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The Characteristics of Sexual Sadists

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Abstract

Examination of the traits and characteristics of 36 sexual sadists found that the majority were white males, with a history of violent fantasies. The most common characteristics involved the criminal act itself, such as torture, asphyxiation and bondage. Traumatic childhood experiences and the presence of minor sexual deviations (such as exhibitionism) were relatively rare. Thus, there seemed to be no common etiology in this sample of sexual sadists and little promise of profiling.

Keywords: Sexual sadism; Sexual murder

Introduction

Hazelwood and Michaud [1] noted that the sadist is the most dangerous, destructive, elusive, brutal and cunning of all aberrant offenders, but the etiology of sadism is not well understood, and the behavior is difficult to treat [2]. According to Money [3], sexual sadism is:

…an obsessive and compelling repetition of sexual thoughts, dreams or fantasies that may be translated into acts in which the mental or physical suffering of a victim is intensely sexually arousing. In some instances, the victim is a consenting masochist, and in others a non-consenting stranger who has been abducted or kidnapped (p. 27).

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition Revised (DSM-IV-TR) [4], sexual sadism is a paraphilia defined as:

…recurrent intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges or behaviors involving acts (real, not simulated) over a period of at least six months in which the psychological or physical suffering (including humiliation) of the victim is sexually exciting to the perpetrator. The fantasies, sexual urges, and behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of function (p. 574).

Integral to defining the sexual sadist is the sexual excitation response to another person's suffering. One offender described his response as follows:

…she was withering in pain and I loved it. I was now combining my sexual high of rape and my power high of fear to make a total sum that is now beyond explaining…I was alive for the sole purpose of causing pain and receiving sexual gratification…I was relishing the pain just as much as the sex [5, p. 2].

Sexual sadists differ in the degree of sadism [6], and some researchers dichotomize this into minor sadism (e.g., humiliation of the victim and degrading acts) and major sadism (e.g., torture and murder). Sexual sadists may also comprise several types. For example, Siomopoulos and Goldsmith [7] proposed several types of sexual sadism, including sexual sadism accompanied by altered states of consciousness and sexual sadism committed by individuals suffering from psychoses. Hucker [8] differentiated between lust murder, forms of mutilation of corpses accompanying necrophilia, the intentional infliction of injuries to persons such as stabbing, the intentional defilement of persons, symbolic sadism which includes such practices as cutting hair from a victim without direct infliction of injury, sadistic fantasies without actual acting out, the use of objects such as whips, and sadistic acts inflicted upon animals.

There have been studies describing the characteristics of samples of offenders. For example, Mitchell and Aamodt [9] explored the incidence of child abuse in a sample of fifty lust murderers. Among their sample, 36% had been physically abused, 26% sexually abused and 50% psychologically abused in childhood, compared to the incidence in the general population of 6% physical abuse, 3% sexual abuse and 2% psychological abuse.

Among the 36 sex killers studied by Burgess, Hartman, Ressler, Douglas and McCormack [10],

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28% killed as juveniles and 50% came from abusive homes. Untreated childhood trauma may enhance the sadist's feelings of helplessness and, as a result, the sadists develop violent fantasies in which they have control in order to acquire some semblance of power. The same study also found a positive correlation between chaotic life histories and meticulously organized crime scenes of their crimes.

In their study of sexually sadistic murderers, Ressler, Burgess and Douglas [11] found 92% of their sample was Caucasian. The majority had family histories of psychiatric problems and drug abuse, and personal histories of abuse including sexual, physical and psychological abuse. For the majority, a paraphilic disorder was present. There is the presence of fantasizing followed by compulsive masturbation and criminal acts that were not of a sexual nature, such as stealing or assaulting children and small animals. Finally, there was a presence of a disillusioned or negative body image which could contribute to their need to control others when they could not control themselves on a personal level.

Several researchers have proposed lists of traits of the sexual sadist. According to Geberth and Turco [12], the organized sexual sadist:

- Is above average intelligence.
- Is methodical and cunning.
- Commits crimes that are carefully planned and well thought out.
- Often owns their own car.
- Usually do not commit crimes in or around their home or workplace and can travel many miles in committing their crimes.
- Engages in fantasy and ritual.
- Selects the victims according to certain characteristics such as the expectation that they are easy to control through power and manipulation.
- Chooses victims who are strangers.
- Is socially adept and uses his charisma and personality to lure the victim.

Given these prior studies and suggested lists of traits, the purpose of this study was to compile a comprehensive profile of the criminal sexual sadist based upon this previous research.

Method

Variables

Previous commentators and researchers were identified from a literature search, and the characteristics and traits of sexual sadists which have been proposed and identified were listed. The variables chosen for the present study are shown in Table 1.

Offenders

Mike DeBardeleben, Robert Leroy Anderson, Malcolm Malone, Michael Bruce Ross and Gerard Schaeffer were identified from Hazelwood and Michaud [1]. The other thirty-one subjects included in the sample were found using the Internet using search engines such as Google and Academic Search Premier with the words "sadism," "sadist" or "sexual sadist." Through Academic Search Premier, two articles with case studies of sexual sadists were found: Joseph Fredericks and an unnamed subject. Crimlibrary.com identified the following individuals whose data on crimlibrary.com were supplemented by a book found for each individual: Bob Berdella, Paul Bernardo, Kenneth Bianci, Jerry Brudos, Ted Bundy, Angelo Buono, Hadden Clark, Jeffrey Dahmer, Wesley Allan Dodd, Theo Durrant, John Wayne Gacy, Harvey Glatman, Jesse Pomeroy, Joel Rifkin, William Howard Suff, and Christopher Wilder. The following six individuals were also found using crimelibrary.com but each case was supplemented with information from The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers [13]: Lawrence Bittaker, Albert DeSalvo, Theo Durrant, Randy Steven Kraft, Roy Norris, and Melvin Rees. Five individuals were found using crimelibrary.com but each case was supplemented with information found using Lexis Nexis: Peter Dupas, Cameron Hooker, Peter Kurten, Leonard Lake, and Charles Ng. The data for Herb Baumeister, came from crimelibrary.com. Finally, data for David Parker Ray and John Edward Robinson were obtained from Glatt [14,15]. The list of 36 offenders is shown in the Appendix.

Results

The percentages of offenders with each of the 53 proposed traits and characteristics are shown in Table 1. It can be seen that several of the proposed variables were frequently present in this sample of sexual sadists. Those variables occurring in 75% or more of the offenders were: white, male, violent fantasies, and violent theme collection. For the act itself, the commonly occurring variables were: careful planning, con approach, preselected location, victim bound, use of torture kit, variety of sexual acts, penile vaginal penetration, sexual ritual, intended torture, asphyxiation, trophies and concealed corpse.

At the other extreme, several of the proposed variables were rarely found. Those occurring in less than 25% of the offenders were: in utero alcohol exposure, parental infidelity/divorce, scatalogia (obscene speech, especially obscene telephone calls), exhibitionism, interest in security or law enforcement, and use of police impersonation. This is not to say that no sexual sadists can be found who have these traits, but only that these traits were not very common.

Discussion

The present analysis has produced mixed results. Some of the variables proposed by previous researchers were found to be frequently present in the present sample of 36 sexual sadists (present in 75% of the sample or more), while others were uncommon (present in 25% of the sample or less). Interestingly, the majority of the frequently occurring variables involved the commission of the act itself, but this may be a consequence of the definition of a sexual sadist. Because sadism is part of the definition, sadistic acts will obviously be present for most of the offenders.

Surprisingly, developmental and psychological variables were not especially common in this sample of sexual sadists. With the exception of psychological abuse (occurring in 70% of the sample), other forms of abuse and neglect were found in less than half of the sample (34% to 44%). Substance abuse, psychosis and head trauma/brain dysfunction was present in roughly a third of the sample (29% to 39%), and minor sexual deviations such as voyeurism, exhibitionism and scatalogia, were even less common (3% to 34%).

These results suggest that profiling sexual sadists in general may be difficult. They share very few personal characteristics, and some sexual sadists may have characteristics that are unusual (such as in utero exposure to alcohol) and not applicable to the majority of

Table 1:

Variable	Source	% present
Childhood Factors		
Physical abuse	Gratzer & Bradford [18]	42%
Sexual abuse	Hall et al. [19]	34%
Psychological abuse	Hall et al. [19]	70%
Neglect	Hall et al. [19]	44%
Other threats of injury	Hall et al. [19]	38%
Abandonment	Hall et al. [19]	38%
In utero alcohol exposure	Hazelwood & Michaud [1]	9%
Offender Characteristics		
Gender (male)	Dietz et al. [16]	100%
Race (white)	Hucker [8]	94%
Middle class	Gratzer & Bradford [18]	67%
Parental infidelity/divorce	Hall et al. [19]	24%
Stable employment	Hazelwood & Michaud [1]	42%
Homosexual experience	Hucker [8]	26%
Paraphilic voyeurism	Hucker [8]	34%
Scatalogia	Gratzer & Bradford [18]	3%
Exhibitionism	Gratzer & Bradford [18]	21%
Multiple paraphilias	Gratzer & Bradford [18]	81%
Violent fantasies	Egan et al. [17]	100%
Compliant victims	Dietz et al. [16]	36%
Married	Gratzer & Bradford [18]	49%
Post high school education	Gratzer & Bradford [18]	57%
Drug/alcohol abuse	Langevin [6]	29%
Violent theme collection	Dietz et al. [16]	79%
Interest in security/law enf	Dietz et al. [16]	25%
Psychotic symptoms	Langevin [6]	39%
Prior arrest	Dietz et al. [16]	69%
Head trauma/brain malfunct	Hucker et al. [20]	32%
Offense Characteristics		
Careful planning	Hazelwood [5]	94%
Police impersonation	Hazelwood & Michaud [1]	21%
Con approach	Dietz et al. [16]	81%
Preselected location	Gratzer & Bradford [18]	100%
Victim bound	Meloy [22]	97%
Blindfolded	Meloy [22]	50%
Gagged	Meloy [22]	58%
Use of torture kit	Geberth & Turco [12]	86%
Sexual bondage	Hazelwood et al. [5]	42%
Anal intercourse	Meloy [22]	71%
Forced fellatio	Meloy [22]	62%
Foreign object penetration	Hazelwood et al. [5]	53%
Variety of sexual acts	Meloy [22]	94%
Penile vaginal penetration	Meloy [22]	91%
Necrophilia	MacCulloch et al. (2000)	26%
Verbal behavior/scripting	Burgess et al. (1986)	60%
Sexual ritual	Burgess et al. (1986)	75%
Intended torture	Gratzer & Bradford [18]	97%
Asphyxiation	Dietz et al. [16]	83%
Stabbing	Geberth & Turco [12]	50%
Postmortem mutilation	MacCulloch et al. [21]	47%
Trophies	Geberth & Turco [12]	88%
Partner	Hazelwood & Michaud [1]	35%
Concealed corpse	Geberth & Turco [12]	94%
Recorded offenses	Meloy [22]	71%
Single state	Hazelwood & Michaud [1]	67%

sexual sadists. The most common characteristics identified pertain to the criminal act itself, and the signs of these acts may be readily apparent from the crime scene and are congruent with the label of sexual sadist. It may, however, be possible to gather a large enough sample of sexual sadists with available information in order to carry out a cluster analysis of variables which could identify several types of sexual sadists.

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