

The Sexually Sadistic Serial Killer

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ABSTRACT: This article explores characteristics and crime scene behavior of 20 sexually sadistic serial murderers. The pairing of character pathology with paraphilic arousal to the control and degradation of others is examined as it manifests itself in their murders. Commonalities across murders and across murderers are highlighted, i.e., the execution of murders that are well-planned, the use of preselected locations, captivity, a variety of painful sexual acts, sexual bondage, intentional torture, and death by means of strangulation and stabbing.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, forensic psychiatry, sexual sadism, serial murder, paraphilia, criminal profiling

"I did and perpetrated them [the murders] following [the dictates] of my imagination and my thought, without the advice of anyone, and according to my own judgment and entirely for my own pleasure and physical delight, and for no other intention or end."—Baron Gilles de Rais (1400's) (1)

Throughout history, there have been isolated, but highly publicized cases of serial murder. Jack the Ripper, a source of on-going inquiry and speculation, became famous following a series of prostitute murders in London, England, in 1888. In the 1950s, Ed Gein provided the prototype for the movie, *Silence of the Lambs*, by using the skin of his murder victims to fashion face masks and articles of clothing. Most recently, Jeffrey Dahmer shocked America when the body parts of multiple male victims were found in his apartment in Milwaukee, and he confessed not only to having sex with the corpses but eating muscle tissue of his victims.

In 1970, Brittain attempted to offer a "clinical description of the sadistic murderer," a significant number of who had murdered multiple times (2). Drawing from case studies, he suggested that the sadistic murderer was an introspective, solitary, and prudish person who rarely showed any signs of overt violence. His developmental history was characterized by an ambivalent relationship to his mother, a punitive relationship with his father, and general difficulty in relating socially to others. Brittain suggested that, sexually, this type of offender experienced a rich fantasy life and

reported a history of cross-dressing, fetishism, and homosexual activity but was "often impotent" in his heterosexual relationships. He was described as being cruel to animals; interested in black magic, Nazism, and weapons; and "excited by cruelty in books and films." Brittain contended that the sadistic murderer was likely to offend following a loss of self-esteem, experienced relief in response to his murder, and behaved "normally" after it. He killed by asphyxia or multiple stabbings. Prognostically, Brittain observed that this type of murderer was often a model prisoner or patient but "given the opportunity he is likely to murder again and he knows it."

MacCullough, Snowden, Wood, and Mills discussed the interrelationship between sadistic fantasy, sadistic behavior, and criminal offending (3). They argue that the wish to control lies at the heart of sadism and define sexual sadism as "the repeated practice of behavior and fantasy which is characterized by a wish to control another person by domination, denigration or inflicting pain for the purpose of producing mental pleasure and sexual arousal (whether or not accompanied by orgasm) in the sadist."

Drawing from patients at Park Lane Hospital in Liverpool, England, MacCullough et al. identified 16 individuals who had been diagnosed as psychopathic and who had been convicted of a sexually motivated crime. Eighty-one percent of the offenders had been masturbating to fantasies of rape, buggery, kidnap, bondage, flagellation, torture, and killing for extended periods of time before their offenses. The majority of the offenders reported nonaggressive sexual fantasies following puberty, but one to seven years after the onset of puberty, sadistic content began to appear, accompanied by a "substantial" increase in masturbatory activity. A significant number of the offenders described their sadistic fantasies as being progressive in nature with the fantasies continually being changed to maintain their efficacy as a source of arousal and pleasure. The authors comment: "this increase in the power of fantasies was accomplished by increasing the sadistic context and also by including fantasy based on previous behavioral 'try-outs' of the main fantasy sequence." The offenders reported acting out discrete components of the sexually sadistic fantasy over extended periods of time before their patterns of violent offending coalesced. Offenses that did not appear overtly sadistic were considered covertly sadistic "because they are part of an escalating sequence of sadistic behavior, which, if unchecked, can ultimately lead to loss of life." These offenders were all characterized from an early age by difficulties in social relatedness that developed after puberty into a problem of relating erotically. In describing this formative process, these authors comment: "fantasy of successful control and dominance of the world can be conceptualized as an operant which increases the probability of its own recurrence by the relief which it gives from a pervasive sense of failure." In assessing this pairing of fantasy with progressive behavioral enactment, MacCullough et al. caution that "if a man presents with

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sadistic sexual fantasies, admits to previous tryouts (which may have resulted in recordable offenses), and demonstrates a pattern of progression of offending and fantasy, then progression to killing would appear to be a strong possibility."

In 1985, Levin and Fox undertook to study mass murder, a phenomenon they defined as involving either a simultaneous mass slaying or a series of killing with at least four victims (4). Drawing from a sample of 42 offenders, they concluded that the mass murderer is typically a white male in his late twenties or early thirties; in cases of serial murder, he kills by beating or strangulation. According to Levin and Fox, the sexually motivated offender is "more evil than crazy"; he is described as traveling from state to state, "searching for victims whom he can rape and sodomize, torture and dismember, stab and strangle." Emphasizing that this particular type of offender is seldom driven by hallucinations or delusions, Levin and Fox assert that he is most often a sociopathic personality devoid of guilt or conscience and intent upon controlling and dominating others.

In 1986, Dietz drew from case examples and research in progress to develop a typology of serial, mass, and sensational homicides (5). The term "serial murder" was used to refer to cases in which a single perpetrator killed others in five or more separate incidents. According to Dietz, the serial killer is often a psychopathic sexual sadist who kills strangers by means of strangulation, stabbing, or beating, because these means of death allow greater intimacy than projectile weapons. Dietz argued against the diagnostic labeling of these men as borderline personality disorders, emphasizing that "these men enjoy killing people." Dietz recognized additional categories of serial killers: crime spree killers; functionaries of organized crime; custodial poisoners and asphyxiators; and the "supposed psychotics."

Leyton wrote that the serial killer uses murder to provide both "revenge and a life-long celebrity career" in a social context that highlights worldly ambition, success and failure, and "manly avenging violence" (6). Drawing from detailed narratives of Kemper, Bundy, de Salvo, and Berkowitz, he argued against "clumsy" psychiatric attempts to find these men insane, asserting that their motivations "transcend mere catharsis and temporary gratification: their aim (being . . .) a more ambitious one, a kind of sustained subpolitical campaign directed towards 'the timelessness of oppression and the order of power'."

In 1988, Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas published the results of interviews with 36 sexual murderers, most of whom murdered multiple times (7). The authors examined the developmental history, motivational dynamics, and crime scene behavior that characterized certain notorious killers and determined that the men in their sample were not only aware of their long-standing preoccupation with murder, but also "devoted to violent, sexualized thoughts and fantasies." Examining the progressive development of these fantasies from childhood through adolescence into adulthood, the authors conclude that these men murdered "because of the way they think," and that the motivation for sexual murder lay in their internally driven and pervasively active fantasy life. The authors suggested that childhood sexual trauma may be a predisposing factor to murder and that deviant fantasies precede the sexually violent crimes of these men.

Holmes and DeBurger, using the FBI's classification scheme, asserted that the serial murderer was the most heinous and perplexing of violent offenders (8). Highlighting four classificatory themes (the background of the offender, his victims, the methods used, and the location of the victims), they suggest four subcategories of serial murder: the visionary type; the mission-oriented type;

the hedonistic type; and the power-control-oriented type. They apparently attempt to differentiate the psychotic serial killer from the sexually motivated, characterologically-disturbed serial killer, but the basis on which they attribute particular motives to certain well-known offenders is unclear.

In 1989, Prentky, Burgess, Rokous, and Austin attempted to explore further the role of fantasy in serial sexual murder. Using part of the sample interviewed by Ressler et al., as well as cases from the Treatment Center for Sexually Dangerous Persons in Massachusetts, they compared 25 sexual murderers who had killed at least three times with 17 sexual murderers who had killed only once (9). They found that the serial sexual murderers reported more compulsive masturbation, indecent exposure, and voyeuristic activity and had a significantly higher incidence of fetishism and cross-dressing. The serial killers were also characterized by more consuming violent fantasies and a consistently better planned and more organized crime scene. Highlighting the importance of internal drives to an understanding of repetitive sexual murder, Prentky et al. emphasized the need to understand further why "some individuals move from fantasy to behavior and others do not . . ."

Langevin, most recently, has sought to describe the behavior of "sex killers" (10). Observing that they are, in many respects, demographically similar to killers in general, he notes that they are characterized by two unique aspects of their *modus operandi*; i.e., they more often choose strangers as victims and tend to use strangulation as their preferred method of murder. Drawing on an earlier study of 13 sex killers, he observed that 31% appeared to be driven by pure sexual release, whereas an additional 69% fused a sexual motive with anger. Diagnostically, most of the murderers were suffering from some type of character disorder, and 75% met diagnostic criteria for sexual sadism. Although both sex killers and a group of sexual aggressors tended to suffer from multiple paraphilias (including voyeurism, exhibitionism, and frottage), sex killers were engaged in transvestism more often than nonsex killers and nonhomicidal sexual aggressors. Eighty percent of the sex killers reported running away from home as children, 83% had temper tantrums, and 60% had alcoholic fathers. Langevin reported no difference in intelligence between the three groups, but indicated that 40% of the sex killers showed some abnormality in the right temporal horn area of the brain and a trend toward an elevated level of testosterone.

Interspersed throughout these various attempts to understand serial murder, is an implicit or explicit recognition of the sexual component of some types of repetitious homicide. Although the terms vary depending on the author's discipline, descriptors such as "sexual homicide," "sadism," and "paraphilic murder" repeatedly occur in accounts of many of the most virulent serial murderers. Dietz has been perhaps the most definitive in asserting that the blending of sexual sadism with psychopathic character pathology results in the phenomenon of men who "enjoy killing."

To explore one subgroup of serial killers more fully, we compiled data on 20 sexually sadistic serial murderers. Some of these data (16 subjects) were compiled as part of the Dietz, Hazelwood, and Warren study of sexually sadistic criminals (11). The 20 men selected for the present study were responsible for 149 murders throughout the United States and Canada.

Method

The data were compiled from case files obtained by the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime through their case consultations or research efforts. Cases were included in the

sample if: a. the perpetrator demonstrated an enduring pattern of sexual arousal to images of suffering or humiliation and b. the offender killed at least three victims in at least three incidents separated by time, place, or both. For each case, information was available from a variety of sources, including police investigation reports, crime scene photographs, victim statements, reports of interviews with families, confessions, psychiatric reports, trial transcripts, presentencing reports, descriptions generated by the offenders (i.e., manuscripts, diaries, sketches, audiotapes, and videotapes), interviews with the offender, and/or published book-length biographies of the offender. All data reported represent minimum estimates of the actual frequency of the variables studied; the data were collected from sources of information not designed specifically for research.

Results and Discussion

Nineteen of the 20 offenders were white males (see Table 1). This over-representation of Caucasians in sexually motivated serial crimes is a pattern observed in other research (Warren J, Reboussin R, Hazelwood R, Gibbs N, Trumbetta S, Escalation in violence in serial rape, unpublished). Although blacks are known to commit serial rape and murder in an instrumental fashion, for example, in the context of burglaries or robberies, the fantasy-driven crimes of the sexual sadist do not appear to be represented proportionally in this population. This pattern may reflect a different process of development of sexual identity among the two groups, a different potential for developing paraphilic preferences, or both.

Anthropological studies of serial murder highlight the lower class origins and the oppressive inequality of the early life of this particular group of offenders. This study found that 65% of the sample came from middle- or upper-middle class families. The available information indicates, however, that at least 50% also came from families characterized by infidelity and divorce. These findings suggest that sexually sadistic serial murder is not related to lower class origins, but may be associated with a chaotic or unstable early life experience.

Interestingly, 65% of the sample had no arrest record before being arrested for murder. This pattern is unlike other types of

aggressive sex offenders whose criminal histories are often characterized by a lengthy constellation of property and personal crimes. This pattern supports either the specificity of these offenders' criminal intent or their skill at avoiding detection, and highlights the difficulty of law enforcement in identifying them early in their criminal careers.

Still, not all of the crimes of sexual sadists are designed to fulfill their sexual desires. For example, some of the subjects in this study had engaged in armed robbery, illegal arms deals, drug trafficking, counterfeiting, and other crimes for profit. One of the subjects committed three known murders, none of which can be proven to have been committed in the course of sexually sadistic acts. One victim was a wife whom he had tortured sexually for years, but asphyxiated merely because he got tired of her and wanted a new wife. A second victim was an adolescent female whose body was skeletonized; he remained silent about stabbing her. A third victim was the female relative of a woman he intended to kill.

Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittelman, and Rouleau's study of paraphilic behavior has indicated that individuals plagued by one paraphilia generally suffer either simultaneously or sequentially from three or four additional paraphilias over the course of their lives (12). Not unexpectedly, in this sample, a significant proportion of the men demonstrated an interest in paraphilic activities in addition to those reflecting sexual sadism. These included voyeurism, obscene phone calls, exhibitionism, fetishism, and/or cross-dressing. Over half of the men also reported homosexual experiences as adults. The multifaceted nature of the sample's sexual behavior is consistent with the clinical hypothesis that perversions may be polymorphous and reflective of some underlying disorganization or lack of unification in the development of the sexual libido. Recent research, by Hucker, Langevin, Dickey, Handy, Chambers, and Wright, associates sexual aggression and sexual sadism with neurological abnormalities in the right temporal horn of the brain (13). Prentky and Burgess discuss the role of the limbic system, serotonin, and sex hormones in the manifestation of sexually aggressive behavior (14). These preliminary findings or propositions invite further inquiry as to whether the well-documented clustering of paraphilic behaviors might emanate from subtle yet significant neurological or biochemical dysfunctions.

Many writers have emphasized the role that violent fantasies play in the occurrence of sexually sadistic behavior. Drawing from the sketches, videos, and pornography that were accumulated by these men, at least 85% of the sample had violent fantasies that seemed to remain consistent over significant periods of time. These fantasies contain a ritualized, repetitious core that is highly arousing to the sexual sadist. The assimilation of this core fantasy into ritualized, repetitious behavior across successive murders suggests that this internal representation is the script followed by the offender during his crimes. Evidence of such scripted behaviors can be instrumental in linking offenses perpetrated by the same offender.

A previous study by Hazelwood, Warren, and Dietz suggests that sexual sadists are particularly apt at seducing women into becoming compliant accessories to their violent fantasies or criminal acts (15). Within the current sample, 35% of the men enacted their core fantasies with women with whom they were having ongoing relationships; two of the 20 men eventually introduced their spouses into their murders. As discussed by Wilson and Seaman, Charlene Williams, a competent boutique owner became an accessory to murder for her husband, Gerald Gallego (16). Hazelwood,

TABLE 1—Characteristics of 20 sexually sadistic serial murderers.

	n	%
Male	20	100
White	19	95
Middle class background	13	65
Parental infidelity and/or divorce	10	50
Stable employment	15	75
Homosexual experience in adulthood	11	55
Paraphilic interest in peeping, obscene phone calls, or indecent exposure	9	45
Paraphilic interest in fetishism, bondage, or transvestism	5	25
Evidence of violent fantasies	16	80
Shared sexual partners	7	35
Indoctrination of compliant victims	7	35
Married at time of offense	10	50
Posthigh school education	6	30
Drug/alcohol abuse	8	40
Violent theme collections	15	75
Interest in security/law enforcement	7	35
Psychotic symptoms	1	5
Arrest history	7	35

Warren, and Dietz described the process by which such indoctrination occurs and suggested that the sexually sadistic offender often manifests an unusual degree of insight into ways by which others can be influenced and controlled. The psychopathic underpinning of such exploitive behavior is highlighted.

The current study found that 75% of the sexually sadistic serial murderers kept collections of a violent theme of one type or another. These included audiotapes, videotapes, pictures or sketches of the individual's sadistic acts, or crimes with others, bondage material that was used in the various killings, sexually sadistic pornography, detective magazines, and various types of weapons. The nature of these collections and the sexual interests of these murderers cannot help but bring to mind Freud's assertions regarding the dynamic association between anal eroticism, sadistic behavior, and obsessive patterns of behavior. On a more practical level, the importance of these materials in the investigation and eventual prosecution of these offenders cannot be overemphasized. Hazelwood and Warren recommend that these collections be sought when applying for search warrants and conducting investigations, as their discovery can constitute irrefutable proof of the perpetrator's guilt (17).

As indicated in Table 1, only one serial murderer exhibited any type of psychotic behavior (i.e., hallucinations, delusions, or thought disorder). This clearly contradicts some of the earlier writing which associated these bizarre types of murder with insanity (18). As discussed in the earlier study of sexually sadistic criminals, the majority of these men engaged in extensive patterns of antisocial behavior in adult life, suggesting that their willingness to commit crimes for sexual gratification stems from character pathology rather than psychosis.

Perhaps, the most unsettling aspect of the murders committed by these men is the meticulous and precise nature of their execution. As indicated in Table 2, the majority of the murders were carefully planned (95%) and involved a preselected location (80%), the use of a torture kit (70%), prolonged captivity of at least some victims (65%), and recording of the offense by various means (45%). These activities clearly reflect a preferred mode of murder for these offenders that has been carefully thought out and choreographed over time. The obsessional and highly ritualized nature of these offenses seems to require the establishment of a preselected location and prolonged interaction with the victim.

As summarized in Table 2, the sexual acts that accompany the murders include a multiplicity of assaultive activities including rape, fellatio, sodomy, and foreign object penetration. Certain of the sexual acts apparently derive from a desire to humiliate and cause pain to the victim (65% perform anal intercourse, 65% insert foreign objects into the victim anally or vaginally). Sexual bondage also occurs in the murders of 95% of the offenders. This interest in sexual bondage is of paraphilic significance to these men and, by their account, represents the subjugation and control of the victim that is central to their sexual arousal. There was only one instance of postmortem mutilation and no instances of necrophilic sexual activity, distinguishing these offenders from necrophilic serial killers such as Ted Bundy, Arthur Shawcross, or Joel Rifkin.

The means of death used by these murderers are personal and intimate. Sixty percent of the sample used strangulation or other types of asphyxiation as their primary means of killing, while 30% stabbed their victims to death. Only one individual in the sample used projectile weapons in murdering his boy victims. In 100% of the cases, intentional torture was inflicted on the victim before death. The types of torture, as noted in the earlier study by Dietz, Hazelwood, and Warren, included beating, biting, whipping, the insertion of foreign objects, painful bondage, electrical shock,

TABLE 2—Characteristics of the offenses of 20 sexually sadistic serial murderers.

	n	%
Careful planning of offenses	19	95
Impersonation of a police officer in the commission of the offense	3	15
Use of a con or ruse in approaching victim	16	80
Victim taken to preselected location	16	80
Victims kept in captivity for 24 h or more	13	65
Victim bound, blindfolded, or gagged	20	100
Use of a torture kit	14	70
Sexual bondage of victim	19	95
Anal intercourse with victim	13	65
Foreign object penetration	13	65
Variety of sexual acts (i.e., vaginal intercourse, fellatio, anal intercourse, foreign object penetration)	18	90
Penile penetration	19	95
Postmortem sexual assault	0	0
Verbal/behavioral scripting during offense	14	70
Sexual ritual	19	95
Intended torture	20	100
Asphyxiation as primary means of killing	12	60
Stabbing as primary means of killing	6	30
Gunshot as primary means of killing	1	5
Postmortem mutilation	1	5
Trophies (belonging to victim)	13	65
Partner assisted in crime	4	20
Concealed victim's corpse	13	65
Recorded the offenses	9	45
Single state or province murders	15	75
Multiple state or province murders	5	25

asphyxiation, and burning (11). The process of seeing the victim suffer, of having the experience of pain, terror, and humiliation reflected back to the sadist, is central to the intent and arousal of this particular type of murderer.

Levin and Fox asserted that certain types of serial murderers move from state to state trying to find victims to rape, sodomize, and torture (4). In the current sample, only 25% murdered in more than one state or province; 75% contained their offenses to a single city, state, or province. This finding contradicts the vagabond image of the serial murderer and suggests that the majority of men are able to murder repeatedly in a relatively restricted area, and through the well-planned nature of these murders, avoid detection for long periods of time.

The victims of these murders seem to fall into consistent categories (see Table 3). Seventy percent of the men killed only female victims; 15% killed only male victims. A minority killed both male and female victims and/or adult and child victims. In 80% of the cases, the abduction of victims involved fairly complex scenarios to gain access to the victim. These cons or tricks involved

TABLE 3—Characteristics of the victims of 20 sexually sadistic serial murderers.

	n	%
Female victims only	14	70
Male victims only	3	15
Female and male victims	3	15
Any child victims (15 years and under)	10	50
Stranger victims only	16	80
Similarities among victims (age, appearance, intelligence, or circumstances)	10	50

such ploys as impersonating a police officer, enticing children into playful activities, and arranging for models through photographic studies. As in other studies of serial offenders, the majority of these sexually sadistic murderers killed only strangers (19). This element of their modus operandi is of great importance in their continued success at avoiding apprehension. The fact that four of the offenders also murdered individuals known to them, however, also suggests, as does their involvement with "compliant victims," that they are not always careful to avoid detection.

The nature of the data did not allow for an examination of the first murder committed by each man, which would seem to be a pivotal point. The research of MacCullough et al. suggests that the sadistic fantasy has been in existence for years and that the first murder represents the culmination of many prior imaginary reenactments (3). One of the murderers in the current sample, however, described experiencing death in a nonsexual context for the first time. He wrote:

"I stood there looking at him on the ground and I was suddenly feelings of power. I realized I held this man's life in my hands . . . I thought 'I'm like God . . . I too have the power to give life or take it away' . . . I got down on my knees and took the rock and hit him again as hard as I could. I watched his forehead cave in from the force of the blow and the blood and brains splattered over the road . . . I never thought it would be so easy to kill a person, or that I would enjoy it. But it was easy and I was enjoying the feeling of supremacy. A supremacy like I had never known before."

Clearly, this man did not experience the visceral abhorrence that would accompany such an experience for many; rather, he stumbled upon an exhilaration that made him feel "like God." Over time, he sought his exhilaration in sexual homicides of three women. Further study of "first murders" might shed light upon the rewards that cause some killers to seek the experience repetitively.

Conclusions

These data on 20 sexually sadistic serial murderers suggest that they represent a group of serial murderers whose demographics, offense behavior, and victim acquisition techniques are surprisingly consistent. Ninety-five percent were white males and 65% from middle class origins. They repeatedly executed murders that reflect careful planning, the use of preselected locations, captivity, a variety of painful sexual acts, sexual bondage, intentional torture, and death primarily by means of strangulation or stabbing. Their murders were consistent over time and reflect sexual arousal to the pain, fear, and panic of their victims. They choreographed assaults that allowed them to intrude upon and control their victim's deaths. One of the men, who murdered victims by manual strangulation, told of breathing air into his dying victim so that he could watch more closely her dawning realization that he was, in fact, going to kill her. This sense of being Godlike and in control of the life and death of another human being is reported by some of the men as one of the most exhilarating aspects of their sexual experiences and of their crimes. There was little postmortem mutilation and no necrophilic sexual activity.

The careful planning and execution of the murder occurs both in voluntary imaginings (fantasy) and in practical preparations for each crime. Whether masturbating to the fantasy or committing the crime, they hope for and sometimes achieve climax at the time of the victim's death. This type of reinforcement is obviously powerful, and no doubt, contributes to the offender's interest in reoffending. These men report that the actual murders become the fantasy material for subsequent masturbation, which reinforces the sadistic arousal pattern and the desire to murder and causes them to remain at risk for future violence.

This research suggests that the sexually sadistic killer represents one distinctive type of serial murderer whose expertise and thoroughness makes him a particularly dangerous threat to society.

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