

The Lust to Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder,
by Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer (New York: New
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Take my wife . . . please!

Henny Youngman

Do not all passions require victims?

Marquis de Sade

In a recent article in the periodical *Violence and Victims*, two researchers reviewed findings of the past 15 years regarding female victimization. They concluded that the strongest precipitant of violence toward women is simply their being women.¹ One out of five women has been attacked physically by a male partner at least once,² and these attacks have resulted in more injuries to the victims than have attacks by strangers.³

Is misogyny endemic to American and Western European culture? Is hatred of women a cultural expectation for the construction of masculine identity? Is the extreme expression of female hatred—sexual murder—pathognomonic of this socio-cultural aberration?

The Lust to Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder is both a disturbing and an illuminating book. It gnaws at your sensibilities, particularly if you happen to be male. It is especially troublesome if you are a psychoanalytically oriented male psychologist, as I am, for it forces you to reconsider certain aspects of the psychodynamic model of deviancy. It pleads and argues for a broader perspective—a socio-cultural perspective—toward a behavior that few relish thinking about: sexual murder.

The Lust to Kill, written by two English feminist sociologists, is a well-conceived and thoughtful analysis of sexual murder. As the authors note in their preface, they adopt a “consciously interdisciplinary focus” that provides an alternative account of existing explanations of sexual murder. The book is a commentary on secondary material, and admittedly the authors have never actually interviewed anyone convicted of sexual murder. Yet they discount this drawback, arguing that even the personal comments of a sexual murderer are only “a constructed text” dependent upon “codes of culture” to give it meaning. They assert that the relationship between murder and any discussion of it is very close—that cultural processes of “representation” shape both murder and our understanding of it.

As a psychoanalytic theorist, I find their focus on “representation” and “meaning” of considerable interest. Though they are concerned with the socio-cultural implications of these terms and I with the intrapsychic construction and expression of them, we share an interest in the *reason* for these unusual, yet highly destructive, behaviors.

The authors define sexual, or lust, murder as behavior motivated by sadistic sexual impulses. “What is important is the eroticization of the act of killing in and for itself.” (p. 18) It is the killing of the object of sexual desire. I have never seen a better, more succinct definition of sexual homicide. They explore the history of sexual murder in some detail, and observe that although the behavior is traceable to at least the 15th century, it was not until the late 19th century that it became a distinct category. They conclude the *Introduction* by arguing that explanations of sexual murder have mistakenly emphasized individual deviancy, whereas the facts suggest that lust murder is a product of both social structure and power differentials. The salient question for the authors is: Why do men, as a group, want to hurt and kill the objects of

their sexual desire? The rest of the book is an attempt to answer this question in terms of the lust murderer as hero, deviant, and misogynist.

The murderer as hero: The authors define a "hero" as the "chief male character in a book or play," and in a chapter titled "The Murderer as Hero" they search for the origins of the sexual murderer as a cultural "folk devil." They find the roots of this cultural phenomenon in the sensational yet moralistic "true crime" tabloids, the Gothic literature of the 18th and 19th centuries, highlighted by the writings of the Marquis de Sade and by the clinical model of the sexual murderer as a social and sexual deviant.

This chapter explores in fascinating detail material that few psychologists and psychiatrists would bother to consider. I was particularly impressed by the authors' analysis of the criminal tabloids, originally called *broad-sides*, that were sold at fairs and other public gatherings beginning in the 16th century. Today such magazines focus simply upon murder; but they still emphasize sexual murder as a product of sin, rather than of social or psychiatric sickness. These magazines emphasize the need for retributive punishment,⁴ yet they also meet the reader's desire for voyeuristic titillation. Cameron and Frazer found that most readers of these criminal tabloids are women between the ages of 44 and 54. Their tentative explanation of this rather astonishing fact is the female's "ambiguous relation to the pleasures and dangers of transgression." (p. 50) She perceives herself as merely an "eavesdropper on a dialogue really intended for men." (p. 51)

The authors conclude the chapter by finding that there are two kinds of sexual murder "heroes": the "fiend, beast, or monster" and the "libertine or rebel." Both of these versions of the sexual murderer reassure the populace that the sexual murderer is different, a breed apart, someone who is con-

summarily evil. The authors find this explanation inadequate, however, when issues of gender, power, and historical specificity are considered.

The murderer as deviant: The third chapter of the book attempts to analyze the deficiencies of the biological, psychological, and sociological models of deviancy concerning the sexual murderer. Unfortunately, this is the weakest chapter in the book. For one thing, the authors' scientific references are quite dated, and they have failed to cite some of the most widely known researchers in these fields, particularly in biology and psychology.

In a subsection entitled "Criminality and the Brain," two of the three studies cited were published in the 1950s. The authors write: "Subsequent research does not associate EEG abnormality with disorders of behavior." (p. 78) This statement is patently false. Lorne Yeudall, who uses power spectral analysis of activated EEG recordings, has written extensively on the EEG abnormalities of both "persistent delinquents" and psychopaths.⁵ The research of Robert Monroe and his colleagues concerning the episodic dyscontrol syndrome and its relationship to EEG abnormalities and criminality is also completely ignored.⁶ There is not one reference in the chapter to the extensive research of Frank Ervin, John Lion, and Dorothy Lewis concerning violent behavior, neurological abnormality and criminality.⁷ The authors conclude this subsection with a provocative and highly debatable statement: "However illuminating a biological account might be, it will never enlighten us about sexual murder." (p. 81) Is this critical analysis, or unfounded opinion?

The authors' discussion of relevant psychological findings is even more troublesome. They review the literature on the psychopathic personality by focusing on an obscure psychiatric text by Michael Craft written 22 years ago.⁸ Then they make misstatements that betray their ignorance of the field:

“There is no international agreement on the diagnosis of psychopathy . . . quests for the underlying cause of psychopathy not only fail to give any positive results, they are confounded in any case by the prevailing definitional confusion.” (pp. 88–89) The authors are obviously unaware of the classic work of Hervey Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity*.⁵ Nor, indeed, do they seem aware of the subsequent research of psychologist Robert Hare, who, during the past 20 years, has empirically defined the disorder in a reliable and valid manner and has repeatedly replicated the neurophysiological fact that psychopaths, as a group, have a peripheral autonomic nervous system that is hyporeactive.¹⁰

Perhaps the most ironic statement in this chapter is the authors’ criticism of the theory that males have stronger aggressive drives than females. They write: “There are some writers who resort to mere biologism in the style of Krafft-Ebing. Men have stronger aggressive drives. . . . We have already explained why this sort of proposal is quite unsatisfactory on every possible level.” (p. 101) Unsatisfactory to the authors, perhaps, but still scientifically accurate! The researchers who carefully reviewed the literature and concluded that aggressiveness represents one of the few biological differences between the sexes were two female psychologists of feminist persuasion. Their text has since become a classic, yet it was completely overlooked by these authors.¹¹

It is unfortunate that this chapter is so weak, for it detracts from the authors’ credibility as thorough researchers and thoughtful analysts. Not only have they not done their homework, which is essential if you are going to critique branches of science, but they have also fallen prey to a false dichotomy: the idea that there is *either* a psychobiological explanation of sexual murder *or* a sociological explanation of it. I found this disheartening, because it ignores the much more tenable hypothesis that sexual murder is a multidetermined behavior that has biological, psychological *and* socio-

cultural contributions.¹² Instead of adding what I consider an important socio-cultural factor—misogyny—to the existing research literature concerning the psychobiology of violence, the authors seem to believe that they must discredit the latter as if only one dimension of human experience is valid: feminist sociology. Sexual murder, in my opinion, is a biopsychosocial phenomenon; and each discipline has important contributions to make.

Fortunately, the authors redeem themselves in the next chapter of the book in which they discuss case histories of sexual murder. Specifically, they consider the change and continuity apparent in the killings of Jack the Ripper and the Yorkshire Ripper, two serial prostitute-killers who committed their acts nearly a century apart; the assumption of the *identity* of a sexual murderer, apparent in the 1966 “moors murders” of Ian Brady and Myra Hindley; the malignant narcissism present in the homosexual murders and necrophilia of Dennis Nilson, who between 1978 and 1983 strangled to death 16 young men in his London flat; and the peculiarly American phenomenon of serial killing and its aspects of mobility, frustration, and anomie. This engrossing chapter vividly illustrates the authors’ arguments that sexual murder is not just the extreme expression of misogyny, but also underscores the socio-cultural fact that “desire itself has been masculinized, made dependent on dichotomies of self and other . . . which presupposes some version of the . . . hierarchy, male:female . . . deeply marked by the historical realities of gender and power.” (p. 144) Women are cast in roles that reflect the dichotomous perception of them as examples of either “spotless innocence” or “essential wickedness.” Indeed, male desires seem to be socially constructed in ways that define women as *repositories* of sex.

The murderer as misogynist: The final chapter of *The Lust to Kill* is a summary and further explication of arguments put forth elsewhere in the book. The authors conclude that sexual murder is more than just the extreme expression of a

socially constructed misogyny. It is also the most extreme expression of masculine transcendence—that is, a self-affirming act of masculine identity.

What does vary in sexual killing is the gender of the victim. Homosexual males sometimes emerge as the targeted victims. What does *not* vary in sexual murder is the gender of the perpetrator, who is virtually always male. It is within this social construction of masculine sexuality that the causes of sexual murder coalesce: misogyny, transcendence, and sadistic sexuality. The motifs of this masculine sexuality are performance, penetration and conquest, and their most extreme expression is found in the aberration we term “sexual murder.”

This book is a very well written sociological argument for the importance of masculine identity in sexual murder. Its emphasis upon the concept of misogyny as a central socio-cultural factor in sexual murder establishes the importance of the book for forensic professionals.

However, the book is flawed. The most obvious drawback has already been mentioned: the very limited and out-of-date review of biological and psychological research concerning criminality and violence. As also mentioned, the authors' arguments often posit a false dichotomy that disparages the work of those in related fields and detracts from their own important contributions.

Most telling, perhaps, is a criticism that can be leveled at any sociological argument that attempts to explain uncommon behavior such as sexual murder. The critique is that the authors cannot account for false positives, given the narrowness of their theory. If misogyny, masculine transcendence, and sadistic sexuality are ubiquitous in American and West European culture, how can it be that most adult males *do not* sexually murder? And assuming that the research referenced at the beginning of this review is accurate, how can one

explain why 80% of males have never physically assaulted their spouses? The answer is to be found, of course, in the concept of individual differences—a concept that can be studied most usefully by employing the scientific disciplines that the authors criticize: biology and psychology. In fact, Hans Eysenck, a well-known British psychologist and researcher whom the authors disparage, has continually emphasized that human behavior can be understood only if we study and appreciate *both* individual differences and normative group behavior. Cameron and Frazer, however, seem unwilling to appreciate the biopsychosocial complexity of human behavior, even though their socio-cultural contribution warrants our attention. I think they would find ideological comfort, and even scientific merit, in the writing of novelist Harry Mathews:

Some males claim to dislike women, others to like them, but all share an original, undying fear. Every man is irrationally and overwhelmingly convinced that woman, having created him, can destroy him as well. Men are all sexual bigots. The distinction between dislike and like only separates those who resist women's power by attacking them from those who try to exorcise it through adoration and submission.¹³

Notes

1. Hotelling, G. & Sugarman, D., "An analysis of risk markers in husband to wife violence: the current state of the knowledge," *Violence and Victims*, 1:101-124 (1986).
2. Straus, M. & Gelles, R., "Societal change and change in family violence from 1975 to 1985," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 48 (1986).
3. Browne, A., *When Battered Women Kill* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 5.
4. A most compelling argument for the necessity of proportional retribution in our criminal justice system is found in Susan Jacoby's *Wild Justice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).
5. See Yeudall, L., Fromm-Auch, M., & Davis, P., "Neuropsychological impairment of persistent delinquency." *J. of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 170:257-265 (1982); Yeudall, L., Fedora, O., & Fromm, D., "A neuropsychological theory of persistent criminality: implications for assessment and treatment." *Alberta Hospital*,

Edmonton, Dept. of Neuropsychology and Research Bulletin #97 (1984).

6. Monroe, R., *Episodic Behavioral Disorders: A Psychodynamic and Neurophysiologic Analysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).
7. See, e.g., Lewis, D. O. et al., "Biopsychosocial characteristics of children who later murder: a prospective study," *American J. Psychiatry*, 142:1161-67 (1985).
8. Craft, M., *Psychopathic Disorders* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1966).
9. Cleckley, H., *The Mask of Sanity* (New York: New American Library, 1982).
10. See Hare, R., "Twenty years of experience with the Cleckley psychopath," in W. Reid, D. Dorr, J. Walker, & J. Bonner, eds., *Unmasking the Psychopath: Antisocial Personality and Related Syndromes* (New York: Norton, 1986).
11. Maccoby, E. & Jacklin, C., *The Psychology of Sex Differences* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974).
12. See, e.g., Holmes, R. & DeBurger, J., *Serial Murder* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1988).
13. Mathews, H., *Cigarettes* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987).