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Contact info:

National.Research@noms.gsi.gov.uk

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Offence Pathways of Sexual Homicide Perpetrators

Ewa Stefanska, Adam Carter and Tamsin Higgs

Offending pathways of sexual homicide perpetrators were explored with a focus on whether the pathways for those with a previous conviction for rape or attempted rape differed from those who had no such convictions. The criteria for sexual homicide was taken from the UK National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Offender Assessment System (OASys) research database, and included murders where a sexual element and/or a sexual motivation was evidenced, suspected or admitted. A total of 129 non-serial male perpetrators of sexual homicide of females where the victim was aged 14 years or over, who had been convicted and served a custodial sentence within UK Prison Service, were included. The analyses used in the study evaluated cognitive problems, sexual and behavioural interests, *modus operandi* and crime scene characteristics. The data was obtained from the Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) databases and the electronic Lifer files held within the Public Protection Unit Database (PPUD).

Key findings

- The study identified three distinct offence pathways: *deviancy, grievance and sexually driven*, which seem to correspond to previously defined types of sexual homicide.
- Offenders in the *deviance driven* group were characterised by a high rate of post-mortem sexual activity. This suggests that the killing was sexually arousing for these perpetrators and that the killing formed an integral part of the offending process.
- Offenders in the *grievance driven* group had a high rate of 'overkill' and were triggered by something that a victim said or did. Some perpetrators in this group were aroused as a response to extreme violence carried out during the crime.
- The killing for the perpetrators in the *sexually driven* group appeared to play an instrumental role and was carried out either to silence the victim or to avoid detection. Offenders with a previous offence for rape/attempted rape clustered significantly into the *sexually driven* group.
- Due to inclusion criteria, this sample may not be representative of all sexual homicide perpetrators.

Introduction

A body of research examining typologies of sexual killing identifies two or three types of sexual homicide (e.g., Beaugregard & Proulx, 2002, Fisher & Beech, 2007), with killing playing a different functional role, depending on the pathway of offending being followed. In addition, studies aiming to understand risk factors related to recidivism and the intervention needs of sexual homicide perpetrators have examined whether they represent a distinct group of sexual offenders. As more similarities than differences have been found between sexual homicide perpetrators and sexual aggressors (e.g., Langevin *et al.*, 1988; Beech, Oliver, Fisher and Beckett, 2005), some scholars have suggested that these offences should be viewed as occurring at the opposite ends of a single continuum with circumstantial violence determining its outcome (Oliver, Beech, Fisher & Beckett, 2007; Salfati & Taylor, 2006). However, comparison studies have generally considered sexual homicides as one group while it could be argued that those who had previously raped would be more closely aligned to the sexual aggressors, as they could be considered sexual aggressors who have killed as a result of circumstantial violence rather than the killing and sexual element having a strong association

The current study aims to explore:

- (1) Whether we can identify offending pathways for sexual homicide in the UK sample in line with existing typology and pathways literature for these perpetrators.
- (2) After controlling for a previous rape and attempted rape conviction, how well does a continuum theory account for pathways of sexual homicide.

Approach

The criteria for sexual homicide was taken from the OASys research database, and included murders where a sexual element and/or a sexual motivation was evidenced, suspected or admitted. Offenders identified were checked against the National SOTP databases (to include offenders who attended treatment and thus, completed pre-treatment assessment) and against PPUD (for the information required to code modus operandi factors). This search yielded a sample size of 150,

out of which 44 had a previous rape or attempted rape offence. As the management information was missing for 21 of the offenders, this resulted in fewer cases (129 in total) being analysed. The data was extracted in 2013 and the sample was identified from information relating to convictions between 1954 and 2012.

The offenders in the final sample, which may not be representative of all sexual homicides, were aged from 18 to 45 years old at the time of offence, with an average age of 26. The majority (94.7%) were White. Approximately two-fifths (41%) were in full-time employment, with 28% classifying themselves as having been unemployed.

The analytical strategy employed Multidimensional Scaling Analysis (MDS) as well as a series of TwoStep cluster analyses and Chi-square analyses to evaluate cognitive problems, sexual and behavioural interests, modus operandi and crime scene characteristics.

Results

The analysis identified three distinct offence pathways, which seem to correspond to previously defined types of sexual homicide (Beaugregard & Proulx, 2002; Proulx, 2008), clinical descriptions published by Clarke and Carter (2000), and closely to the clusters described by Beech *et al.*, (2005).

The first distinct pathway resembles sadistic sexual homicides (labelled *deviance driven* due to a lack of self-reported or phallometric information on sadism) described in previous research. Offenders in this group were characterised by a high rate of post-mortem sexual activity, suggestive that the killing was sexually arousing for these perpetrators. Offenders in the second group termed *grievance driven* (resembling an angry type of sexual homicides) had a high rate of 'overkill' while perpetrators in the *sexually driven* third group appeared to murder the victim for instrumental reasons; either to silence the victim or to avoid detection.

The results suggest that continuum theory proposed by Oliver *et al.*, 2007 and Salfati and Taylor, 2006 is most valid for the sexually driven group, because of the instrumental role played by the killing. The situation is more complex in the grievance driven group as some only thought of

raping after severely beating the victim, which suggests arousal as a response to extreme violence. The killing in the deviance driven group appears to form an integral part of the offending process.

From a clinical standpoint, characteristics of deviant offenders were better defined in behavioural terms, perhaps because men tended to be reluctant to talk about the degree of their problems. Identifying perpetrators in the sexually driven group appeared to be most problematic as their profile was mixed, sharing characteristics of both the deviant and grievance driven groups. However, the incidence of both post-mortem sexual activity and mutilation was very low in this group.

Implications and Conclusions

Similarities between the three groups of sexual homicide found by Beech, Fisher & Ward (2005) and the distinct pathways in the current study add weight to the clinical application of a typology of sexual homicides. The pathways identified can inform case formulation, where they can be used to help identify the motivation for the killing. In terms of treatment, the deviance driven group is more likely to need work controlling and addressing deviant sexual interests including sadism. The grievance driven group could benefit from work on managing their anger and schemas that promote unhelpful and hostile rumination. The sexually motivated deviance driven group could benefit from additional work on offence related sexual interests that are not the focus of primary SOTPs as well as addressing dysfunctional schemas.

The term 'sexual homicides' currently applies to murder or manslaughter where sex is attached to the killing in some way. Arguably, this term might be too broad for research purposes. Given that the sexually driven group tended to perform instrumental violence and did not engage in sadistic behaviour these men may well be more akin to non-homicide sexual aggressors (consistently, almost all offenders with a previous rape conviction clustered in this group), whereas this does not seem to be true for the deviance and grievance driven groups. Arguably, these latter two groups might be more representative of cases where sex and killing are closely bound.

To advance our understanding of sexual homicides and better understand the different role that killing can play in relation to sexual behaviour, more consideration should be given to how we select cases for study and how these criteria can effect the conclusions drawn. For example, excluding offenders with a previous rape conviction when comparing sexual aggressors with sexual homicide perpetrators in the future could help to further understand and identify important characteristics of those perpetrators who kill for sexual enjoyment or as a result of grievance. Excluding offenders for whom the killing only plays an instrumental role could be a helpful next step. A sample of only those perpetrators who engaged in post-mortem sexual interference could be selected because this behaviour is less likely to occur in the context of an instrumental killing to eliminate the only witness to an offence.

Limitations

Data sources were limited to SOTP and PPUD files, which may limit the generalisability of the results. Data sources also varied in their content. Reports were written by various professionals whose focus would have differed depending on their role in the case. However, in practice clinicians also need to overcome a similar problem and in addition are likely to be restricted by incomplete access to reports. This study was able to bring together a range of sources rarely available to clinicians in daily practice therefore improving the reliability of information through corroboration across sources.

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