

Toates, F. & Coschug-Toates, O. (2022). *Understanding Sexual Serial Killing*. Cambridge University Press, 450 pages, ISBN 978-1-316-51759-8

Reviewed by James Oleson*

The public is interested in crime, but it is *fascinated* by murder. “Our newspapers are filled with murder, and murder streams from our radios. Murder transfixes us when we go to the movies, when we read novels, and when we watch television” (Oleson, 2013, p. 57). And serial murder is particularly compelling. As Beckman (2001, p. 62) notes, “[T]he serial killer constitutes a mythical, almost supernatural, embodiment of American society’s deepest darkest fears. We are compelled by the representation of this figure because he allows us to project our fears onto a clearly delineated villain.” Indeed, the American Film Institute’s number one villain, Hannibal Lecter, is a serial killer; the world’s most successful horror franchise, *Saw*, is about a serial killer. Today, many serial killers exist in a pantheon of celebrity (Schmid, 2005): Jack the Ripper, Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy are all iconic. Correspondingly, criminologists (and many armchair detectives) pore over true-crime biographies, striving to understand the origins of these seemingly inexplicable crimes. Coding official documents and true-crime books is how the Radford/FGCU serial killer database (Aamodt, Leary, & Southard, 2020) was generated.

Not all serial killers are motivated by sexual desire: Billy the Kid (who is reported to have killed 21 men) and Al Capone (implicated, both directly and indirectly, in as many as 700 murders) would satisfy the FBI’s (2010) definition of serial murder: “The unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events”. Some serial killers kill for money, others for revenge. Yet many serial killers *are* motivated by psychosexual drives. It has long been so. Gilles de Rais, lieutenant to Joan of Arc, confessed to sodomy and the murder of 140 children; ‘Blood Countess’ Elizabeth Báthory was imprisoned for life for the murder of as many as 600 young women. By the time of the Weimar Republic, the sexually motivated serial killer was an acknowledged phenomenon known as the *lustmord* (Tatar, 1997). Today, the very stereotype of the serial killer is a middle-class white male *who kills for sexual gratification*.

The study of serial murder, consequently, often employs a psychological approach. This is an interesting exception to criminology’s general reliance on sociological—not psychological—variables. As Wright and Miller (1998, p. 2) have noted, “during the 1930s, American sociologists waged a successful turf war against biologists, psychologists, and physicians, wresting criminology from its biological roots, to make the growing field a specialty within the larger discipline of sociology”. But the traditional—sociological—explanations for crime (e.g., poverty, racism, urbanisation and the like) seem ill-suited to the explanation of serial murder. Serial killers are not disproportionately poor, are not disproportionately from ethnic minorities, and do not come from disorganised inner-city neighbourhoods. So criminologists often look to psychopathology in an attempt to understand serial homicide. In *Understanding sexual serial killing*, however, Frederick Toates and Olga Coschug-Toates augment their psychological study of sexual motives with reference to biological science and a trenchant analysis of sociological factors and the result is impressive.

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It allows the authors to answer fundamental questions such as “why are [serial killers] not restrained (‘inhibited’) by” “capture, ostracism and life in jail?” (p. 87) or “why do some cultures produce relatively many lust killers and others appear to produce almost none?” (p. 7). The book remains unquestionably psychological at its core—Frederick Toates is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Open University UK—but the multi-disciplinary nature of the book’s research base makes it a work worthy of careful study by sociologists, criminologists, and lawyers.

Understanding sexual serial killing organises 33 chapters into three parts. The first part, examining the factors that underlie lust killings, explores foundational questions around the definition of serial murder (as opposed to mass and spree killers), the mad/bad debate, psychopathy and sociopathy (chapter 3), motivation for lust murder (chapter 6), thrill seeking (chapter 10), paraphilias (chapter 11) and addiction to sexual homicide (chapter 12). Part one also includes chapters that focus on the individual (chapter 2) and—of particular interest to sociologists—on the social context of lust murder (chapter 4). Chapter 4 explores questions around the sociohistorical emergence of serial murder, victim selection and sex and ethnicity of serial killers. Although it privileges the role of motivation, this part of the book provides a comprehensive and up-to-date general overview of the scholarly literature on serial homicide.

The second part of the book, consisting of 20 biographical sketch chapters, is organised by motivational themes. For example, chapter 15, entitled ‘A focus on the (ex-)wife’, provides sketches of the killer Faryion Wardrip and Mikhail (“The Cleaner”) Popkov, and concludes with a “signposts” section that highlights common elements across the cases. Other chapters in part two are related to adoption (chapter 16), mother’s behaviour (chapter 18), revenge (chapter 19), being gay (chapter 20), sexual fetishes (chapter 21), cross-dressing (chapter 24) and problems with sexual potency (chapter 28). There are two chapters that describe paired killers: one (chapter 29) on male-male pairs such as Leonard Lake and Charles Ng; one (chapter 30) on male-female pairs such as Ian Brady and Myra Hindley or Fred and Rose West. There are also chapters that examine the impact of powerful events (chapter 22), drugs and addiction (chapter 31) and the desire for child victims (chapter 26). These pithy biographical sketches are an effective mechanism to examine the similarities (and differences) in motivation among lust killers, but they should not be understood as representing fixed categories. For example, the infamous “Gray Man” killer, Albert Fish, is included in the chapter on powerful events (since he was sexually excited by being whipped at a young age) but, alternatively, he could have been listed in the chapter on fetishes (since he fantasised about whipping teenaged boys, drinking urine, and eating faeces) or the chapter on child victims (since he whipped boys and girls and murdered a 10-year-old girl—the one victim with whose murder he was formally charged). That the 71 biographical sketches included in part two can serve as data points for multiple categories (e.g., Albert Fish standing in for powerful events *or* for fetishes *or* for child victims) means that different arrays of cases could be configured and that the “signposts” of common themes might therefore look slightly different. This should not be understood as a deficiency in the authors’ analysis—it is simply a consequence of interpreting ambiguous data (see, e.g., Oleson, 2019, for an analogous discussion of interpretation in the context of social control theory). Another important aspect of part two is that the biographical sketches include a number of cases from the former Soviet Union. Here, Olga Coschug-Toates’ experience as a translator allowed the authors to incorporate novel cases within their analysis. The value of extending an analytical sample beyond the set of now-familiar US and UK cases examined by other scholars must not be underestimated. It allows us to better disentangle the phenomenon of sexual serial killing from its socio-political context and from the Anglophone accounts in which it is reported. It defines the boundaries of our knowledge since “in the criminological encounter, who we ask, and what we ask them, shapes what we learn” (Oleson, 2018, p. 48).

Part three of *Understanding sexual serial killing* consists of just one concluding chapter that draws the book’s elements together. This key chapter builds upon the foundation of the 32 chapters that precede it, making important points. For example, the authors conclude that for many lust killers, sexual violence is

an addiction, similar to opiate addiction: “Rather than opiates, they discover aggression as a means of regulation and are sensitized to cues of sexual violence ... Stress, particularly of a social kind, accentuates this process, creating a pressure to kill” (p. 467). They explain how dissociation allows two systems of behavioural controls to operate, allowing the lust killer to shift between normal social activity and forms of sexual violence. This shift helps to explain why some serial killers report feeling like they are compelled by a powerful force. After combing the available biographical accounts, the authors also identify recurring factors that appear to predict sexual serial killing. These include familiar factors such as cruelty to animals, bedwetting, fire starting (collectively known as the Macdonald triad: see Macdonald, 1963), as well as low IQ, childhood abuse, neglect, addiction to pornography and stalking. Lack of attachment to any parental figure also appears to be important. Yet according to Toates and Coschug-Toates, “the closest to a universal factor is the presence of bullying and taunting of the future killer” (p. 469). This has implications for understanding the stresses that trigger episodes of sexual violence, and in the book’s final pages, the authors identify a range of interventions that might help to inhibit the association between violence and sexual pleasure.

On the book’s Amazon page, one reader hails *Understanding sexual serial killing* as “a masterpiece of vital importance” and another, serial homicide researcher Stephen Giannangelo, lauds the book as “a resource to the field that’s new, timely and impressively comprehensive and is long overdue”. One of the reasons that the book is praised by experts and lay readers alike is that it deliberately eschews jargon. Its reliance on plain language while still accounting for the scholarly literature makes it simultaneously accessible and scholarly. Doing this, and doing it well, is *incredibly* difficult. I know this is true: one of my own books was once reviewed as reading like a 400-page journal article. Another attractive feature of *Understanding sexual serial killing* is its price. Hardback monographs from university publishers are notoriously expensive, and *Understanding sexual serial killing* is a big book. Yet the recommended retail price on the Cambridge University Press site is less than \$45.00 USD (\$72.95 NZD in New Zealand). This places the book within financial reach for students and curious lay readers as well as experts. For this reason, I endorse Giannangelo’s appraisal of the book as “a fine addition to anyone’s research library”.

Although written from a psychological perspective, Toates and Coschug-Toates have incorporated a range of relevant work from biology, law, and sociology. The curious sociologist will find much of value here, particularly in the chapter that locates the psychology of the individual offender within his wider social milieu. This sociological foundation could be extended using fundamental constructs such as anomie, hegemonic masculinity, class inequality, and discrimination. This line of sociological inquiry, coupled with the motivational analysis provided so ably by Toates and Coschug-Toates, has the potential to identify new etiological factors, thereby enhancing prevention efforts and saving human lives.

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