



Sexual Homicide: a Criminological Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose of Review This review presents recent findings of research focusing on sexual homicide. Firstly, we examine international comparative studies of victim, offender, and crime characteristics. Secondly, we review an important body of literature that compares developmental and psychological as well as the decision-making process of sexual murderers with other violent offenders. Thirdly, recent and major findings on links between sexual homicide and psychopathy as well as sadism are presented. Fourthly, findings on spatial behavior and factors that can explain it are discussed. Finally, the last section reviews characteristics of sexual homicide involving children and elderly victims.

Recent Findings International comparisons suggest that sexual homicide presents more similarities than differences across countries implying that most of knowledge can be generalized and applied to other countries. Comparisons with other types of violent offenders highlight that sexual murderers are a specific type of offenders with particular characteristics (criminal careers, developmental factors, personality disorders, lifestyle characteristics) and crime commission process (modus operandi, spatial behavior). As to the etiological factors of sexual homicide, psychopathy and sadism are important characteristics of sexual murderers leading their criminal life as well as their everyday life. Finally, studies focusing on specific types of vulnerable victims showed a high level of heterogeneity within the population of sexual murderers.

Summary Sexual murderers are specific offenders with peculiar characteristics and further research should develop proper knowledge on it. Creation of new international databases allows research to confirm and increase knowledge by considering sexual homicides as a complex heterogeneous crime.

Keywords Sexual homicide · Criminology · International comparisons · Individual factors · Crime process · Heterogeneous population

Introduction

Sexual homicide (SH) is a rare event that represents only a very small proportion of violent crimes. Furthermore, trends also suggest that rates of SH have been declining over time. One challenge for sexual homicide researchers is that gaining valuable and reliable knowledge about these crimes has proven to be very difficult, likely due in some part to the low base rates of SH. However, improving our practices and our understanding

of this type of crime is of the utmost importance. SHs have the distinct ability to provoke fear in the community. Because the media tends to focus on the most extreme forms of violence, SHs tend to receive widespread and intensive media coverage. This attention helps contribute to increases in the moral panic that surrounds these crimes [1, 2]. Moreover, despite being a rare event, SH investigations are often time-consuming and costly; estimates suggest a single homicide may cost nearly \$20 million (USD) to investigate [3].

As there is no legal definition of SH, several attempts have been made to identify the “true” sexual homicide offender (SHO) [4]. Traditionally, SH has been defined as the intentional killing of a person where there is evidence of a sexual element to the murder [5, 6], while for some other researchers, the sexual activity is not necessary, as the act of killing in itself can be considered the source of sexual gratification [7, 8]. Most studies however e.g., [9–21] use the definition proposed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [22] to identify cases of SH. This definition is based on the presence of at least

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one of the following six items: (a) victim's attire or lack of attire; (b) exposure of the sexual parts of the victims body; (c) sexual positioning of the body; (d) insertion of foreign objects into the victim's cavities; (e) evidence of sexual intercourse (oral, anal, or vaginal); and (f) evidence of substitute sexual activity, interest, or sadistic fantasy. It was recently suggested that in order to avoid false positives, it would be beneficial to look for cases that present more than one of these items [23].

This article explores some of the most recent criminological findings regarding SH, more specifically as it relates to (1) the international comparisons of victims, offenders, and crime characteristics; (2) intergroup comparisons with other types of violent offenders; (3) psychopathy and sadism features; (4) spatial behavior; (5) SHs involving specific types of victims.

International Comparison of Sexual Homicide

An important aspect of SH studies consists of describing victim and offender characteristics, as well as the crime commission process. Most SH studies are based on small samples and it is only in the last decade that researchers were given access to larger and more representative samples. This change has provided new possibilities in terms of research, specifically, comparative studies across countries that test whether the knowledge produced on sexual homicide from one country is generalizable to the others. Currently, there are only a few studies that have compared SH cases across different countries [9–11, 12•, 13, 14, 15••, 17, 24].

In one study based on a sample of 772 cases of extrafamilial (strangers or acquaintance) SH—412 cases from France and 350 from Canada—the major findings showed that both French and Canadian SHOs abused alcohol, but drug consumption was significantly more prevalent among Canadian SHOs. This difference was explained by the fact that drugs are more accessible in Canada compared with France [17]. Sexual fantasies were also more prevalent among French SHOs and could be linked to the fact that they have a more psychopathological profile and are more sexually deviant [17]. Moreover, comparisons between Canadian and Korean data showed that SHOs of both countries had previous criminal convictions, but the number of such prior convictions was greater for Canadian SHOs compared with Korean SHOs, especially for sex offenses, while violent offenses were less prevalent [9]. Korean victims were much older than Canadian victims, and Canadian victims were more often students, whereas Korean SH victims were more likely to be employed [9].

With respect to the offending process, differences were noted across four cultures and three continents. French SHOs more often used a ruse (e.g., befriended the victim, posed as an authority figure, offered assistance, etc.) and a surprise approach (e.g., lay in wait inside a building, grabbed the victim, etc.), while Canadian SHOs preferred the blitz approach (e.g., offender

grabbed and immediately choked the victim, offender immediately overpowered the victim, offender immediately hit the victim, offender immediately stabbed or shot the victim, etc.) [17]. Scottish SHOs used a surprise or blitz approach more often than Canadian SHOs [24]. As to the cause of death, no significant differences between the Canadian and the French samples were observed [17], with strangulation being the preferred method across both countries. Compared with Scottish and Korean SHOs, Canadian SHOs were more likely to commit their crime at an outdoor location [24].

As to the sexual acts involved in SH, Scottish SHOs more frequently perpetrated anal penetration, acts of foreplay, and ejaculated on the victims compared with Canadian SHOs [24]. Genital mutilations were more prevalent among the Scottish SHOs, whereas overkill (inflicting more grievous bodily harm on the victim than is necessary to cause death; [25] and trophy collection were more common among Canadian SHOs [24]. Compared with Canadian SHOs, French SHOs more typically perpetrated vaginal penetration with objects or fingers as well as anal penetration [17]. Unusual acts and overkill were significantly more prevalent among Canadian SHOs compared with Korean SHOs [9].

Although interesting and informative, these findings present some limitations that may have resulted in biased conclusions. For instance, the studies have used data collected with different instruments, which could have led to important differences as to how some of the variables were operationalized and coded. Only one study has provided a comparison between two samples of SHs (French and Canadian) where data were collected and coded with the same instrument [13]. In this study based on a sample of 762 SHs (412 from France and 350 from Canada), among the 126 variables included for analysis, 31 presented significant differences. This suggested that despite coming from two different countries—even two different continents—individuals committing SHs present with more similarities than differences, not only as it relates to their personal characteristics but also as to the way they commit their crimes [13]. However, despite the similarities between the two countries, some differences still emerged, which were hypothesized to be related to the specific context (i.e., cultural and geographical) of a given country [23].

The Sexual Murderer as a Specific Type of Offender

Studies comparing SH with other type of violent crimes (e.g., rapes, nonsexual homicide) have been conducted by researchers to answer the question: Is the SHO a specific type of offender? For example, some studies have compared groups of SHOs with groups of similar offenders such as nonhomicidal sexual offenders (NHSOs) and/or nonsexual homicide offenders (NSHOs). Two literature reviews on studies examining the differences and similarities between SHOs and NHSOs [26, 27]

were recently published. The review by Chan and Heide [26] examined 17 empirical studies using heterogeneous sample of SH while the study by Stefanska and Beech [27] focused on 10 empirical studies using a sample of non-serial SH.

For instance, SHOs were more likely to report problems with loneliness see [28–33] as well as issues with anger see [28, 34] compared with NHSOs. However, both groups similarly shared the presence of mental disorders see [28, 35, 36], a criminal history of sexual and violent offending [28, 30, 35, 37], a dysfunctional family structure see [30, 35], and sexual victimization [28, 30, 35]. NHSOs were more likely to commit vaginal penetration, to plan the crime see [31, 37, 38], and to humiliate the victim [31, 39] compared with SHOs.

Although these studies highlighting important differences between SHOs and NSHOs, some also present several limitations [27]. For instance, some studies have included both serial and nonserial SHOs despite evidence that these groups are different [2], some studies included a mix of victim types (e.g., male victims, child victims), or compared groups of SHOs with heterogeneous groups of NHSOs e.g., [40–43].

Beauregard and colleagues [18•, 44–47] have overcome some of these limitations by conducting a series of studies disaggregating the group of NHSOs into violent and nonviolent sex offenders [18•, 44–47]. They found that SHOs and violent NHSOs were more versatile in their offending patterns and presented with a history of more assaults, homicides, kidnappings, and aggravated sexual assaults in comparison with non-violent NHSOs, who were more specialized in their sexual offending [46•]. In addition, SHOs presented a background characterized by abuse and a variety of problematic behaviors, such as chronic lying, angry temperament, running away, reckless behaviors, and cruelty against animals [45]. SHOs were also more likely to be characterized by schizoid and borderline personality disorders and chose to select a victim, use a weapon, and use drugs and alcohol before their offenses. However, SHOs were less likely to force their victim to engage in sexual acts or humiliate them and were less likely to present with antisocial and dependent personality disorders [44].

Another recent study compared SHOs with violent NHSOs and a group of NSHO [18•]. Findings showed that SHOs were more likely to exhibit paraphilic behavior, possess a sexual collection involving children, report sexual dysfunctions, and use psychoactive substances. As to the crime scene behavior, SHOs were more likely to use a con or a surprise approach, commit the crime in a residence, beat the victim, use asphyxiation, and use a weapon intentionally [18•]. Findings from this corpus of studies suggest that the SHO is a distinct type of offender. Therefore, it becomes important to develop specific knowledge on SHOs for police, corrections, and the criminal justice system.

A different approach has identified that certain factors related to the criminal event can be used to explain an escalation from a violent crime to a homicide [48–50]. Specifically,

studies have shown that violent crimes, such as robberies and physical assaults, were much more likely to escalate to homicide with the presence of a weapon (e.g., knife or gun versus blunt object), and if the victim is known to the offender [51]. Moreover, other studies have found that the offender being intoxicated during the offense [49] and the victim reacting during the assault (i.e., whether the victim retaliates during the crime; see [49, 50] were both associated with an increased likelihood of a lethal outcome in nonsexual physical assaults.

Although considered a hybrid offense—combining homicide with a sexual assault [18•]—SH can be partly explained as an escalation of sexual violence. Although there is evidence that some SHOs kill because of individual psychopathology (i.e., sexual sadism) or excessive rage, there is also mounting evidence that SH may be one of many outcomes of a rape [52–54]. A first study using conjunctive analysis tested the crime escalation hypothesis by combining victim, situational, and crime scene characteristics [52]. Findings showed that the likelihood of a sexual assault escalating to SH was influenced by a complex combination of all three groups of variables [52]. The most lethal combinations of event characteristics identified were when the offender used a weapon during the crime and did not commit intrusive sexual acts on the victim, but spent more than 30 min with the victim. It was suggested that this inability to perform sexually—despite spending a long time with the victim—enraged the offender and, with ready access to a weapon, the sexual assault was very likely to end with a murder. A more recent study, also using conjunctive analysis, tested the combination of the crime scene behavior and offender characteristics to estimate the likelihood that these combinations will lead to an escalation from rape to SH [14]. Findings showed that the modus operandi, especially the violence used by offenders during the assault, was fundamental to predict a lethal outcome. Moreover, findings showed that victim resistance was very important to distinguish the type of SH (i.e., intentional and non-intentional). In non-intentional SH, offenders were motivated to commit a rape but encountered victim resistance which led to a lethal outcome due to the amount of force used to overcome that resistance. In intentional SH, pain was inflicted intentionally to cause suffering and death of the victim [14].

Despite the fact that offenders' characteristics (i.e., psychoactive substance consumption, loner behavior, previous criminal activities) were associated with a lethal outcome, their contribution was only partial, as these characteristics had an impact only in certain situations [14].

Psychopathy and Sadism Among Sexual Murderers

Beyond the crime of SH, it is also important to examine some of the offender characteristics potentially contributing to the

commission of this crime, as the association between psychological disorders and the crime commission process is an important aspect of the criminological literature. Psychopathy has been associated with violent crime commission e.g., [55, 56]. Findings on sex offenders suggest that psychopathic sex offenders are more likely to use a high level of violence, even committing SH e.g., [57], by using excessive violence such as torture to satiate their thrill-seeking motivation see [58, 59]. In almost 85% of SHOs, the Psychopathy Checklist-revised (PCL-R) scores were in the moderate–high range [60].

Several studies have shown a strong association between psychopathy and sadism [61–63]. Indeed, comparisons between nonpsychopathic and psychopathic offenders showed that the latter were more frequently diagnosed with sadism [64]. A classification of Canadian SHs based on the degree of sadistic behavior showed a three-cluster solution, including a severe sadistic group, a mixed group, and a nonsadistic group [65•]. Despite doctrinal debate on the sadism definition, a certain consensus was reached to consider sexual sadism as characterized by (a) some form of violent or humiliating behavior [66–68]; (b) the victim's reaction to this behavior (e.g., being frightened, scared, or in pain) [69]; or (c) the resulting feeling of power and control as a result of the violence inflicted [28, 70–72]. The prevalence of sadism ranged anywhere between 5 and 50% of all sex offenders [61, 67, 73, 74]. The most important controversies were related to the measurement of sadism. To improve the reliability of the diagnosis, researchers adopted a scale approach using crime scene behaviors [75–77] to identify sadistic SHOs, leading to important methodological debates [77–79]. The most recent scale, the SADSEX-SH scale [75••], is unique in that it aims to assist in the diagnostic assessment of unidentified or unconfirmed perpetrators purely from crime scene evidence. It was constructed based on the sexual sadism and sexual homicide literature combined with the empirical experience of the authors in evaluating sexually sadistic murderers and SH crime scene characteristics (e.g., [39, 70, 71, 79–82]). From a practical point of view, this scale uses a cutoff score of 6 (i.e., not present or unknown = 0 point, possibly present/some evidence = 1 point, present = 2 points) on the basis of eight items (sexual domination of the victim through the use of bondage, asphyxia, blindfolding, a knife, etc.; physical or psychological torture of the victim; victim forced to verbally or physically engage in sexually degrading, humiliating behavior; gratuitous violence, excessive injury, biting, cutting, or other acts of physical cruelty inflicted on the victim; anal or oral sex forced upon the victim; use of an inanimate object(s) to sexually penetrate the victim; sexual mutilation of the victim; souvenirs or trophies taken from the victim) [75••].

Psychopathy and sexual sadism are important features of SHOs, partly explaining their marginalization and adaptation problems in their everyday life [12]. Dissatisfaction in their everyday life (e.g., poor work performance, social isolation,

lack of agency, lack of relatedness, etc.) can contribute to their crime commission process [12]. SHOs often present with alcohol-related problems and negative perceptions of their environment as well as themselves, and are engaged in victimization behaviors due to impulsive hostile and aggressive personality traits [12].

Spatial Behavior of Sexual Murderers

Spatial behaviors of sex offenders have been well described in criminology see [83] for a review, and are especially helpful for understanding the interactions between offender and victim characteristics (e.g., routine activities, sociodemographic information) within their physical environment. Nevertheless, empirical studies which specifically examine the spatial behavior of SHOs are scarce [10, 21, 84–87]. Findings have shown that, in general, SHOs assaulting children and adult victims traveled a short distance around their living space [10, 21, 84–87], similar to other sex offenders e.g., [83, 88, 89]. SH of children occurred closer to the offender's residence than SH involving adult victims [87], similar to cases of sexual abuse (e.g., [88]).

Recent Canadian studies [21, 84] examined the distance traveled by SHO (i.e., distance between initial contact scene, offense scene, body recovery scene, and offender residence) as well as the correlates of criminal mobility and identified the travelers and the non-traveler offenders. They found that SHOs who target a victim who is walking or jogging, encounter a victim in a bar, target a stranger or a victim who is working as a prostitute, and use a vehicle, were more likely to travel during the commission of the crime. In a study involving French SHOs, researchers used the crime triangle mobility (i.e., analysis of distances between offender's residence, victim's residence, and the crime location) for the first time [10]. SHs presented more spatial concentration than sexual assaults, and the spatial behaviors of SHOs were more influenced by crime parameters than individual characteristics of offenders and victims [10]. This study proposed a four-category spatial typology of SHOs [10] defined as [1] farming (i.e., victim and offender are acquaintances and usually live close to each other); [2] hunting (i.e., offender is ready to travel beyond his neighborhood to assault in her residence a victim they do not know); [3] trapping (i.e., victim travels into the offender's neighborhood); and [4] picking (i.e., offender and the victim are both far from their residence) of SHOs [10]. This model needs to be tested with additional data from other countries to evaluate its validity. It examines only solved cases of SHs occurring on the French territory and it is possible that countries with different geographical distributions provide a different model.

The Sexual Homicide of Specific Victims

Most of SH studies are based on a wide range of SHOs and research tends to confirm the heterogeneity of this type of offender. Recent findings showed that sex offenses against children and elderly victims followed a specific crime process e.g., [40, 41, 90, 91].

Although the research directly addressing the phenomena of SH against children has been scarce, the extant literature has pointed out that, in addition to the definitional problem of what a child is, the discussion of SH of children has been obscured by the fact that SHOs of children appear to be a diverse population of offenders [92]. The violence used in SH can take three different forms: inadvertent (i.e., killing for a lack of care); indiscriminate (i.e., killing if necessary); and intentional (i.e., varied categories including sadists, killing to avoid detection, misguided love from a pedophile, or ambivalent hate) [92].

To show the distinct aspect of SH against children, some researchers have compared SHOs of children with diverse groups of sex offenders. Seven studies have conducted such comparisons [40, 41, 91, 93–96]. In terms of offender characteristics, the studies have shown that SHOs of children scored higher on factor 1 and factor 2 of the PCL-R, exhibited more symptoms of antisocial personality disorders and paraphilias (especially sexual sadism), were more likely to receive three or more DSM III-R diagnoses, and demonstrated higher levels of deviant arousal to pedophilic and adult assault stimuli as measured by penile plethysmography [94]. However, SHOs of children were less likely to report alcohol abuse and drug dependency, as well as to present with sexual dysfunctions or a narcissistic personality disorder [96]. SHOs of children were also more likely to live with another adult and to have committed sexual abuse prior to the SH [40]. As to the crime characteristics, findings showed that SHOs of children were more likely to have purposefully carried out the crime without any provocation from the victim [96], to report deviant sexual fantasies, to use pornography prior to the crime, and to plan the crime compared with SHOs of adults [41]. In addition, SHOs of children were more likely to establish contact with the victim prior to the crime, to commit the crime during the day, to use strangulation to kill the victim, and to dismember and hide the victim's body compared with SHOs of adults [41]. Furthermore, SHOs of children were more likely to find the victim at home or outside on the street and to physically beat the victim during the criminal event, whereas SHOs who specifically target adults (mainly women) were more likely to attack a victim of thin build, leave the body in a residence, and remain undetected by the police [40]. Analysis of SHO characteristics and modus operandi showed that SHOs of children were more similar to SHOs of adult victims than NSHOs of children [97]. Following these comparisons, the first empirical typology of SHOs of children was

identified [11••]. This typology is based on both the level of violence and the age category of the child and describes offenders, victims, and crime characteristics, across six different categories. The *Intentional/Prepubescent* describes offenders that usually select and sexually assault very young male victims that are acquaintances and kill them to avoid detection. The *Inadvertent/Prepubescent* represents a young unexperienced pedophile targeting very young male victims to inflict sadistic acts and kill them due to excessive violence. The *Intentional/Preteen* describes offenders sexually motivated by the suffering and death of the victim, often disinhibited by psychoactive substances and assaulting preteen female victims to inflict a variety of sexual and sadistic acts. The *Inadvertent/Preteen* includes offenders perpetrating violent attacks of unknown preteen female victims to sexually assault them. The level of violence used by these offenders is generally the cause of death. The *Intentional/Teen* describes offenders that are sexually motivated by the death of the victim, targeting teen females to rape and torture them. Finally, the *Indiscriminate/Teen* includes older offenders targeting teen females to sexually assault them. The death is an opportunistic decision to avoid police detection [11••].

Similar to SH of children, the research focusing on elderly people has been scarce, with only two studies published on this vulnerable population [98, 99]. Both studies were based on a sample of offenders from the USA with female victims aged 60 years or older [98, 99]. These studies showed that elderly victims were assaulted by SHOs that were much younger (ages 20 to 35). As to the modus operandi, SHs of elderly were characterized by overkill, suggesting brutal and excessive injuries to what would be necessary to cause death [98]. Moreover, in the majority of the cases, victims and offenders lived in a proximal area (i.e., within six blocks) and in most cases elderly victims were killed in their residence [98]. Most elderly victims were killed by strangulation, whereas the use of firearms was very uncommon [98]. Approximately 72% of SHOs removed something from the crime scene but findings suggested that the sexual aspects remained the main motivation and occur chronologically first, while the robbery has been suggested to happen as an afterthought [98, 99]. Although previous studies had confirmed the heterogeneity of SH, the examination of specific subgroups shows that depending on the type of victim, distinct offender and crime characteristics may influence their offending process.

The Methodological Evolution of SH Studies

This review of the literature highlighted the fact that SH is a type of sexual crime deserving to be studied on its own. As SH is an unusual crime, many of the early studies suffered from important methodological limitations due to the difficulty for the researcher to constitute large and representative databases

[23]. Partly due to the relatively low base rate of SH, most early studies were based on clinical observations [100]. At the same time, it is important to mention the general lack of interest from criminology to study extreme forms of violence [101]. However, the field has slowly started to move away from the clinical tradition to a more data-driven approach. Empirical studies from the FBI [22, 102–104] mark the beginning of this period which saw the publication of several typologies as well as comparative studies between SHOs and NHSOs. Research from this period allowed to empirically test some of the ideas suggested in older clinical studies, as well as to build a knowledge base on sexual homicide, something that criminology had been reluctant to do [101]. However, these studies were based on relatively small samples that were not representative. For instance, Chan and Heide [105] compared 32 studies on SH from the mid-1980s to 2008 and noticed that there were only six studies which had samples of more than 50 cases and only one with more than 100 cases. Recently, we have entered a period characterized by empirical research based on large and representative samples. Some of the latest studies have been based on samples ranging from 350 to almost 800 cases. In fact, between 2008 and 2015, the number of empirical studies using samples larger than 100 cases increased, with 21 studies of the 48 identified by Chan [106]. These larger and more representative samples of SH cases have permitted obtaining more generalizable findings.

Conclusion

This review highlights a number of findings about the offenders, victims, and the crime commission processes of SHOs. First, international comparisons showed that SH present more similarities than differences across countries, and that the minor differences observed could be explained due to cultural and contextual factors. This result suggests that most of the criminological theories as well as practical implications derived from North American research can be generalized and applied to other countries, even non-Western countries. Second, findings suggest that SHOs are a different type of offender compared with other violent criminals. Various studies suggest that SHOs are characterized by specific criminal careers, developmental factors, and personality disorders, as well as lifestyle characteristics and crime commission processes. As to the etiological factors related to SH, several studies highlight the fact that psychopathy and sadism represent important features of SHOs. Psychopathy and sadism are not only highly prevalent among this population, but they also relate to their crime commission process. Third, the analysis of spatial behavior shows that SHOs follow different mobility patterns, such that some exhibit classical predatory behavior, whereas others follow a more opportunistic pattern. Finally, studies based on different types of victims suggest that there is

a high level of heterogeneity within SHOs, and that SHOs of children are very different from those of adult and elderly victims, with different motivations, characteristics, and crime commission processes. Further research should use larger databases like the *Sexual Homicide International Database* (SHIeID) [13] to replicate findings that were based on smaller and not representative samples. For future research, there is a need to revisit the existing typologies that were based on limited and non-representative sample in order to test their reliability as well as to identify new ones to help police investigations as well as correctional practices.

Moreover, researchers need to focus on specific types of vulnerable victims, such as children and the elderly. Previous findings suggest that they present specific characteristics that influence the crime commission process of SHOs. Finally, future studies need to adopt an integrative approach and empirically test theoretical models of SH. It is time for criminological theories to test whether they can explain this extreme form of violence.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Julien Chopin and Eric Beaugard each declare no potential conflicts of interest.

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