

A Rorschach Investigation of Sexual Homicide

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A sample of incarcerated sexual homicide perpetrators ($n = 18$) were compared to a sample of non-sexually offending but violent male psychopaths ($n = 23$) on select Rorschach variables using the Comprehensive System (Exner, 1991). Results suggest that sexual homicide perpetrators are similar to psychopaths in their attachment abnormality, characterological anger, pathological narcissism, moderate and pervasive formal thought disorder, and borderline reality testing. They are distinguished, however, by a more frequent affectional hunger, a tendency to engage in more dysphoric rumination, and abnormal elevations of nonvolitional ideation (obsessional thoughts) due to unmet instinctual need states. They also show a greater interest in others as whole, real, and meaningful objects. Five psychodynamic factors, supported by the empirical findings, are proposed to partially explain the intrapsychic mechanisms involved in an act of sexual homicide.

Sexual homicide is the intentional killing of another human being during which there is evidence of sexual activity by the perpetrator. Although not identified as a paraphilia in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., rev. [DSM-IV]; American Psychiatric Association, in press), sexual homicide has recently been categorized as one of four motivational types of homicide (Douglas, Burgess, Burgess, & Ressler, 1992).

Clinical case studies of sexual homicide date back to Krafft-Ebing (1886). Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas (1988), in the largest group study to date ($N = 36$), found that the majority of perpetrators were raised in families in which sexual abnormality, criminal history, and psychiatric disturbance were common. They also found a significant frequency ($> 50\%$) of daydreaming, compulsive masturbation, isolation, chronic lying, enuresis, rebelliousness, nightmares, destroying property, fire setting, stealing, cruelty to children, and poor body image in the perpetrators' childhood and adolescent histories.

A study of the sexual homicide perpetrator through the use of standardized psychological testing has not been done. We decided to investigate the structural personality characteristics of a sample of incarcerated individuals who had committed at least one sexual homicide to understand better their internal psychological operations. We tested the null hypothesis that individuals who commit a sexual homicide share the same personality structure as psychopaths.

The Rorschach was selected as our investigative tool, given its reliability and validity (Exner, 1986) in studying criminal populations (Gacono & Meloy, 1992). A comparison group of non-sexually offending psychopaths was chosen for the following reasons: the popular belief that all individuals who commit sexual homicide are "psychopaths," the reliability and validity of an instrument to measure psychopathy (Hare, 1991), extant Rorschach research concerning psychopaths (Gacono & Meloy, 1992) and normal adults (Exner, 1991), and the elimination of confounding paraphiliac attributes in an otherwise criminal and violent male comparison group.

METHOD

The sexual homicide sample ($n = 18$) Rorschach protocols were gathered nonrandomly through the two senior authors' clinical and forensic practices (11 protocols) and solicited from three other colleagues, one male and two female psychologists (7 protocols). All Rorschachs were administered between 1986 and 1992 to individuals convicted and incarcerated in various prisons and forensic hospitals in California, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia. The only criteria for inclusion in the sexual homicide sample were positive evidence that a sexual homicide had been committed and the production of a valid Rorschach protocol (Exner, 1991) following incarceration. Positive evidence included physical evidence of sexual assault of the victim; sexual activity in close proximity to the victim, such as masturbation; or a legally admissible confession of sexual activity by the perpetrator. We purposefully did not exclude individuals on the basis of mental retardation, mental illness, or neurological impairment to accurately represent the probable heterogeneity of this population. None of the subjects, however, were psychotic at the time of testing or judged to be mentally retarded ($IQ < 70$) by the examiners.

The Rorschachs for the psychopathic comparison group ($n = 23$) were randomly drawn from a large Rorschach sample of convicted and incarcerated antisocial personality-disordered (*DSM-IV*) men ($n = 82$) described previously (Gacono & Meloy, 1991). This entire sample was assembled from various prisons and hospitals in California during the years 1984–1992. In order to be considered a non-sexually offending psychopath, each subject had to score 30 or higher on the Hare Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL–R, Hare, 1991) and not be incarcerated for a sexual offense. The PCL–R is a reliable and valid measure of psychopathy determined by a clinical interview and extensive record review. Approximately one third of antisocial personality-disordered men (*DSM-IV*) will meet the quantitative threshold (≥ 30) on this instrument to be considered a psychopath for research purposes (Hare, 1991). Unfortunately, we did not have PCL–R scores for the sexual homicide perpetrators. The comparison subjects were free of a diagnosis of mental retardation, mental illness, or organic mental disorder as determined by clinical interview and records review.

All Rorschachs for both groups were administered using the Comprehensive System (Exner, 1986), and descriptive statistics were generated using the Rorschach Scoring Program–Version 2 (Exner, Cohen, & McGuire, 1990). Interrater reliabilities for the PCL–R scores and Rorschach scores for the comparison group were previously determined (Gacono & Meloy, 1992) and judged satisfactory. Interrater reliability for the sexual homicide Rorschachs was determined by the first two authors independently scoring the protocols and calculating percentage of agreements. Select Rorschach variables were compared between groups based on previous research (Gacono & Meloy, 1991, 1992; Gacono, Meloy, & Heaven, 1990; Meloy & Gacono, 1992) and theory (Gacono, 1992; Meloy, 1988) and were clustered according to affects, cognitions, self-perception, and object relations. Variables were nonparametric and tested using either Mann–Whitney U (means comparison) or chi-square (frequency comparison). They were considered significantly different if $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics of the samples are compared in Table 1.

The sexual homicide sample is descriptively older than the psychopathic sample, and contains two female subjects. Ethnicity of the groups appears comparable, although unlike other incarcerated populations in the United States, most perpetrators of sexual homicide are White. Education appears comparable.

The sexual homicide sample accounted for the deaths of at least 30 victims, most of whom were stranger women, consistent with other research (Ressler et al., 1988). None of the victims were married or cohabiting with the perpetrators. Twenty-two percent of the sample ($n = 4$) committed more than one sexual homicide.

TABLE 1
Demographic Data for Sexual Homicide Perpetrators and Non-Sexually Offending Psychopaths

Variable	Sexual Homicide Perpetrators ^a	Psychopaths ^b
Age	35.3 (18-53)	29.7 (18-43)
Education	12.3 years	10.7 years
Male	89%	100%
Female	11%	0%
White	78%	61%
Black	11%	22%
Hispanic	6%	13%
Other/unknown	5%	4%

^a*n* = 18. ^b*n* = 23.

TABLE 2
Comparison of Select Rorschach Variables Between Sexual Homicide Perpetrators and Primary Psychopaths

Variable	Sexual Homicide Perpetrators ^a			Primary Psychopaths ^b			<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Frequency	Mean	SD	Frequency	
Responses	30.00	13.91	18	19.04	5.93	23	.0058 ^c
Affects							
<i>T</i>	1.17	2.23	7	.09	.29	2	
<i>T</i> = 0			11			21	.05 ^d
<i>T</i> > 1			5			0	.026 ^d
<i>V</i>	0.94	1.39	10	0.35	0.49	8	.18 ^c
<i>Space</i>	2.72	1.78	17	2.48	1.78	20	
<i>FM</i>	6.11	3.60	16	2.87	1.74	21	.0019 ^c
Cognitions							
<i>WSum6</i>	23.17	19.12	16	14.22	13.01	20	
<i>X</i> - %	21	12	17	20	10	23	
Self-Perception							
<i>Rf</i>	0.94	1.06	9	0.65	0.98	9	
<i>PER</i>	3.28	3.85	14	2.09	1.86	17	
Object Relations							
<i>All H</i>	7.00	3.22	18	4.26	2.09	23	.0029 ^c
<i>COP</i> > 2			5			0	.007 ^d

Note. Variables without *p* were not tested for significance. Frequency is the number of subjects who produced at least one of the variables, unless otherwise noted.

^a*n* = 18. ^b*n* = 23. ^cMann-Whitney *U*. ^dChi-square.

Spearman's rho was .94 for interjudge reliability of the PCL-R for the comparison group (Gacono & Meloy, 1992). Percentages of agreement for the Rorschach scoring for the sexual homicide group were as follows: Location 99.3%, Developmental Quality 99.0%, Determinants 90.2%, Form Quality 99.3%, Content 96.8%, Z Score 98.7%, Special Scores 94.7%, and Total Agreement (for all variables) 85.5%.

Results of comparison of the Rorschach variables are listed in Table 2.

Total Responses

The sexual homicide sample produced significantly more Rorschach responses than did the primary psychopath sample ($p = .0058$). Because the frequency of many variables is dependent on R , differences are discussed with this limitation in mind. When significantly greater frequency of a particular variable is produced by the group with fewer overall responses, it strongly suggests the characterological influence of the variable (Gacono & Meloy, 1992).

Affects

Texture (T) responses, a measure of attachment capacity, were more frequently present, $\chi^2(1, N = 41) = 3.76, p = .05$, in the sexual homicide sample (39%) than in the psychopathic sample (9%). Twenty-eight percent of the sexual homicide sample also produced T greater than 1, an abnormal finding in nonpatient populations that suggests a bimodal distribution for this variable among sexual homicide perpetrators. Elevated T (> 1), a measure of attachment hunger, was completely absent in the psychopathic controls, $\chi^2(1, N = 41) = 4.91, p = .026$.

Vista (V) responses, a measure of dysphoric or painful introspection, were not significantly different between the groups, but an apparent trend is suggested in the direction of the sexual homicide sample producing more ($M = 0.94, SD = 1.39, p = .18$).

Space responses (S), a measure of characterological anger or chronic negativism when S is greater than 2, were found to be similar for both groups and clinically elevated in the predicted direction.

Animal movement (FM) responses, a measure of nonvolitional ideation (obsessional thoughts) resulting from unmet instinctual need states, were significantly greater in the sexual homicide sample than in the psychopathic sample ($M = 6.11, SD = 3.6, p = .0019$).

Cognitions

The $WSum6$ score, a weighted measure of formal thought disorder, was clinically elevated in both samples with a trend in the direction of a greater amount, and more variance, in the sexual homicide sample ($M = 23.17, SD = 19.12$). The $X-\%$, a measure of reality-testing impairment, was grossly elevated and virtually the same in both groups.

Self-Perception

The Reflection response (Rf), a measure of pathological narcissism, appeared with clinically elevated frequency ($Rf > 0$) in both the sexual homicide (50%) and psychopathic (39%) samples. The Personal (PER) response,

a measure of self-aggrandizement in forensic populations (Gacono et al., 1990), was also elevated (> 2) and similar in both samples, with greater variance among the sexual homicide perpetrators ($M = 3.28, SD = 3.85$).

Object Relations

The sexual homicide sample produced significantly more human content (*All H*), a general measure of interest in others, than the psychopathic sample ($M = 7.0, SD = 3.22, p = .0029$). The sexual homicide sample also showed a greater frequency (28%) of cooperative movement responses (*COP* > 2), a measure of the expectation of cooperative human interaction, than the psychopathic sample, which showed none: $\chi^2(1, N = 41) = 7.28, p = .007$.

DISCUSSION

Perpetrators of sexual homicide evidence abnormal personality structure when select Rorschach variables are used to measure affects, cognitions, self-perception, and object relations. Our sexual homicide sample generally showed more variance within Rorschach variables than did a comparative sample of non-sexually offending psychopaths. This finding may be related to our choice to define a population for study on the basis of one extreme behavior, sexual homicide.

The remarkable response productivity of the sexual homicide sample, almost two standard deviations greater than the mean for nonpatient men ($M = 23.2, SD = 4.44$; Exner, 1991) confounds the findings of this study. Perusal of the data, however, indicated no gender-specific differences that would contribute to elevated *R* on the part of either the two female examiners or the two female subjects.

Nearly 50% of the explainable variance in Rorschach data is accounted for by the number of responses (Meyer, 1992). Increased responses, however, were interpretively expected in this study. Although the psychological operations of psychopaths facilitate rapid discharge of unmodulated affect and primitive impulse, and bolster grandiosity, sexual homicide perpetrators seem to contain, and then be overwhelmed, at times, by such affect and impulse. Their defensive operations appear to function in a less efficient manner, and they exert less control over the number of Rorschach responses as intrapsychic material presses for expression. Nevertheless, the structural findings are suggestive of certain characteristics of sexual homicide perpetrators when compared to a psychopathic sample.

Eighty-nine percent of the sexual homicide sample evidence abnormal bonding or attachment capacities ($T >> 1$). A portion of these individuals, however, are hungry for attachment, rather than detached, in contrast to the psychopaths, who are almost always chronically emotionally detached

(Gacono & Meloy, 1991). Both groups are strikingly different from nonpatient men where normative attachment ($T = 1$) is evident in 88% of the population (Exner, 1991). These findings further support the contributory factor of early childhood attachment problems in sexual homicide perpetrators (Ressler et al., 1988).

Both psychopaths and sexual homicide perpetrators appear to engage in dysphoric introspection (V), at least after incarceration, to a greater degree than do normal men ($M = .24$, $SD = .61$; Exner, 1991), and there is a trend toward more dysphoric rumination in the sexual homicide sample. This may be akin to failed grandiosity and self-pity, as we previously hypothesized (Gacono & Meloy, 1992). This affective process, however, coexists with chronic characterological anger and negativism toward others ($S > 2$) in both samples, in contrast to the infrequent presence (13%) of this variable in nonpatient men (Exner, 1991). Chronic anger appears to be a structural characteristic of sexual homicide perpetrators, often manifest in crime scene behavior (Geberth, 1990; Ressler et al., 1988), but this emotion does not distinguish them from psychopaths. These negative affects may also be a result of incarceration, but we think not. Further research is needed.

A most striking difference between the groups is the suggestive data that sexual homicide perpetrators experience significantly more nonvolitional ideation (obsessional thoughts) because of the press of instinctual unmet need states (FM) than do psychopaths. In fact, the psychopaths experience less of this than do normal men ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.09$; Exner, 1991). This unwanted ideation may be accompanied by unpleasant affect and may motivate a common antecedent behavior, such as drug and alcohol use prior to the sexual homicide, to dampen such thoughts (Ressler et al., 1988). Psychopaths, on the other hand, seem much more able to discharge affect and avoid this ideational "noise" in ways that support their generally alloplastic character (Fenichel, 1945; Meloy, 1988). This finding is also consistent with the sexual homicide literature, which has repeatedly mentioned the obsessive-compulsive nature of sexual homicide, particularly serial sexual homicide (Revitch & Schlesinger, 1981).

The two measures of cognitive functioning are abnormal in both groups. Although there is a trend toward more thought disorder ($WSum6$) in the sexual homicide sample, when we eliminated the two most extreme scores (both men), the mean dropped to 17.22, with a standard deviation of 12.26, only slightly more than that of the psychopaths. Both groups, however, showed moderate and pervasive formal thought disorder when compared to nonpatient men ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 3.04$) not unlike antisocial personality-disordered men ($M = 17.12$, $SD = 13.83$; Gacono & Meloy, 1991) but far less than inpatient schizophrenics ($M = 44.69$, $SD = 35.40$; Exner, 1991). The quality of the thought disorders is somewhat different. The sexual homicide sample shows evidence of more frequently redundant, circumstantial, and irrelevant thoughts than the psychopaths and a somewhat greater frequency of clearly bizarre (Level 2) associations (44% vs. 30%). These findings provide empirical support for the deviant

cognitive mapping and processing hypothesized as one motivational aspect of sexual homicide (Ressler et al., 1988).

The reality testing ($X-\%$) of both groups is likewise seriously impaired. It is much worse than that of normal men ($M = 7, SD = 5$; Exner, 1991), almost the same as that of antisocial personality-disordered men ($M = 23, SD = 11$; Gacono & Meloy, 1992), and less than that of inpatient schizophrenics ($M = 34, SD = 17$; Exner, 1991). This perceptual inability to accurately distinguish between internal and external stimuli may facilitate the sexual homicide perpetrator's use of fantasy as a tool of both projection and projective identification during the actual homicide itself (Gacono, 1992; Gacono & Meloy, 1988; Meloy, 1988, 1992). Our results are consistent with the finding of rehearsal fantasy as a primary drive mechanism in sexual homicide, relatively unconstrained by the dictates of reality (Prentky et al., 1989). Both sexual homicide perpetrators and psychopaths appear to be pathologically narcissistic (Rf), or at least inclined to self-aggrandize (PER), perhaps to shore up a threatened grandiose self structure (Kernberg, 1984). A sense of entitlement is ubiquitous in psychopathy, and appears to be so among sexual homicide perpetrators. This attitude of specialness, perhaps mixed with a sense of impunity, could disinhibit sexual and aggressive impulses aroused in the presence of a victim. Narcissistic traits among sexual homicide perpetrators and psychopaths have been noted elsewhere and are consistent with our findings (Hare, 1991; Ressler et al., 1988).

The sexual homicide perpetrators show a greater genuine interest in other human beings ($All H$) when compared to psychopaths, although both groups are within one standard deviation of the finding for normal men ($M = 5.72, SD = 1.61$; Exner, 1991). We also found a tendency for the sexual homicide perpetrators to more readily mentally represent others as whole, real, and meaningful individuals, a Rorschach measure of internalized object relations ($Pure H$) unreported in Table 2. These findings, along with a more frequent expectation of cooperativeness from others ($COP > 2$), suggest that sexual homicide perpetrators, despite the extreme violence of their crimes, are whole object seeking (Fairbairn, 1952), unlike their psychopathic counterparts. There is genuine interest in others, at least sometimes.

These preliminary findings lend the first empirical support to five psychodynamic factors that we propose to partially understand the act of sexual homicide itself: abnormal bonding, characterological anger, formal thought disorder, borderline reality testing, and pathological narcissism (entitlement). We think these factors may play a large role in the psychogenesis of sexual homicide when the perpetrator is in the presence of a potential victim and is sexually aroused. Although the empirical support for our factors is limited because of its retrospective and inferential nature, the Rorschach variables we selected for study generally have good temporal reliability (Exner, 1986). We think our results, although preliminary, begin to shed light on the psychodynamic shadows that portend this low-frequency but high-intensity act of sexual aggression (Gacono & Meloy, in press).

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