SEXUAL MURDERERS
A Comparative Analysis and New Perspectives

Edited by

Jean Proulx
University of Montreal

Éric Beauregard
University of South Florida

Maurice Cusson
University of Montreal

and

Alexandre Nicole
Institut Philippe-Pinel, Montreal

With a Preface by William L. Marshall
Translated by Steven Sacks

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd
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Sexual murderers quite rightly attract significant public attention. Indeed, they are among the most consistently noted sexual offenders to appear in the public media. As a result, considerable attention has been given to those offenders in the professional literature. Unfortunately much of this literature, until quite recently, reflected no more than the untested opinions of clinicians who had worked with these men (and they are almost all men, a point not all authors attend to). As a more empirically based literature has appeared, it has become clear that many of the purportedly distinguishing features of these offenders do not distinguish them from other sexual offenders. This, in fact, is the essential and most important feature of the evidence reported in Proulx et al.’s excellent book.

Sexual murderers, as Proulx et al. make clear, are a mixed group, a fact often overlooked in empirical studies. The FBI researchers, who have been among the foremost authors on this topic, characteristically include serial sexual murderers, sexually sadistic murderers and sexual murderers with just one victim where there is no evidence of sadism. Proulx et al. sensibly distinguish these groups and focus all but one of their studies on the single-victim sexual murderers by comparing them with nonmurderous sexual aggressors (i.e., rapists of adult women). Their other study compared sadists with nonsadistic sexual aggressors.

The Introduction to this book provides an excellent overview of the results of the Montreal studies of sexual murderers, revealing, as noted above, that these men have far more in common with sexual aggressors who do not murder than a reading of the prior literature would imply. The Montreal studies also reveal that the murder of a victim occurring in the course of a sexual assault has various causes (e.g. to silence the witness, an expression of rage, a response to victim resistance and as a result of sadistic impulses). However, the Montreal group generated a ‘decision tree’ revealing that four features are strongly predictive of the occurrence of murder during a sexual crime: pre-crime anger; a stranger victim; offender has a weapon; and victim resistance. This latter feature is quite disappointing, since feminists at one time advocated training women to fight back in the event that they
might be sexually attacked, and presumably fighting back reduces the
tendency of victims to blame themselves for the abuse.

The valuable chapters by the Montreal group of researchers are followed
by two outstanding contributions by the Birmingham group, whose studies
produced findings essentially matching those of the Montreal researchers.
The addition, in the Birmingham reports, of a comparison between sexual
murderers and rapists on demographic features and psychometric results
adds to the overall picture of sexual murderers.

Finally there are two chapters that focus on what are said to be practical
features. I must say I was surprised to learn that work over the past few years
on profiling has revealed utility to this approach. However, the authors are
careful to point out that too many practitioners overemphasize the ‘art’ or
‘semi-mystical’ aspect of applied profiling. Apparently, adhering carefully to
the empirically established rules of profiling can result in very valuable
information that can assist investigators. The last chapter treads where few
authors have gone before to suggest ways to therapeutically intervene with
sexual murderers. While there are good suggestions made for treatment,
these need to be subjected to empirical analysis, although one problem that
besets such endeavours is the fact that few sexual murderers get released from
prison and those that do are quite old at the time of release. Since we now
know that age at release markedly alters the likelihood of reoffending among
sexual offenders, this latter feature will always remain a confounder in
examining the effects of treatment on sexual murderers.

I found this book to be very valuable and I congratulate the authors on
their top-class work. The topic of sexual murderers has been of considerable
interest to me in my work over the past 38 years of treating sexual
offenders. At last I feel I have some empirical guides to help me in my
work with these men.

William L. Marshall, OC, PhD, FRSC
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors wish to thank the SSRC for its financial support, without which the Montreal Study could not have been conducted. We would also like to thank Correctional Service Canada for its support throughout the study. In particular, we would like to draw special attention to the professionalism and availability of Jacques Bigras, a senior psychologist with CSC.

In addition, we would like to thank Martine Giovanola and Nicole Pinsonneault, secretaries in the Centre International de Criminologie Comparée (CICC), as well as Francine Packwood, of the Centre de Recherche de l’Institut Philippe Pinel de Montréal (IPPM), for having typed the various versions of this book. We would be remiss if we did not mention the significant contribution of Steven Sacks, who translated the book into English. We would also like to thank the directors of the CICC (Jean-Paul Brodeur) and the research centre of the IPPM (Gilles Côté) for their financial support for the publication of this book. Finally, we are grateful to Gillian Leslie, Sarah Tilley, Nicole Burnett and Tessa Hanford at John Wiley & Sons for their skilful shepherding of the manuscript to publication.
INTRODUCTION
SEXUAL MURDERERS: MYTH AND REALITY

Maurice Cusson

Why is it that sexual murder elicits such a striking mixture of revulsion and fascination from us? Perhaps it is because the sexual murderer, although a figure of evil, bridges the gap between the two antithetical realities of unbridled violence and sexual pleasure. Krafft-Ebing believed that this association can be traced back to the Marquis de Sade, that regular guest of French asylums and prisons from 1763 until his death in 1814. Sadism – for that is the name we know it by today – appeared to Kraft-Ebing to be the key, the direct link between violence and sexual pleasure.

Since then, the shadow of de Sade has hovered in the background of every study of sexual murder. Sexual murder is the culmination of an attack prepared with the express purpose of seeking pleasure, even orgasm, in the subjugation, rape and suffering of a carefully selected woman. Indeed, it is precisely because they obtain pleasure in the suffering and humiliation of women that sexual murderers torture and kill their victims. Most authors believe that this aberrant motivation originates in long-nurtured fantasies in which cruelty and sexual pleasure are intermingled. Once a sadist has experienced the pleasure of sexual murder, he develops an obsession for it and sets out on murderous hunts over and over again. Hardly surprising, therefore, that of all sexual murderers, it is the serial killer who predominates in literature – both professional and fictional. It goes without saying
that such monsters are clearly distinct from the run-of-the-mill lot of habitual thieves, violent criminals and, even, rapists. They are in a category of their own: obsessed by their fantasies, serial sexual murderers have only scorn for the petty crimes of robbery and assault.

When we began the research that forms the basis of most of the chapters of this book, we did not have the temerity to question the apparently implacable logic of the classic model of sexual murder. We did, however, know that the empirical foundation of this conceptual edifice was fragile, and that every relevant study had generalized from either a few cases or from small and unrepresentative samples, and furthermore that statistically valid conclusions were few and far between, and controversial in any event. To elucidate the phenomenon of sexual murder, it seemed to us, the logical next step was to rigorously verify the scientific validity of this apparently coherent and valid model. We therefore constructed a representative sample of sexual murderers, and systematically investigated the criminological, sexological, psychological and social characteristics of its members. Specifically, we approached every inmate incarcerated in Quebec in 1998 and 1999 for the sexual murder of a woman. Of the 57 inmates approached, 40 agreed to respond to our questions and submit to our tests. This sample is clearly different, in terms of both size and systematic recruitment, from other samples reported in the literature. It is in no way simply a collection of ‘good cases’ or ‘monsters’.

Science often proceeds on the basis of comparison, and criminology is no different: criminals are compared to noncriminals, yesterday’s patterns to today’s. Consistent with this approach, we investigated the distinctive characteristics of the sexual murderers in our sample, through comparison of this group to sexual aggressors in a similarly constructed sample. To this end, every inmate incarcerated in federal penitentiaries in Quebec between 1995 and 2000 for the sexual assault of a woman was asked to participate in the study and respond to the same questions posed to sexual murderers. In all, 101 agreed. We also compared the sexual murderers in our sample to a sample of American serial murderers, and compared sadistic and nonsadistic offenders in our sample.

As the comparisons progressed, we had no choice but to face the obvious: our results raised serious questions about the dominant theory of sexual murder. The first surprises were that only a minority of sexual murderers were sadistic, and that sadism was much less important in the dynamics of murder than we had first thought. Another unexpected finding was the widespread similarity of sexual murderers and sexual aggressors: with very few exceptions, the two groups had similar criminal histories and personality disorders. This last similarity led us to a further discovery: the criminal histories of incarcerated sexual murderers and incarcerated career criminals were strangely similar. In both cases, the most common crimes were crimes against property and nonsexual assault.
The final surprise was a big one: among all the sexual murderers incarcerated in Quebec, there was only one serial killer of women (who refused to participate in our study). The conclusion was inescapable: unless one is to believe that Quebec police officers are incapable of catching serial murderers, this type of criminal is extremely rare in Quebec. Serial murderers are, it is true, more numerous in the United States, but the population there is some 45 times greater than that of Quebec. And even in the United States, they are hardly legion: Ressler interviewed only 36 in the entire American prison system. The illusion of numbers is only the product of media and literary frenzies.

In addition, a comparison of the single-victim sexual murderers in our sample and Ressler’s serial killers revealed that the American serial killers were clearly more disturbed. It would thus be an error to equate sexual murderers and serial killers.

In summary then, sexual murderers are not as sadistic as we had thought, and are in fact little different than the sexual aggressors and broad-spectrum habitual criminals so familiar to criminologists. Can they then truly be called sexual murderers in the strictest sense of the term, i.e. members of a distinct category of criminals with a specific personality, history and criminal career? This answer is far from clear. What is clear, is that they had committed a sexual murder. And so we must ask: why? The reader will find the answer revealed bit by bit in the following pages. Without giving everything away, however, we would like to outline a few ideas that run through all our analyses, and which are more fully developed in the following chapters.

Among the sexual murderers in our sample, some exhibited a particularly strong intention for murder; in these, the primary intention – driven by rage, vengeance or sadism – was to kill. On the other hand, some murders started out as sexual assaults, with the death of the victim resulting from the murderer’s excessive violence in the face of resistance to sexual relations, or the need to silence the only person capable of identifying him. Sexual murder may be understood as the outcome of three factors: the murderer’s personal history; the murderer’s state of mind at the moment of the crime; and the specific circumstances of the attack. Most of the murderers in our sample (more than 60%) had substantial criminal records, typified by thefts of all kinds (the most common type of crime), nonsexual violent crimes and drug-related crimes. But virtually similar criminal records were also found among the sexual aggressors. Most sexual murders were thus preceded by a succession of varied, and in most cases nonsexual, crimes. This suggests that the general criminal proclivity invoked by criminologists to explain recidivism is also a factor in sexual murder. It can be further hypothesized that the commission of a crime as serious as murder requires a profound contempt for human life, and indeed for all rules, that is reinforced by a long history of unpunished transgressions.
If sexual murderers and sexual aggressors are so similar, why does the first group kill? Our results point to a nexus of developmental, intentional and situational factors. The sexual murderer is a man possessed by anger, if not rage, who drinks to excess, and who has a weapon close to hand. Which is to say that sexual aggressors who progress to murder are unhindered by inhibitions and scruples, in part because of alcohol consumption and their criminal background, and are so overcome with rage that they formulate a plan to kill or attack with ultimately fatal force.

And the sadists? Here we found a portrait similar to that reported by our predecessors – but only partially. As far as sexual preferences are concerned, we found essentially the classic clinical portrait. Once well ensconced in their reveries, the sadists in our sample – regardless of whether they had committed a murder or a sexual assault – wallow in fantasies of domination and violence. Phallometric evaluation revealed their preference for humiliating and violent scenarios. In particular, they like violent pornography. They are more likely than nonsadists to prepare their crime, and to choose their victims carefully. During the commission of the murder or sexual assault, they give full rein to their perverse nature, humiliating their victims and indulging in wanton violence much more often than nonsadists, and going as far as torture and mutilation.

Where our observations part company with the dominant model is on the question of the similarity of sadists and ordinary recidivists. The dominant model sees these two groups as quite distinct, the sadists being seen as exceptions by virtue of the fact that they lack criminal records. But this was not true in our sample: sadists had committed as many thefts and nonssexual violent crimes as nonsadists. This suggests that sadistic killing takes more than the mere contemplation of fantasies of humiliation and torture: it also takes fertile criminal soil.

Similarly, our results with regard to the role of anger and sexual motivation in sadistic sexual murder forced us to question the classic model. The sadists in our sample did not act in cold blood, and were motivated by more than the mere quest for orgasm. Even more so than the nonsadists, they hated women and were driven by rage, which rendered their attacks even more violent than they would have been had they been motivated by sexual desire alone. The personal histories of the sadists, riddled with hate and resentment, are consistent with this interpretation. Very early in their lives, future sadistic criminals are the object of humiliation, which leads them to social isolation and to take refuge in an imaginary world in which they keep their wounds green. Coupled with an aversion to women, this resentment nourishes an obsessive desire for vengeance.

For several reasons, we believe that rage is a factor in most sexual murders, although it may operate in two different ways. In nonsadistic murderers, rage is impulsive, an explosive reaction to frustration (for example, a woman’s rebuffing of the murderer’s advances). On the other hand, in sadistic murderers, it appears that hate long nurtured in solitude
leads to a premeditated attack. Filled as they are with resentment, and accustomed to associating violence and pleasure, sadists are predictably drawn to murder. And in fact this is what we found: sexual murders were twice as common among sadists as among nonsadists. In the latter group, sexual assault is the predominant crime, and is three times more prevalent than murder.

This book is composed of 13 chapters. Chapters 1 to 9 present the results of the Montreal Study of Sexual Murderers. Chapter 1 outlines our view of sexual murder, summarizes current knowledge on its frequency and critically reviews the principal explanatory theories. Chapter 2 adopts a developmental perspective. It presents our results concerning the childhood and adolescence of sexual murderers, compares them to those of sexual aggressors and examines the criminal careers of both groups. Chapter 3 examines the personality characteristics of sexual murderers and sexual aggressors, as measured by psychological tests, in order to identify any psychopathologies specific to sexual murderers. In Chapter 4, the focus is on the sexual murder as an event. What were the murderer’s intentions at the time of the crime? What happened afterwards? Why did an attack which could have ended in sexual assault only in fact end in the death of a woman? Chapter 5 presents the results of a multivariate analysis in which all the variables presented in Chapters 2–4 that appear to contribute to the discrimination of sexual murderers from sexual aggressors were studied simultaneously. This statistical procedure revealed the existence of several factors which are related to the lethality of the sexual assault. This analysis is followed in Chapter 6 by a comparison of our sample of sexual murderers and the FBI sample of serial sexual murderers analysed by Ressler. Chapter 7 discusses sexual sadism. After a detailed examination of the literature, we compare the sadistic sexual aggressors in our sample to the nonsadistic sexual criminals (in this case, the samples of sexual murderers and sexual aggressors were merged). This comparison gave rise to a novel portrait of sadistic criminals. This analysis is further developed in Chapter 8, which is concerned with the distinction between the angry and sadistic types of sexual murderers: the first acts primarily out of anger and in a disorganized manner, while the second acts in a premeditated manner, and the suffering of his victim is the core component of his crime. In Chapter 9, the results of qualitative analyses are presented. Case studies are relied on heavily in our attempt to answer two questions: What motivates sexual murderers to commit their crimes? What was the criminal career of our subjects before they committed their last and worst crime? Chapters 10 and 11 present the results of the Birmingham Study of Sexual Murderers. Chapter 10 presents a comparison of sexual aggressors of women (rapists) and sexual murderers of women, whereas Chapter 11 contains an analysis of sexual murderers’ motivations. Chapters 12 and 13 discuss Practical Issues related to sexual murderers. Chapter 12 discusses criminal profiling, a popular but controversial technique, while Chapter 13 formulates recommendations for treatment of sexual murderers.