

Sexual Sadism: Assessment, Structure, and Clinical Implications

Symposium Chair: William Marshall, O.C., F.R.S.C., Ph.D.

Discussant: Reinhard Eher, M.D.

Sadism is characterized by sexual urges, fantasies or behaviors that circle around the wish to control another human-being (MacCulloch, Snowden, Wood, & Mills, 1983). Leaving consensual sadomasochistic role play aside, the infliction of pain or humiliation on non-consenting victims is one possible means to assert such dominance. Consequently, the diagnosis of sadism is relevant for treatment planning and risk assessment in forensic psychology and forensic psychiatry. The agreement of diagnosticians with respect to sadism ranges from poor to substantial levels, however, according to seven studies reviewed by Nitschke, Mokros, Osterheider, and Marshall (2012). Low inter-rater reliability with respect to sadism is particularly disconcerting given its role in the indeterminate incapacitation of offenders under the so-called sexually violent predator legislations of several states (Frances, & Wollert, 2012; Levenson, 2004). Furthermore, it is unclear whether a diagnosis of sadism increases the risk for subsequent violent recidivism among convicted sexual offenders, with some studies showing evidence for (Berner, Berger, & Hill, 2003; Kingston, Seto, & Bradford, 2009) and other studies showing evidence against such a supposition (Hill, Habermann, Klusmann, Berner, & Briken, 2008).

Given the reliance on truthful reporting for clinical diagnosis and given the obvious costs associated with a diagnosis of sexual sadism for the person being interviewed it is plausible to assume that sadists will dissimulate their disorder within forensic settings, thus increasing the rate of false-negative results (Nitschke, Blendl, Ottermann, Osterheider, & Mokros, 2009). Behavioral indicators, in contrast, may therefore prove useful to inform decision-making with respect to sadism (Kingston, Seto, Firestone, & Bradford, 2010).

In the first talk, Dr Joachim Nitschke will give an overview of the development of a file-based rating scale for sexual sadism, the Sexual Sadism Scale (SeSaS; Mokros, Schilling, Eher, & Nitschke, 2012; Nitschke, Osterheider, & Mokros, 2009) which is based on a list of behavioral criteria suggested by Marshall and Hucker (2006) that was derived from a survey of forensic experts (Marshall, Kennedy, Yates, & Serran, 2002). Dr Nitschke will describe the psychometric properties of the SeSaS instrument which is conceptualized as a structured professional judgment instrument to aid in the diagnostic process with sexual offenders.

In the second talk Dr Andreas Mokros will describe recent findings on the latent structure of sadism as measured with the SeSaS. Based on a large national sample of sexual offenders from Austria, the latent structure of sadism was found to be dimensional in nature, not taxonic. The implications for diagnostic cutscores as well as for related concepts (such as paraphilic coercive disorder) will be discussed.

In the third talk, Robert Lehmann MSc will present the results of a thematic analysis of the crime scene actions of rapists and sexual abusers of children. Focusing on the sadistic theme as measured through the SeSaS items, results on convergent and predictive validity will be described, also in comparison with the predictive validity of an established actuarial risk assessment instrument.

The final discussion with Dr Reinhard Eher will integrate the content of the three presentations and provide a critical appraisal of the sadism concept in general and the SeSaS instrument in particular.

References

- Berner W., Berger P., & Hill, A. (2003). Sexual sadism. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 47, 383-395.
- Frances, A., & Wollert, R. (2012). Sexual sadism: Avoiding its misuse in sexually violent predator evaluations. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law*, 40, 409-416.
- Hill, A., Habermann, N., Klusmann, D., Berner, W., & Briken, P. (2008). Criminal recidivism in sexual homicide perpetrators. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 52, 5-20.
- Kingston, D. A., Seto, M., & Bradford, J. (2009, October). *Sexual sadism: Excessive violence, phallometric arousal, and diagnostic predictors of recidivism*. Poster presented at the 28th Annual Research and Treatment Conference of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA), Dallas, TX.
- Kingston, D. A., Seto, M. C., Firestone, P., & Bradford, J. M. (2010). Comparing indicators of sexual sadism as predictors of recidivism among adult male sexual offenders. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 78, 574-584.
- Levenson, J. S. (2004). Reliability of sexually violent predator civil commitment criteria in Florida. *Law and Human Behavior*, 38, 357-368.
- MacCulloch, M. J., Snowden, P. R., Wood, P. J., & Mills, H. E. (1983). Sadistic fantasy, sadistic behaviour and offending. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 143, 20-29.
- Marshall, W. L., & Hucker, S. J. (2006). Severe sexual sadism: Its features and treatment. In R. D. McAnulty, & M. M. Burnette (Eds.), *Sex and sexuality (Vol. 3): Sexual deviation and sexual offenses* (pp. 227-250). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Marshall, W. L., Kennedy, P., Yates, P., & Serran, G. (2002). Diagnosing sexual sadism in sexual offenders: Reliability across diagnosticians. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 46, 668-677.
- Mokros, A., Schilling, F., Eher, R., & Nitschke, J. (2012). The Severe Sexual Sadism Scale: Cross-validation and scale properties. *Psychological Assessment*, 24, 764-769.
- Nitschke, J., Blendl, V., Ottermann, B., Osterheider, M., & Mokros, A. (2009). Severe sexual sadism- an underdiagnosed disorder? Evidence from a sample of forensic inpatients. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 54, 685-691.
- Nitschke, J., Mokros, A., Osterheider, M., & Marshall, W. L. (2012). Sexual sadism: Current diagnostic vagueness and the benefit of behavioral definitions. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0306624X12465923
- Nitschke, J., Osterheider, M., & Mokros, A. (2009). A cumulative scale of severe sexual sadism. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 21, 262-278.

The Sexual Sadism Scale (SeSaS): Development, Properties, and Use

Joachim Nitschke, M.D.

Based on a survey of forensic experts Marshall and Hucker (2006) published a list of 17 behavioral criteria deemed most relevant for the diagnosis of sexual sadism. We assessed the scale properties in a sample of forensic patients resulting in the SeSaS which included 10 of the original 17 items plus the additional item of inserting objects into the victim's bodily orifices. Both inter-rater agreement and scale reliability of the one-dimensional scale comprising 11 items coding for crime scene behavior is high. The items are coded dichotomously based on offenders' files. An individual would be classified as likely meeting the diagnostic criteria for sexual sadism if at least 4 of the criteria from the 11-item set are present. Based on a review of four studies (Austria, Germany, and US) overall sensitivity was estimated at 95% and overall specificity at 99%. Even though the SeSaS appears to be a viable complement for diagnostic procedures, it has a potential for misuse. By no means should the SeSaS be regarded as an actuarial instrument that could replace clinical judgment. Therefore a thorough explication of the items is presented to prevent misinterpretation. Furthermore, a draft of a structured manual is presented, which integrates regular diagnostic procedures resulting in a working hypothesis on whether a person is suffering from severe sexual sadism.

The Latent Structure of Sadism in Sexual Offenders

Andreas Mokros, Ph.D.

The latent structure of sexual sadism is yet unclear. Recent experimental work using penile plethysmography indicated a qualitative distinction between sadistic and non-sadistic individuals (Seto, Lalumière, Harris, & Chivers, 2012, *J Abnormal Psychol*, 121, 739-753). Taxometric studies of related phenomena such as rape, in contrast, were more consistent with a dimensional interpretation (Knight, 2010, *Arch Sex Behav*, 39, 419-426). The question whether sadism is a taxon or the upper extreme on a dimension of eroticized violence is relevant because the answer to that question could inform diagnostic (and thus possibly judicial) decision-making and also guide the search for etiological pathways of the disorder. Based on the data from a national sample of convicted sexual offenders from Austria ($N = 1,020$ adult men) the latent structure of sadism as measured with the Sexual Sadism Scale (SeSaS) was analysed using latent profile analysis as well as three conceptually different taxometric procedures. The results of all analyses supported a dimensional interpretation of the underlying structure. In the light of this finding sadism likely represents an extreme form of sexual violence, not a distinct category. The implications for diagnostic procedures using the SeSaS and the potential ramifications for related concepts (such as the so-called paraphilic coercive disorder) will be discussed.

Is it Possible to Identify Sexual Sadism using Crime Scene Analysis?

Robert Lehmann, Ph.D. Candidate

This presentation examines the extent to which crime scene analysis (CSA) could help to identify the underlying psychological meaning of sexual offenders' crime scene behavior. Further, the ability of detailed crime scene analysis to predict future sexual recidivism will be discussed. According to Mann, Hanson, and Thornton (2010, *Sex Abuse*, 22, 191-217) psychologically meaningful risk factors can be conceptualized as individual propensities. We argue that CSA could help to identify an offender's propensities, which may manifest in his offense behavior. In other words, the individual propensities of an offender (e.g., sexual sadism) may be activated during the cause of an offense and manifest in a particular pattern of crime scene behaviors (e.g., humiliation of the victim, penetration with object). In a sample of 247 acquaintance rape cases as well as in sample of 424 cases of child sexual abuse from Berlin, Germany, crime scene behaviors were analyzed using Multidimensional Scaling. Especially, crime scene-related components of the Sexual Sadism Scale (SeSaS) were included into the analysis. The construct validity of the hypothesized themes was investigated by considering the predictive validity (e.g., sexual recidivism), the convergent validity (e.g., sexual deviance as assessed by the subscale of Static-2002) and the content validity (e.g., variables of the SeSaS). In both samples distinct regions including the variables of the SeSaS were identified. Further, in both samples these variables were related to sexual deviance. The behavioral theme of sexual sadism predicted sexual recidivism in the sample of child molesters, but not in the sample of acquaintance rapists. Additionally, the theme of sexual sadism added incrementally to the Static-99 for the prediction of sexual recidivism.