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Serial and Non-Serial Sexual Murderers: An Exploratory Study of Developmental Antecedents

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The trial of individuals accused of sexual murder requires considerable preparation from investigative teams and psychosocial professionals. One objective is to collect as much information as possible on the accused's childhood, in order to answer one of the main questions posed by professionals and the general public: "What was it in this person's childhood that made him into a sexual murderer?" To this end, the accused, his family, his childhood friends, his neighbours, and his teachers are interviewed extensively: "Could you tell us about your childhood? What type of child was he? What was he like in class? How would you describe his family?" etc. The information collected serves not only to understand the origins of the murder and the meaning of the crime for the murderer, but also to identify the risk factors associated with his sexual homicide, in order to attenuate them and thus reduce the risk of recidivism. Although many studies have suggested that a variety of characteristics may be developmental risk factors in non-serial and serial sexual murderers (e.g., sexual victimization, empathy deficits), only two empirical developmental models have been proposed (Burgess et al., 1986; Nicole & Proulx, 2007a); both these models are based on small samples of sexual murderers—and, in the case of the FBI model, the sample is unrepresentative, as it comprises serial murderers only. Although the studies by Proulx and colleagues (James & Proulx, 2014; Nicole & Proulx 2007a, 2007b) shed some empirical light on the developmental antecedents of non-serial murderers, there remains only a limited empirical basis for distinguishing developmental antecedents of serial and non-serial sexual murderers. Consequently, the objective of this study was to identify similarities and differences in the developmental antecedents of serial and non-serial sexual murderers. To this end, multiple domains—such as neuropsychological functioning, family and social environment, and educational and behavioural development during childhood and adolescence—were examined from birth to adulthood. A sample of 55 male individuals was included for this study (10 SSMs, 45 NSMs). The results indicate that the principal distinction between the two groups is the age at which risk factors appear and the accumulation of these factors—with risk factors appearing earlier, and accumulating to a greater extent, in SSMs—rather than the nature of developmental antecedents. Consequently, it appears that serial and nonserial homicide are associated with developmental pathways that are distinct in several ways. Forensic and theoretical implication will be discussed.

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