

## Sexual Murder

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**Background.** Little is known about men who kill in a sexual context. The present study compares a group of sexual murderers with a group of men who had raped but not killed.

**Method.** Twenty-one men who murdered women in the course of a sexual attack and 121 men convicted of rape were interviewed in six prisons. Victim statements were obtained in 103 cases (73%). Assessment consisted of a 90-minute semi-structured interview, the Eysenck I-7 questionnaire, and the Schonell reading test.

**Results.** The most notable characteristic distinguishing the men who killed was their lifelong isolation and lack of heterosexual relationships.

**Conclusions.** A better understanding of the social and emotional isolation commonly found in sexual murderers may provide important insights into why some sexual offenders go on to kill.

The incidence of sexual murder of women is unknown. Evidence of a sexual element in a killing is often difficult to discover, particularly when offender and victim are known to each other. In England and Wales, for instance, about a third of female homicide victims are killed by their spouses or co-habitees (*Criminal Statistics for England and Wales*, 1990), but it is not clear how many of these are of a sexual nature. Statistics are difficult to obtain in both the UK and North America because, even for those murders that are discovered, the offence is classified as homicide and not as a sexual crime (Burgess *et al*, 1986).

There are a number of ways in which homicide and a sexual offence may become associated. An offender may murder his victim in order to silence his potential accuser, he may become angry and kill in response to her resistance, he may simply panic, death may be accidental, or homicide may be the result of pathological group behaviour, such as may occur when an army goes on the rampage in an occupied territory.

The killing may also be closely bound to the sexual element of an attack. In these cases the offender's control of his victim, and her pain and humiliation, become linked to his sexual arousal. Murderers of this last type, often referred to as sadistic, have attracted much of the little research in the area, partly because of the possible presence of psychopathology, and partly because it is in this group of men that serial offenders, that is, men who attack and kill numerous victims, are thought most likely to be found (Ressler *et al*, 1988).

Perhaps the classic picture of the sadistic murderer was drawn by Brittain (1970), who, based on clinical anecdote and experience rather than formal research, described an introverted, timid, overcontrolled and

socially isolated man, overdependent on a mother with whom he had an ambivalent relationship. Brittain said that these men were sexually prudish, reserved, and inexperienced, but sexually deviant (being for instance voyeurs, fetishists or transvestites), with rich and sadistic fantasy lives and interests in violent pursuits. Other characteristics of the sadistic killer noted by Brittain were his hypochondriasis, the absence of drug or alcohol addictions, and low self-esteem in spite of great vanity and egocentricism; Brittain suggested that the sadistic killer most commonly offended after a blow to his self-esteem.

Like Brittain, most researchers writing about sadistic offenders and sexual homicide have followed a descriptive approach (Revitch, 1965; Swigert *et al*, 1976; Dietz *et al*, 1990). However, MacCulloch *et al* (1983), in a study of 13 sadistic offenders in a British special hospital (only some of whom had killed), went beyond mere description by providing evidence for the importance of fantasy in the motivation of sadistic crime. They argued, contrary to Brittain, that offending by these men was driven by fantasy and occurred in the absence of external stimuli, a concept that has been explored more fully in a series of American studies based on data collected by the FBI (Burgess *et al*, 1986; Ressler *et al*, 1988).

That fantasy may be a key motivational factor in sadistic killings was further demonstrated by Prentky *et al* (1989), who compared serial with single sexual killers, and found that fantasy was related to offending in significantly more of the former group: a higher proportion admitted to rape fantasies, were paraphilic, and left 'organised' crime scenes aimed at avoiding detection, which suggested some forethought and planning.

The emphasis on sadistic and serial offenders has meant that little research has taken place in relation to sexual murder in general; indeed, other than the study by Prentky *et al* (1989) there has been little attempt to compare putative sadistic murderers with other types of sexual murderer, or even with other sex offenders. In addition, the literature is often less than specific about the type of victim killed, even though in sex offending generally both the sex and age of victims are important discriminators between offenders (Quinsey, 1984). The lack of a comparative framework limits the confidence with which aetiological models can be put forward, and handicaps the search for factors which may help identify those individuals who are most at risk of committing sexual murder, or of killing again.

In order to better understand the phenomenon of sexual murder, this study describes a group of men who killed in the course of a sexual attack, and compares them with men convicted of rape, using Brittain's description of the sadistic murderer as a starting point.

#### Method

In a study of rapists, funded by the Home Office, 142 men were interviewed in six English prisons. Prisons were not chosen randomly, but were selected to provide a cross-section of security categories, and included one young-offenders' institution. Men were eligible for inclusion if they had been convicted of the rape of a woman over the age of 15, or, in the case of offenders under 21, of a woman or girl over the age of 12; incest offenders were excluded from the study. Men were also eligible for inclusion if they had been convicted of the murder of a woman in which a sexual assault was likely to have occurred, although this need not have involved penetration.

In each prison, every second man who met these criteria was asked to take part in the study. Each subject was guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. Of the 152 men approached, only 10 refused to be interviewed. Information was gathered from prison files, and victim statements were obtained in 103 cases (73%); where these were not available, as in cases of murder, police and prosecution summaries provided a description of the offence.

A semi-structured interview lasting about 90 minutes was used. Subjects were also asked to complete a number of questionnaires, including the Eysenck I-7 as a measure of impulsivity (Eysenck *et al*, 1985) and the Schonell reading test as an estimate of educational attainment (Schonell & Schonell, 1965).

Of the 142 men interviewed, 21 had murdered in the course of a sexual attack; one of these sexual murderers had murdered twice, and five others had committed additional rapes or other serious sexual offences. Of the remaining 121 men, 90 had been convicted of a single rape, 26 of two or more rapes, and 5 of one rape together with another serious sexual offence against a second victim.

#### Results

At the time of their offences, the mean age of the 21 men who had murdered was 30.0 (s.d. 8.7, range 18–50), significantly older than the mean of 25.9 (s.d. 6.9, range 15–53) for the rest of the sample ( $t = 2.05$ , d.f. = 140,  $P < 0.01$ ); 8 (38%) of the murderers were over 30 when they offended compared with 23 (19%) of the non-murderers ( $\chi^2 = 3.82$ , d.f. = 1,  $P = 0.05$ ). All of the murderers were white, in marked contrast with the remainder of the sample where whites represented just 60% of the total population ( $\chi^2 = 10.87$ , d.f. = 1,  $P < 0.001$ ). Intelligence was not formally tested, but mean scores for the two groups on the Schonell reading test were similar: 12.1 (s.d. 0.9) for the murderers compared with 11.8 (s.d. 1.4) for the non-murderers.

All but one of the victims was white. Excluding prostitutes, just under half (45%) of those who were killed knew their attackers, a similar proportion to the 47% of victims who were not murdered.

Some of the characteristics suggested by Brittain (1970) as typical of the sadistic murderer were found in this group of sexual killers; those which distinguished them from the men who had raped but not killed are listed in Table 1. Most of these features related to the increased likelihood of social isolation among the murderers, many of whom had infrequent social contacts and lived alone. Even as children, the murderers as a group tended to be more isolated, with over 40% interacting poorly with their peer groups compared with under 20% of those who had not murdered. A majority were judged to have had little heterosexual interaction throughout their lives. Moreover, 18 (86%) of the murderers had at least one of these features suggestive of social isolation, compared with 54 (45%) of the non-murderers ( $\chi^2 = 12.09$ , d.f. = 1,  $P < 0.001$ ).

In Table 1 it can also be seen that more of the murderers said that they tended to keep their anger 'bottled up' before exploding, perhaps reflecting a tendency for overcontrol; impulsivity scores on the I-7, however, were not significantly different between the groups, with a mean of 9.0 (s.d. 5.4) for the murderers compared with a mean of 9.5 (s.d. 5.1) for the non-murderers.

Table 1  
Main features distinguishing sexual murderers from men who had raped but not killed

	Rapists (n=121)	Murderers (n=21)	$\chi^2$	P<
Not part of childhood peer group	23 (19%)	9 (43%)	5.83	0.01
Lives alone	26 (22%)	9 (43%)	4.40	0.05
Socially isolated	6 (5%)	6 (29%)	12.90	0.001
Few sexual relationships	23 (19%)	13 (62%)	17.40	0.0001
No sex partner in year of offence	18 (15%)	8 (38%)	6.45	0.01
'Bottles' temper	21 (18%)	8 (38%)	4.26	0.05
Past conviction for rape	9 (7%)	6 (29%)	8.46	0.01

Other elements of Brittain's description were also observed in the sexual murderers, but these did not distinguish them from the men who had raped but not killed. About half the men in each group had past convictions for violence and an interest in aggressive pastimes such as martial arts or hunting, while 5 (24%) of the murderers and 39 (32%) of the non-murderers owned weapons. Paraphilic behaviour was noted for 9 (43%) of the murderers and 31 (26%) of the non-murderers (actual paraphilias were diagnosed in just four of the murderers), and about 15% of each group admitted to some form of sexual dysfunction in the year of the offence. Offending in general was similar between the two groups, as were past convictions for sexual offences, with the exception of previous convictions for rape (see Table 1).

No attempt was made to quantify vanity, but hypochondriasis, which might suggest increased interest in oneself, seemed to be more common in the murderers, 11 (52%) of whom required frequent medical attention in prison compared with 24 (20%) of the non-murderers ( $\chi^2=11.37$ , d.f. = 1,  $P<0.001$ ). The murderers were older, but even if one includes only subjects under the age of 40 at the time of interview, the murderers still demanded more medical time, with 7 of 14 (50%) requiring frequent medical input compared with 20 of 110 (18%) of the non-murderers ( $\chi^2=7.38$ , d.f. = 1,  $P<0.01$ ). On the other hand, it was noted that only one of the murderers took an interest in bodybuilding compared with 26 (22%) of the non-murderers.

Other components of Brittain's description did not fit this population of sexual murderers at all. Contrary to his expectation that alcohol abuse would not be common, alcohol dependence was diagnosed in 9 (43%) of the men who had killed. Eight (38%) of the murderers had previous contact with psychiatric services, while just 2 (10%) had evidence of symptoms of anxiety or depression either within or outside prison, again contrary to Brittain's account.

### Fantasies

Most of the men were reluctant to divulge sexual fantasies at interview, with just one of the murderers and eight of the non-murderers admitting to more than occasional sexual fantasies, and two of the former and eight of the latter admitting to having had rape fantasies some time in their lives. Other indicators of an active sexual fantasy life were therefore sought.

Frequent use of pornography, any paraphilic behaviour (ever), frequent fantasies or rape fantasies, or regular use of prostitutes was more common, but not significantly so, among men who had killed (8; 38%) than among non-murderers (33; 27%). Another possible indicator of a rich fantasy life, evidence of a ritual component in the offence, also failed to distinguish the two groups, with 3 (14%) of the murderers and 24 (20%) of the non-murderers appearing to have followed a predetermined mental script in their offences.

### Childhood

Brittain did not comment in detail about the childhood characteristics of sadistic murderers. In this study, other than having less interaction with their peers as children, the killers and non-killers did not differ over a range of characteristics such as the incidence of conduct disorder, possible neurotic traits such as bedwetting or somatic symptoms, or their reports of childhood victimisation, including sexual abuse.

The family structure of those who had killed appeared to be relatively more stable, at least superficially. They were less likely to have experienced a change in primary care, this having occurred in 9 (43%) of the murderers compared with 80 (66%) of the non-murderers ( $\chi^2=4.14$ , d.f. = 1,  $P<0.05$ ), and when this did happen it occurred less frequently, with just 2 (10%) of the murderers experiencing three or more such changes compared with 43 (36%) of

the non-murderers ( $\chi^2 = 5.59$ , d.f. = 1,  $P < 0.05$ ); 19 (91%) of the murderers spent the first ten years of their lives with their own families compared with 95 (79%) of the non-murderers ( $\chi^2 = 1.76$ , d.f. = 1, NS). Fathers were more likely to be present throughout the early lives (up to age 10) of those who had killed, being present for 16 (76%) of the murderers compared with 63 (52%) of the non-murderers ( $\chi^2 = 4.21$ , d.f. = 1,  $P < 0.05$ ). On a rating of paternal stability during these early years (based on paternal absence, criminality, unemployment, alcoholism, or chronic ill health), 12 (57%) of the fathers of the murderers were rated as 'stable' compared with 42 (35%) of the non-murderers' fathers ( $\chi^2 = 3.82$ , d.f. = 1,  $P = 0.05$ ). Similar proportions of the mothers of the murderers and non-murderers were present throughout their first ten years, and the mothers of 15 (71%) of the murderers and 78 (65%) of the non-murderers were rated as 'stable'. The proportions who were single children were also similar, as were the proportions who were eldest children.

### The murder offences

Forensic evidence suggested that seven of the murderers had intercourse with unconscious or dead victims. It might be expected that these men would differ from the remainder of the murderers, but as a group they did not seem to be any more sexually or psychologically disturbed. Just one had a past sex offence, none were serial offenders, none admitted to heavy pornography use, none to rape fantasies, and in just one was there a history of paraphilic behaviour. Although four of these men were not in an established relationship at the time of their offences and three lived alone, just one was considered to be socially isolated. One had evidence of neurotic symptoms as a child and one of conduct disorder, while none admitted to childhood sexual or physical abuse. Two were diagnosed as alcohol dependent, but 6 of the 7 (86%) had used alcohol in the hours before the offence compared with just 5 (36%) of the other murderers.

The average age of the murder victims was 38.3 (s.d. 24.8) compared with 28.2 (s.d. 14.4) for victims who were not killed ( $t = 1.87$ , d.f. = 140,  $P = 0.06$ ), but five of the murdered women were over 60 years of age – excluding women over 60 in both groups, mean victim ages were 25.8 (s.d. 10.2) and 26.1 (s.d. 10.2) respectively. Even excluding victims over 60, however, and counting only the first victims of men with multiple offences, only 7 of 16 murder victims (44%) were within 10 years of age of their attackers,

compared with 84 of 117 (72%) of the victims who were not killed ( $\chi^2 = 5.12$ , d.f. = 1,  $P < 0.05$ ).

In the majority of murder-rapes, access was gained to the victim either by breaking into her home (29%), usually in the course of a burglary, or by stalking her on the street (29%). In about a third of the murders the sex attack, although not necessarily the murder, appeared to have been planned in advance. Weapons, usually knives, were present in 8 (38%) of the attacks, but 14 (67%) of the victims were strangled and just 2 (10%) stabbed. A gun was involved in only one offence, the attacker shooting the male companion of his victim before raping her and then beating her to death with the barrel of the gun. In five cases the offender said that his victim had shown no physical resistance, but the violence used in all but one of the murder-rapes was extreme. For example, in one case the cord used to strangle a woman had been pulled so tight that the ambulance crew were unable to untie it, and in another an elderly woman was beaten so badly that she had 16 broken ribs, a torn liver, and a ruptured heart.

Six of the murderers gave an account of some form of sexual dysfunction during the offence: four described premature ejaculation and two said that they had been unable to ejaculate; in at least three of these cases the sexual dysfunction was related to the murder. One man, for instance, said that his inability to ejaculate made him increasingly angry, which led him to strangle his victim. He told the police at the time that he discovered, "a sense of power in depriving a body of life". Semen was found in the victim's anus and vagina, and presumably it was this sense of power that finally enabled him to ejaculate.

Brittain's observation that murderous attacks were precipitated by a recent loss of self-esteem was clearly found in just 7 (34%) cases. Anger, either because of the victim's lack of cooperation or of a more general nature, was the most common precipitant of the murderous assault, judged to be present in 9 (50%) of the 18 cases for which a motive could be discerned. In only three cases was the process of causing death itself clearly sexually arousing for the offender, while silencing a potential accuser appeared to be the motive in four cases and panic in two.

### Discussion

This study is the first in the UK to look in detail at the sexual murder of women. There is no way of knowing how representative this particular group of men is, however, as the numbers of men who kill in a sexual context is unknown and data about them

limited, and inferences drawn from this population must be made cautiously. This caveat applies to all studies of sexual offenders, which by their nature depend on the small proportion of perpetrators who can be identified, usually only after the filters of accusation, arrest, conviction and sentencing have been negotiated.

The description of the sadistic killer articulated by Brittain (1970) has been generally accepted, but it has never been validated and his use of the term 'sadistic' never defined. Many of the features put forward by him as characteristic of sadistic killers were not found in this sample of sexual killers. Others, such as an interest in aggressive pursuits, sexual deviation, and rich, if not sadistic fantasy lives, were observed here, but they were also found in a comparison group of men who had raped but not killed; if relevant, these features are more likely to relate to sexual offending in general rather than sexual murder in particular.

Many of the American studies of sexual murder also suffer from a lack of a comparative framework. For instance, childhood histories of family instability, victimisation and behavioural problems were common in the backgrounds of the sexual killers described by the FBI, and are postulated to be of important aetiological significance (Burgess *et al.*, 1986; Ressler *et al.*, 1988), but in the present study these features were if anything less prominent in the murderers than in the rapists who had not killed.

The lack of evidence of frequent or preoccupying sadistic fantasies, or of sadism in general, in the sexual killers described here is in marked contrast to the FBI studies. Twenty-nine of the 36 men in the American studies, however, were serial killers, and 25 had killed three or more times. It is in this group of repeated offenders that fantasy is postulated as being an important "drive mechanism" (Prentky *et al.*, 1989). While serial murder was not a feature of the men in the present study, a small number of men had committed other sexual offences in addition to murder, and in this group frequent fantasies, paraphilic behaviour, convictions for sexual offences, and ritualised offending were more often found. In contrast, other factors, in particular anger, sometimes related to a recent specific incident, sometimes of a more general and pervasive nature, appeared more relevant in men who were not repeated offenders. Anger has been found to be a useful typological discriminator in some rapist typologies (Prentky & Knight, 1991).

### **Social isolation**

The most robust finding in the present study was the theme of isolation in the sexual killers. Many of the

murderers lived alone, and many had little in the way of social contacts or social interaction; even as children many were not part of their peer groups. In addition, most of the murderers had few if any intimate relationships with women, and the relationships they did form tended to be emotionally limited, with little sharing or confiding. Social and emotional isolation, although not emphasised, are also characteristics that appear consistently in the published work on sexual murderers (Brittain, 1970; Burgess *et al.*, 1986; Ressler *et al.*, 1988; Dietz *et al.*, 1990).

The isolation experienced by sexual killers may be causally relevant to their crimes in two ways. First, this isolation may be an indicator of underlying personality abnormalities which both cause the isolation and allow an individual to cross the boundary between sexual attack and murder. In particular, it may signal an abnormality of affect whereby these men are unable to empathise normally with other people, either being unable to experience the pain and suffering of their victims, or if they do they experience it as pleasurable and arousing. Alternatively, the isolation may itself be an important contributing factor that allows the killing to take place. Lack of personal contact, and perhaps an increased dependence on an internal fantasy life, may weaken the restraints that inhibit excessive violence even in the course of a sexual attack. In a sense, these men may lack practice in controlling their aggression when their desires are frustrated; some will be habitually aggressive, others will match the description of overcontrolled personalities who explode in infrequent but seriously violent aggression (Megargee, 1966). Men of this second type will be those whose killing is driven by anger (either in general or specifically towards women) rather than by sadism.

While fantasy and behavioural rehearsal are an important prognostic sign in some offenders (MacCulloch *et al.*, 1983), it appears to be present in only a small proportion of men who kill in a sexual context. The current study suggests that a less specific but perhaps more sensitive sign is a history of social and personal isolation, particularly when combined with sexual deviance, sexual offending, or sadistic fantasies. Such isolation may have many causes, ranging from biological to developmental to environmental, and it is unlikely that a common aetiological factor underlies all cases. Social and personal isolation, whether perceived by the individual or not, is a common thread running through many sexual killers, whether the killing is the result of escalation within an offence or was planned from the outset. A better understanding of

what causes an individual to become isolated in this way may shed light on why only some men with sadistic fantasies become sexual offenders, and why some sexual offenders go on to kill.

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