that were rarely found in the other two groups:

- *painful insertion of foreign objects*
- *whipping*
- *biting*
- *painful bondage*
- *electric shock*

TABLE 2—Offense characteristics.

Characteristic	Sadists (NCAVC) %	Sadists (ROH) %	Significance	Sadists (ROH) %	Nonsadists (ROH) %	Significance
Careful planning of offense	28 93.3	23 82.1	n.s.	23 82.1	3 9.7	$P < .001$
Victim taken to preselected location	23 76.7	18 64.3	n.s.	18 64.3	2 6.5	$P < .001$
Unemotional, detached affect during offense	26 86.7	23 82.1	n.s.	23 82.1	9 29.0	$P < .001$
Intentional torture	30 100.0	22 78.6	n.s.	22 78.6	4 12.9	$P < .001$
Victim beaten (blunt force trauma)	18 60.0	18 64.3	n.s.	18 64.3	9 29.0	$P < .05$
Sexual dysfunction during offense	13 43.3	14 50.0	n.s.	14 50.0	0 0.0	$P < .001$
Victim bound, blindfolded or gagged	26 86.7	5 17.9	$P < .001$	6 17.9	0 0.0	$P < .05$
Anal rape of victim	22 73.3	6 21.4	$P < .001$	6 21.4	0 0.0	$P < .05$
Forced victim to perform fellatio	21 70.0	5 17.9	$P < .001$	6 17.9	0 0.0	$P < .05$
Committed serial murders (3 or more victims)	17 56.7	3 10.7	$P < .001$	3 10.7	1 3.2	n.s.
A partner assisted in offense	11 36.7	0 0.0	$P < .005$	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Impersonation of police in commission of offense	7 23.3	0 0.0	$P < .05$	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Victim kept in captivity for 24 hours or more	18 60.0	0 0.0	$P < .01$	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Told victim what to say during assault	7 23.3	0 0.0	$P < .05$	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Sexual bondage of victim	23 76.7	4 14.3	$P < .001$	4 14.3	0 0.0	n.s.
Variety of sexual acts with the victim	20 66.7	4 14.3	$P < .001$	4 14.3	0 0.0	n.s.
Recorded the offense	16 53.3	0 0.0	$P < .001$	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Kept personal item belonging to the victim	12 40.0	0 0.0	$P < .001$	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Concealed victim's corpse	20 66.7	0 0.0	$P < .001$	0 0.0	6 19.4	$P < .05$
Vaginal rape of victim	17 56.7	11 39.3	n.s.	11 39.3	5 16.1	n.s.
Foreign object penetration of victim	12 40.0	4 14.3	n.s.	4 14.3	2 6.5	n.s.
Murdered victim	22 73.3	20 71.4	n.s.	20 71.4	14 45.2	n.s.

- *twisting breasts until victim unconscious*
- *burning*

When these characteristics are viewed individually, sadists (NCAVC) did not differ significantly from sadists (ROH) (with the exception of "painful insertion of foreign objects"). When these characteristics are viewed collectively, sadists (NCAVC) used a greater variety of torture methods than the sadists (ROH). Among the sadists (ROH), the principal method of torture was "beating."

Causes of Death

Table 4 presents the causes of death. No statistical comparisons were made among the causes of death committed by the three groups given the marked difference in sample sizes. However, the following general points can be made. Only strangulation, particularly "ligature strangulation," appears to be associated with sexual sadism. This is consistent with our earlier finding in methods

of torture. No other method of death appears to be strongly associated with sexual sadism. However, there appears to be a greater variety of causes of death found among the sadists (NCAVC) as compared to the sadists (ROH).

Discussion

In summary, it would appear that some of the offender and offense characteristics noted among the sadists (NCAVC) were not specific to sexual sadism. The features "parental infidelity or divorce," "childhood sexual abuse," "vaginal rape of victim," and foreign object penetration" appear more related to sexually aggressive behavior than to sexual sadism.

There were, however, a number of offender and offense characteristics that appeared to be specific to sexual sadism. Commonalities in the offender characteristics of the sadistic offenders (NCAVC) and (ROH) included: significant history of physical abuse, known cross-dressing, telephone scatologia and indecent

TABLE 3—Methods of physical torture.

Method	Sadists (NCAVC) %	Sadists (ROH) %	Significance	Sadists (ROH) %	Nonsadists (ROH) %	Significance
Instruments	8 26.7	15 53.6	n.s.	15 53.6	1 3.2	$P < .001$
Beating	6 20.0	17 60.7	$P < .005$	17 60.7	8 25.8	$P < .05$
Asphyxiation until victim unconscious	4 13.3	13 46.4	$P < .05$	13 46.4	5 16.1	$P < .05$
Painful insertion of foreign objects	7 23.3	0 0.0	$P < .05$	0 0.0	2 6.5	n.s.
Other	7 23.3	0 0.0	$P < .05$	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Whipping	5 16.7	0 0.0	n.s.	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Biting	5 16.7	0 0.0	n.s.	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Painful bondage	5 16.7	2 7.1	n.s.	2 7.1	0 0.0	n.s.
Electrical shock	4 13.3	0 0.0	n.s.	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Twisting breasts until victim unconscious	4 13.3	0 0.0	n.s.	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.
Burning	3 10.0	0 0.0	n.s.	0 0.0	0 0.0	n.s.

TABLE 4—Causes of death.

Cause of death	Sadists (NCAVC) % <i>n</i> = 130	Sadists (ROH) % <i>n</i> = 20	Nonsadists (ROH) % <i>n</i> = 14
Ligature strangulation	42 42.3	4 20.0	0 0.0
Blunt force trauma	4 3.1	7 35.0	4 28.5
Cutting and stabbing wounds	13 10.0	6 30.0	5 35.7
Manual strangulation	34 26.1	3 15.0	4 28.6
Gunshot wounds	32 24.6	0 0.0	1 7.1
Hanging	2 1.5	0 0.0	0 0.0
Suffocation	1 0.8	0 0.0	0 0.0
Torture	1 0.8	0 0.0	0 0.0
Exposure	1 0.8	0 0.0	0 0.0

exposure. These characteristics are found among paraphilic behavior more generally. Commonalities in the offense characteristics of sadistic offenders ("careful planning of the offense," "victim taken to preselected location," "intentional torture," "victim beaten," "forced anal sex," "forced fellatio," and "intentional torture") relate to the paraphilic fantasies and urges that motivate sadistic behavior.

Finally, there were a number of characteristics found among the sadists (NCAVC) and not in the sadists (ROH) and the nonsadists (ROH). This would suggest that some of the features found in the sadists (NCAVC) are unique to the most extreme sadistic offenders.

In terms of offense characteristics, features found among the sadists (NCAVC) that were not found among the sadists (ROH)

and the nonsadists (ROH) included: "serial murders," "a partner assisted in the offense," "impersonation of a police in commission of offense," "victim kept in captivity for 24 hours or more," "told victim what to say during assault," "sexual bondage of victim," "variety of sexual acts with victim," "recorded the offense," "kept personal item belonging to the victim," and "concealed victim's corpse." Both in terms of methods of physical torture and causes, there was a much greater variety of acts performed by the sadists (NCAVC) than were found among the sadists (ROH).

Broadly speaking, these offense characteristics which were not found in sadists (ROH) reflect a greater sophistication in the planning and execution of the offenses. Additionally, in terms of methods of torture and causes of death, the sadists (NCAVC) committed more offenses and utilized a greater variety of *modus operandi*.

There are several explanations for these differences. The most obvious explanation is that the sadists (NCAVC) are higher functioning. This is illustrated by the higher frequency of such demographic variables as: married at the time offense, military experiences, education past high school and established reputation as a solid citizen found among the sadists (NCAVC). It is also possible that the higher functioning sadists (NCAVC) were able to avoid detection for a greater length of time. As a result, there is an escalation of sadistic behavior with each new offense fueling increasingly deviant and elaborate sadistic fantasies. There is some evidence to support a developmental course in sadistic serial killing [10].

Finally, the differences between sadists (NCAVC) and sadists (ROH) may be related to characterological differences. Dietz et al. makes note that many of the offenders studies showed features of a narcissistic personality disorder such as grandiosity, lack of empathy, intolerance to criticism and demanding admiration from the victim. By contrast, the sadists (ROH) tended to show less narcissistic traits and instead showed features of an antisocial personality disorder. In fact, 86% met the diagnosis for antisocial personality disorder. The differences in characterological profiles

reflect the different crime characteristics of the two groups with the sadists (NCAVC) committing more elaborate and self-indulgent crimes and the sadists (ROH) committing simpler and more impulsive crimes.

Furthermore, in examining the profile of the sadists (ROH), they showed, in addition to characterological issues, organic features associated with extremely poor impulse control. 55% had abnormal neurological findings, primarily temporal lobe abnormalities, with 13% having normal neurological findings and 32% not being formally tested. (Neurological testing consisted of neuropsychological tests, EEG, CT scans, PET scans, and single photon CT brain scans.) While the prevalence of neurological abnormalities in the sadists (NCAVC) is unknown, the higher level of functioning exhibited by these individuals suggests that they do not possess similarly gross neurological impairments.

Hence, sexual sadistic behavior appears to be triggered by certain biopsychosocial factors. In the case of the sadists (NCAVC), the expression of sadistic behavior appears to be mediated by characterological issues. The greater sophistication of the crimes of these individuals reflects their narcissistic desire to indulge their paraphilic fantasies. By contrast, the sadists (ROH) may represent a more common kind of sadistic offender whose offenses involve fewer crimes and less elaborate offense characteristics. Because of their characterological problems, primarily antisocial personality disorder, and their neurological abnormalities, they tended to act out their paraphilic fantasies in a more impulsive manner.

Conclusion

It would appear that sadists (NCAVC) and sadists (ROH) exhibited many characteristics common to paraphilic behavior, in general, (for example, history of abuse in childhood, multiplicity of paraphilic behaviors), and sexual sadism, in particular (for example, physical and psychological torture of victim). However, the expression of sexual sadism appears related to the presence of specific biopsychosocial triggers that include characterological and organic factors.

Further research would be necessary to better delineate the characteristics of sexual sadism, not only in the offending population, but also in the nonoffending population. It would also be

important to better delineate the specific biopsychosocial triggers involved in the expression of this disorder.

Only by better understanding this paraphilia can progress be made in earlier identification, intervention and potentially treatment of this condition. Sexual sadism represents a significant social problem and the description of the offenses in the two offender groups provides a graphic illustration of the potential deleterious consequences of this disorder if left unchecked.

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