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First published July 2015

ISBN 978-1-84099-711-8

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## Factors Indicative of Fantasy Disclosure by Sexual Homicide Perpetrators: An Exploratory Study

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Sexual fantasy has been identified as an important characteristic in theories of sexual homicide, while forensic practitioners may seek to determine whether sexual fantasy played a role in a sexual killing. Thus, fantasy can be integral to case formulation and identifying treatment targets as part of rehabilitative efforts to reduce the risk of recidivism. However, perpetrators of sexual homicides can be reluctant to talk about their fantasies due to concerns that this will raise their level of risk and prevent progression. The current research reports on two studies using the same sample. The aim of the first study was to consider the presence or absence of characteristics of perpetrators of non-serial sexual killing and whether or not there was evidence that the perpetrator had disclosed deviant fantasy. The second study aimed to determine whether or not the disclosure of fantasy could be predicted using factors identified in the first study. A sample of 100 life sentenced men convicted of homicide who had committed a non-serial sexual killing (those offenders who had killed one or two people) was used to facilitate knowledge of the factors that could indicate whether sexual fantasy needs to be considered to understand a sexual homicide.

### Key findings

- A number of significant differences were found between perpetrators that had or had not disclosed fantasies according to childhood behaviour (e.g. bed wetting), offence characteristics (e.g. attacked with sexual intention), adult characteristics (e.g. in a relationship/married at time to offence) and crime scene behaviour (e.g. taking weapon to crime scene).
- Several perpetrator variables – such as not the youngest of siblings, problems relating to preferred gender after age 12 years, taking a weapon to the crime scene – were significant predictors of whether the perpetrator disclosed offence related fantasy.
- The findings indicate that aspects of upbringing and childhood experience could promote or foster reversions to deviant fantasy, as well as factors that could be a symptom of reliance on such fantasies.
- Forensic practitioners carrying out assessments could use findings from this study to act as a signal to suggest that a perpetrator who is not disclosing offence related fantasy is possibly not being completely open about the issue.
- Whilst further research is required, the findings from this study make steps towards identifying indicators for determining that deviant fantasy could be relevant to the individual concerned, and to identify sexual killers who disclose fantasy as a separate group of sexual killers from perpetrators who kill for other reasons.

## Introduction

Sexual fantasy features in a number of theories of sexual offending (e.g., Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Marshall & Marshall, 2000) while some theories of sexual killing consider fantasy as a central driving factor for the offence (e.g., Meloy, 2000), or as an element within a more expansive model (e.g., Burgess, Hartman, Ressler, Douglas, & McCormack, 1986). Sadistic sexual killers where fantasy plays an important role in the offence have been identified. Blanchard (1995) proposed that 'lust murders' could result from the development and increase in sexual fantasies. These sexual fantasies are thought to be the result of physical and sexual disturbance from childhood. MacCulloch, Snowden, Wood, and Mills (1983) and Blanchard considered fantasy as a drive mechanism for sadistic violence, including homicide. Prentky *et al.* (1989) found a greater prevalence of violent fantasy amongst those perpetrators considered serial killers than those offenders who were convicted of killing once or twice, suggesting a "Possible functional relationship between fantasy and repetitive assaultive behaviour" (p.890). Nicole and Proulx (2007) reported that sexual killers were significantly more likely than sexual aggressors who had not killed to disclose that during childhood and adolescence they had deviant sexual fantasies. Meloy (2000) in reviewing the 'Nature and Dynamics of Sexual Homicide' noted how the clinical observations of Brittain (1970) and the analysis of a sample of sadistic offenders sexual fantasies by MacCulloch *et al.* (1983) has "Steered much of the subsequent research interest in fantasy as a primary drive mechanism in sexual homicide" (p.8).

Burgess *et al.*'s (1986) motivational model of sexual homicide includes a propensity to fantasise within its five stages. It is suggested that an unsupportive social environment characterised by neglect results in thinking patterns which motivate deviant behaviour including sex-orientated murder. Burgess *et al.* (1986) considered the need in some cases to modify powerful fantasies that facilitate acts of aggression.

MacCulloch, Gray and Watt (2000) proposed a model where feelings of sexual arousal and aggression are paired to form a pathway to sadistic fantasy. They suggest that "Many pairings of the two stimuli, via repeated chronic abuse" (p. 414) is necessary for maintaining sexually sadistic interests where the severity of the sexual sadism is "Related

to the frequency and severity of abuse in childhood" (p. 415).

These models indicate that sexual fantasy is an important factor to consider in sexual killings. However, sexual homicide perpetrators, like other sexual offenders, can be unwilling to disclose offence related fantasy (Clarke & Carter, 2000). This emphasises the importance of the current study and the need to identify predictive factors for disclosure of fantasies in non-serial sexual killers for those working with this client group.

## Approach

All cases were gathered from official Home Office files. A sample of 380 cases was first identified by selecting files where the homicide victim was a female aged 14 years or older, there was a convicted male perpetrator, and the offence met the operational definition of sexual killing. After excluding duplicated names, the remaining sample of 200 cases were cross-checked with the Lifer Database (a Home Office list of all prisoners serving life sentences) to confirm that the inclusion criteria had been met. To make the sample more manageable every second case was marked and numbered to produce 100 cases to be coded. For the purpose of this study those cases where the offender had killed more than two people were excluded. Whilst many studies have used samples combining serial and non-serial sexual killers, sufficient differences between these two groups have been found (Carter & Hollins, 2010; James & Proulx, 2014; Proulx, Cusson, & Beauregard, 2007) which suggests they should be studied separately and supports the need to focus on non-serial sexual killers.

The cases were coded until all 100 cases had been entered into the dataset. This figure balanced the resources involved in getting the files and the time taken to code them against the need for a sufficient sample size for the analysis. The final dataset consisted of 100 life sentenced prisoners who met a definition of sexual killing where at least one of the following criteria was present:

- 1) the perpetrator had disclosed that he had killed with a sexual motive or element to the killing;
- 2) there was evidence of sexual behaviour prior to or during the killing;
- 3) there was evidence of sexual interference or assault following the killing;

- 4) the victim's clothes were disturbed for reasons that could not be explained by simply having moved the body.

The cases were inspected for the following characteristics:

- (i) childhood and family background;
- (ii) schooling, problem behaviours and indications of trauma;
- (iii) adult features including relationships and information about the offence including crime scene factors.

The first study considered the presence or absence of characteristics of perpetrators of non-serial sexual killing and whether or not there was evidence that the perpetrator has disclosed deviant fantasy (fantasy is used here to refer to offence related and deviant fantasy). A substantial number of items had no recorded information; therefore analysis was conducted on those coded items that were present for at least 15% of the total number of cases or where there was an *a priori* interest according to whether or not the perpetrator disclosed fantasy.

A binary logistic regression was conducted in the second study to determine the predictive validity of the factors identified in the first study to distinguish non-serial sexual killers who disclose fantasy.

To ensure a reliable model for each dependent variable, the split for whether it is present or not should be close to 50% and between 40-60% (Field, 2000). For the total sample, whether or not perpetrator disclosed fantasy was split within the recommended band (N=42 and N=58 respectively). Prior to the binary logistic regression, correlation coefficients (Spearman's rho) were calculated for all items in order to establish whether there were any high levels of correlation between items that could unduly influence the logistic regression. There were no correlations that were greater than the 0.7 cut-off for a high correlation (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006). The method of entry for all analysis was the backward stepwise as this was an exploratory study (Field, 2005). Finally, dummy variables were created to allow predictors with three or more categories to be transformed into dichotomous variables (Howitt & Cramer, 2005). In effect, dummy variables were calculated whenever there was a 'missing data' category.

## Results

**Study 1** – Childhood behaviour, offence characteristics, and adult characteristics relating to perpetrators who did and did not disclose fantasy were compared using Chi-square tests. A number of differences were found and are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Significant factors by fantasy disclosed vs not disclosed**

Significant factors	Fantasy Disclosed N = 42	Fantasy Not Disclosed N = 58
Youngest of siblings*	5 (12 %)	18 (31 %)
Witnessed mother/primary carer being physically abused*	13 (31 %)	8 (14 %)
Loner/Few Friends**	26 (62 %)	15 (26 %)
Behavioural examples relating to preferred sex*	13 (31 %)	6 (10 %)
Problems relating to preferred sex after age 12 years**	14 (33 %)	3 (5 %)
Problems relating to preferred sex ever during childhood**	14 (33 %)	3 (5 %)
Reports of bed wetting*	14 (33 %)	9 (16 %)
Ran away from home between age 12 to 16 years*	10 (24 %)	5 (9%)
Has been married for two years *	9 (21 %)	23 (40 %)
In relationship at time of offence but not married*	5 (12 %)	21 (36 %)
Reports they were a loner did not socialise*	23 (55 %)	17 (29 %)
Carried on with work and family business*	26 (62 %)	47 (81 %)
Considered psychopathic*	15 (36 %)	6 (10 %)
Evidence of paraphilia*	13 (31 %)	6 (10 %)
Evidence of grievance towards females*	15 (36 %)	6 (10 %)
Evidence of general grievance*	12 (26 %)	7 (12 %)
Upper half of body exposed*	7 (17 %)	22 (38 %)
Evidence he took weapon to crime scene*	13 (31 %)	4 (7 %)
Death caused by combination of methods*	6 (14 %)	19 (33 %)
Victim found with multiple stab wounds*	9 (21 %)	3 (5 %)
Attacked with sexual intention**	21 (50%)	8 (14%)
Disclosed since conviction forced vaginal sex*	11 (26 %)	6 (10 %)

\* denotes significant at  $p < 0.05$

\*\* denotes significant at  $p < 0.01$

If the perpetrator disclosed fantasy then they were more likely to have disturbance in childhood in terms of witnessing mother/primary carer being physically abused, problems relating to their preferred sex, socialising with peers and childhood friendships, and more likely to bed wet and run away from home. In addition, as adults, they were also less likely to socialise or be in a relationship and more likely to have evidence of grievance generally and towards females. There were also differences in crime scene behaviour depending upon whether the perpetrator disclosed fantasy: they were more likely to take the weapon to the crime scene, stab the victim multiple times, and less likely to kill with a combination of methods. The perpetrator was also more likely to disclose both attacking the victim with a sexual intention and carrying out forced vaginal sex against the victim if they disclosed fantasy.

**Study 2** – The variables included in the logistic regression (Table 2) produced a satisfactory model fit (i.e. discrimination between the outcome groups) as measured by the Hosmer and Lemeshow Test:  $\chi^2(8, N = 100) = 4.15, p > .05$ . This model was significantly better than a constant-only model containing only the intercept, but no predictor variables:  $\chi^2(22, N = 100) = 89.12, p < .05$ . The Nagelkerke R square at step 9 was 0.77, indicating that 77% of variables that account for fantasy disclosure were explained by this model. The correct classification of cases overall in the final step was 89%, although it was slightly better for those perpetrators who did not disclose deviant or offence related fantasy (91%) as compared with those who did disclose fantasy (86%).

Table 2 shows how the predictor variables contributed to the model. It reveals that the overall model was significant and several perpetrator variables were significant predictors of whether the perpetrator disclosed offence related fantasy.

**Table 2: Prediction of Perpetrator disclosed fantasy to overall significant factors**

Predictor	Wald	Exp(B)
Not youngest of siblings	7.95*	85.09
Problems relating to preferred gender after age 12 years	5.42*	14.85
Bed wetting	5.52*	20.51
Ran away from home aged 12 to 16 years of age	4.21*	0.06
In a relationship at time offence but not married	9.46*	69.76
Took weapon to crime scene	7.78*	45.09
Killed by combination of methods	4.56*	11.29
Loner/few friends	4.303	
loner(1)	0.25	2.02
loner(2)	2.90	12.25
Considered psychopathic(1)	2.65	0.18
Carried on with work or family business after killing(1)	4.39*	9.35
Disclosed forced vaginal sex following imprisonment	3.72	0.13
Attacked victim with sexual intention	9.54*	
Attacked victim with sexual intention (1)	2.39	0.14
Attacked victim with sexual intention (2)	1.82	5.67
Constant	4.60	0.00

\* significant at  $p < 0.05$

The significant perpetrator characteristics were:

- not the youngest of siblings;
- problems relating to preferred gender after age 12 years
- a history of bed wetting during childhood;
- not running away from home between 12 to 16 years of age;
- in a relationship but not married at the time of offence;
- taking a weapon to the crime scene;
- not killing by a combination of methods;
- not carrying on with work or family business following the killing.

'Attacked victim with sexual intention' was also significant, but neither of the parameter codings were independently significant.

The findings from this study show a general pattern that suggests elements of upbringing and childhood experience could promote or foster reversions to deviant fantasy, as well as factors that could be a symptom of reliance on such fantasies.



## Implications and conclusions

Perpetrators who disclosed fantasy were more likely to: have experienced factors relevant to problems with parental and childhood social relationships; be considered a loner with few friends; have problems relating to their preferred sex during childhood; and have displayed behavioural problems. These findings support previous research which report increased social isolation in sexual killers (Grubin, 1994; Briken et al, 2006; Nicole & Proulx, 2007). There was indication of traumatising events for the perpetrators in that they were more likely to have witnessed mother/primary carer being physically abused and they were more likely to have a history of bed wetting and to have run away from home aged 12 to 16 years. Supporting the findings by Nicole and Proulx (2007) who found exposure to abusive levels of alcohol consumption, psychological violence, and the witnessing of physical violence in the majority of sexual killers. It was found that perpetrators who disclosed fantasy were less likely to be the youngest of siblings than perpetrators who did not disclose fantasy. There is very little information available on birth order in sexual killers although Ressler *et al.* (1988) found that nearly their entire sample of sexual killers were the oldest son. The current study only investigated whether the offender was the youngest of siblings; future research could consider other birth orders and the effects on disclosure of fantasy.

The current study also indicates that these childhood difficulties extended into adulthood. The perpetrators who disclosed fantasy were less likely to be in a relationship at the time of the offence and less likely to have been married for two years than those perpetrators who did not disclose fantasy. Whilst the information regarding sexual killers and relationship status is somewhat conflicting, the majority of the studies reviewed (Oliver *et al.* 2007; Briken *et al.* 2006) indicate that sexual killers are less likely to be in a relationship at the time of the offence.

In terms of the offence, the victim was less likely to be found with the upper half of the body exposed if the perpetrator had disclosed fantasy than if they had not disclosed fantasy. Death was less likely to have been caused by a combination of methods although the victim was more likely to have been found with multiple stab wounds if the perpetrator disclosed fantasy. Understanding the sexual significance of these findings could be explored

through future interviews with sexual killers, assessing for example whether fantasy was used to cope with problems with parents and childhood, hence running away from home being not so common. Whilst replication is necessary, the findings of this study indicate that it could be possible to use crime scene behaviour to indicate that the perpetrator had deviant fantasy.

The factors from the binary logistic regression that were shown significantly to increase the likelihood of the perpetrator disclosing fantasy include four factors that relate to childhood: (i) the perpetrators were not the youngest of siblings; (ii) not running away from home between 12 to 16 years of age, (iii) having a history of bed wetting; and (iv) having problems relating to preferred gender. These could all act as signals to those carrying out assessments to suggest that a perpetrator who is not disclosing offence related fantasy is possibly not being completely open about this issue. In addition, those perpetrators who were not in a relationship at the time of the offence, did not kill by a combination of methods, and did not take a weapon to the crime scene are all offence characteristics that could signal that fantasy is relevant to understanding the motivation for the offence and suggests that there could be value in studying the significance of crime scene behaviours as well as the presence of grievance in terms of understanding sexual killing.

Although further research is required, the findings from this study make steps towards potentially identifying a cluster of indicators for determining that deviant fantasy could be relevant to the individual concerned and in addition, identifying sexual killers who disclose fantasy as a separate group of sexual killers from perpetrators who kill for other reasons.

(The authors would like to thank Nicola Mathie for her help with preparing this analytical summary.)

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