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Understanding sexual homicide offenders

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Book Review

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Chan, H. C. (2015). *Understanding sexual homicide offenders: An integrated approach*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan. 179 pp. \$95.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-137-45371-6

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Scholarly work on sexual homicides is scarce, which is potentially attributable to its generally low occurrence. Because of the small N's in this area of research, previous work has mostly taken a qualitative, anecdotal approach. Heng Choon (Oliver) Chan should be applauded for taking on the challenge of studying such a rare phenomenon, and to approach the topic with a quantitative focus. In addition to a quantitative approach, the book offers an integrated theoretical framework in an effort to explain these crimes. Chan's *Understanding Sexual Homicide Offenders: An Integrated Approach* provides a solid introduction to the topic of sexual homicides and would be especially useful to graduate students and those new to this area. The book also highlights the significant limitations in studying sexual homicide. One of the most fundamental concerns is the problem of defining the phenomenon. Here, the book falters in that it misses an opportunity to more fully explore this issue that arguably is inherent to the study of sexual homicide. Considering how to define these crimes also would have benefited the discussion of the findings obtained and offered alternative explanations. Given my critique and the need for common definitions of sexual homicide, I will first discuss this issue before proceeding to my review.

Sexual homicide constitutes a specific and rare type of lethal violence, but is also hidden in other categories, such as serial killing, intimate partner homicide, the killing of prostitutes, or child killing by non-family members. This is but one facet that highlights the complexity and heterogeneity of sexual homicide. Some cases may present an overtly sexual element, such as penetration or assault of sexual organs, whereas other cases may show no such evidence but still be motivated by sexual drives or conversely, may show sexual elements while a sexual motivation for the crime was lacking (Koenraadt, 2010). Another difficulty may arise when a sexual assault culminates in the victim's death, purely because the offender wants to eliminate a potential witness and not because the offender gains any sexual arousal from the killing itself (Salfati, James, & Ferguson, 2008). A limitation of the author's current book is that this heterogeneity is ignored.

Although *Understanding Sexual Homicide Offenders* largely reflects the author's dissertation work, chapters have been re-written in a way that makes the text accessible to a wider audience. Chapters 1 through 3 not only illustrate this work but also tend to take the form of stand-alone chapters rather than a more integrated discussion, which misses opportunities to provide more extensive critical assessment of the current state of the field.

The first two chapters provide an overview of the sexual homicide phenomenon, giving a detailed summary of findings from previous studies comparing sexual homicide offenders (SHOs) and non-homicidal sexual offenders as well as an overview of classifications of sexual homicide. At the end of Chapter 2, the author critically reviews the existing classifications, rightfully pointing out the lack of a scientific basis for the organized–disorganized maxim. An integration of this material in the core text would have strengthened the presentation. Nevertheless, the value of the chapter lies in these and other critiques on the literature-to-date that many SHO classifications lack empirical support or are based on very small sample sizes.

Chapter 3 continues the overview of the sexual homicides with a focus on theoretical models of sexual homicide. One limitation, especially for readers new to the field, is a need for a critical assessment of the selected theories throughout the chapter rather than a limited discussion at the end. In this absence, the author refers to theories used in serial homicide, without making explicit why. One could argue that the number of sexual homicides is simply too small to constitute a sound basis for theory-formation. On the contrary, only a portion of serial homicides is sexual in nature. Similarly, the author's choice of theories elicits questions as to whether the focus of his quest is sexual homicide, serial homicide, or both.

The two main criminological theories that may shed light on sexual homicide are discussed in Chapter 4. Here, the author discusses Akers' social learning theory and Cohen and Felson's routine activity theory. This work previously appeared as a journal article (Chan, Heide, & Beauregard, 2011), which likely explains its separate treatment, although a discussion of these theories would have fitted nicely in the previous theory chapter. An integration with Chapter 3 would have strengthened connections between social learning perspectives with theoretical explanations such as "formative events in childhood and adolescence" (p. 66), and "patterned responses to formative events" (p. 67). My second concern echoes the limited discussion of defining sexual homicide and relates to the choice of the routine activity theory to explain sexual homicide. In doing so, the author emphasizes the target suitability of sexual homicide victims: ". . . sexually motivated offenders often initiate their 'hunt' for suitable targets, who satisfy their 'goodness of fit' with their deviant sexual fantasies" (p. 98). Although potentially applicable to *serial* SHOs, it remains questionable to what extent this theory applies to *non-serial* SHOs.

Chapter 5 builds upon the conclusion of the previous chapter in that only a single theory does not fully explain the complete sexual homicide offending process and an "integrated approach" is needed. Chapter 5 combines social learning and routine activity theories in one model and adds pre-crime precipitating factors in a second model. In the remainder of the chapter, the author tests these two models on an existing

Canadian sample originally collected for another study, consisting of 230 incarcerated male sex offenders who targeted female victims, of which 55 committed a non-serial sexual homicide and 175 committed a non-homicidal sexual offence. For the homicide to be classified as sexual, the offense had to meet one of six criteria (victim's attire or lack of attire, exposure of sexual parts, sexual positioning, insertion of foreign objects, evidence of sexual intercourse, and evidence of substitute sexual activity, interest, or sadistic fantasy). The chapter ends rather abruptly with the presentation of a series of tables reflecting the suggested models, finding that none of the models are empirically well supported.

A discussion of the findings is left to the final chapter, Chapter 6, in which the author offers several reasons for the lack of empirical support for his "integrated approach." He suggests that the measures of the theoretical constructs may not have been good measures, that the theoretical models may not have been apt to explain the offending process and third, that "both theoretical models fail to incorporate other determining factors . . . such as the offender's psychopathological factors . . ." (p. 142). A further complicating factor involves his inclusion of non-homicidal sexual offenders, many of them having committed minor sexual offences. The author admits that the results may have been different if this control group were limited to offenders who sexually assaulted the victim.

As noted above, one limitation in the book is the need to more fully engage in the necessity of determining how best to define sexual homicide. This discussion of the findings is an opportunity to do so and offer an additional explanation. Namely, as we know from much previous work, SHOs constitute a very heterogeneous group with a wide range of offender motivations. The author's premise that these non-serial SHOs constitute a single, quantifiable group that can easily be compared with other non-homicidal offenders is difficult to substantiate. The reader is not informed, for example, how many of the SHOs were classified as such because of meeting just one, or all inclusion criteria? For example, how many homicides resulted from a rape that unexpectedly turned deadly or showed evidence of pre-planned hunting behavior? Future work might be able to explore these issues and provide a broader understanding of the nature of the sample by presenting qualitative information on several of the 55 SHO case studies.

The author envisioned this book to become "the one-stop shop for readers who were eager to learn more about sexual offending and sexual homicide offenders, and the latest research development in this field" (p. xiv). He partially succeeded in this aim by providing a succinct review of the literature to date. This work also provides a valuable contribution by taking a quantitative approach to sexual homicides, which previous studies typically have not done. The author also highlights the need for more work in this area, particularly, considering the heterogeneity of the sexual homicide phenomenon.

The strength of this book is its bringing together existing literature on SHOs. The author has re-written both theoretical and empirical dissertation material that may well appeal to scholars and graduate students interested in studying sexual homicides: It applies social learning and routine activity models, and proposes a combined approach.

The large (albeit heterogeneous) sample size makes this work a unique addition to the field. Taken together, *Understanding Sexual Homicide Offenders* provides a useful starting point to begin much-needed future research on underlying motivations, psychopathologies, and offending behaviors of this multifaceted type of homicide.

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