

## SERIAL MURDER: AN INTERACTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON SERIAL MURDER

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### INTRODUCTION

The study of human behaviour from an interactional perspective places emphasis on contextual aspects, deals with the interactions of individuals with one another in their environment and is less focussed on an intra psychic view of man. Criminal activity can also be seen as a way in which man interacts with his environment. Criminality can therefore not be isolated from the context in which it occurs.

In the South African context there presently seems to be an increase in criminal activity, a problem with law enforcement and a possible inability of correctional facilities to effectively engage in the rehabilitation of people who commit criminal acts, especially acts of extreme violence, for example murder, rape, and serial murder. Current knowledge of the complexity of criminal behaviour appears to be lacking. The interactional approach seems to be one which may bring an understanding of the phenomenon of criminal behaviour, the meaning of criminal interaction and the complexity of the contexts in which such criminal acts occur.

Many viewpoints and theories about crime exist, yet it seems as if little is known about such crimes as murder from a psychological viewpoint. Even less is known about serial murder, a phenomenon which is appearing more frequently in the headlines of South African and international newspapers. Lunde (personal communication, June 1997) is of the opinion that the difficulty in researching this crime is partially due the death penalty; he elaborates by saying that since rehabilitation is not an option for these people, funding to do research on condemned individuals is difficult to obtain. Nevertheless the uniqueness of

such crimes attracts a large amount of media attention and disproportionately drives fear into the inhabitants of the various communities. Even less, if any, research is based on an interactional understanding of this phenomenon. In this study an investigation into the phenomenon of a violent crime, namely serial murder, is to be undertaken. A brief definition of what is meant with the concept of serial murder follows.

### THE NEED FOR STUDIES ON SERIAL MURDER

McKenzie (1995) feels that there is a definite lack of controlled studies on serial murder, and that there is a strong need for studies based on personal interviews so as to validate, expand, or refute the existing data base of knowledge on this phenomenon. She also feels that there is a need for intelligence testing amongst respondents and suggests other tests such as the MMPI, Hare Checklist of Psychopathy, and a measurement of dissociation.

Similar to the systemic approach, the interactional viewpoint regards the interview situation as a microcosm of how the individual reacts to his environment (macrocosm). The supposition is that the patterns of behaviour that normally are present in the individual's interactions with his environment will be repeated in the interview. Observations of the interactions and patterns of behaviour will hopefully lead to the identification of themes that determine in which situations or contexts such murders occur. Since the interactional viewpoint seeks to understand man in his context or environment, the interpretations made in the study will be based on the interactions between the individuals and the researchers.

Very little research has been done on the phenomenon of serial murder (De Hart & Mahoney 1994; Keeney & Heide 1995) and most of the psychological research on individuals who committed serial murders is based on principles originating from the psychoanalytical paradigm (De Hart & Mahoney 1994; Liebert 1985; Liebman 1989; Pollock 1995). As yet it seems that no research has been done on serial murder from an interactional/systemic viewpoint. Little research has been done using actual serial murderers as respondents (Keeney & Heide 1995). For this reason this research would attempt to investigate the function and the patterns of interactional behaviour of persons who commit serial murders.

Serial murders are fast becoming a common-place phenomenon and there has been a steady increase in awareness of these crimes over the past five years in South Africa and internationally. Control is currently law enforcement's only viable strategy in response to the phenomenon of serial murder. Control means to identify, find, and apprehend (Egger 1984). Researchers have noted that the understanding of the psycho social context of serial murderers may assist in the identification, apprehension and prevention of these crimes (De Hart & Mahoney 1994).

While still small in numbers when compared to other crimes, indirect effects on communities are far reaching. Incidences of various anxiety based disorders dramatically increase in a community terrorised by serial murder (Biernat & Herkov 1994). In the United States of America after the slaying of five college students at Gainesville, Florida, nearly 700 students dropped out of the University. Handgun, mace and security system sales increased dramatically and sleeping habits changed. Counselling centres claimed to be overwhelmed by client demand (Biernat & Herkov 1994). Green (1991) found that large-scale disasters produce symptoms such as phobias, anxiety, fear, depression,

interpersonal problems, physical symptoms, post-traumatic stress and grief reactions.

## EPIDEMIOLOGY

The recent increase in awareness of serial murders can give the false impression that the phenomenon is a contemporary one, but it has been reported for centuries. Cases have been documented as early as the 15th century when Gilles de Rais reportedly sodomised and killed over 140 young boys (Internet Crime Archives 1996). In the late 1980s the Federal Bureau of Investigation estimated that there were about 45 multiple murderers active in the United States of America at any one time (DeHart & Mahoney 1994). Snyman (1992) states that in the United States (US), law enforcement officials claim that between 35 and 500 serial murderers are currently at large. Leyton (1986) stated that between 1970 and 1986 the incidence of serial murder in the US had increased by approximately 400 percent. While recordings and research on this phenomenon are more extensive in the US, it gives the false impression that this country has an above average incidence rate of serial murder. Between 1960 and 1985, 47 cases of serial murder were noted in countries like Hungary, Germany, England, France and countries in Southern and South-East Asia (Snyman 1992).

Researchers differ in their explanation for the increase in incidence. Some say that serial murders have remained proportionately constant over the years, but identification, detection, and labelling has improved in recent years. Others claim there has been an increase. "Linkage blindness" can also contribute to the "dark" or hidden figures in that there is not a comprehensive system for linking data on crimes committed over long periods of time and in various geographical regions (Egger 1984). While technology can certainly help in the investigation of certain murders, it may also facilitate serial murder, such as in the case of the Internet. *Online serial murderers* are now becoming a concern. It has been cited that they

commonly use similar techniques in luring victims. They gain their victims' confidence, and then arrange for the meeting. All seem to seek out emotionally vulnerable victims and play on their victims' insecurities. They make use of "chat-rooms" to avoid discovery by others (Serial Killer Report 1996).

In South Africa a lack of detail hampers the identification of people who have committed serial murder. Official crime statistics only report the murder weapon and the race of the offender and victim (Snyman 1992). Also, people are not convicted of serial murder, the charge remains as murder, irrespective of the number of victims. In South Africa in 1996 alone, the following people labelled as "serial killers" were recorded in local newspapers: Samuel Jacques Coetzee (5 victims), Christopher Zikode (18 victims) (*Die Burger* 1996), unknown NASREC killer (12 victims) (*City Press* 1996), unknown Brakenfell killer (19 victims) (*Pretoria News* 1996), unknown Tzaneen killer (3 victims) (*Citizen* 1996), unknown River strangler (5 victims) (*Saturday Star* 1996). In 1995 Moses Sithole was apprehended for 38 murders, 40 rapes, and 6 robberies (*Saturday Star* 1996). In 1994 David Selepe was apprehended for the murder of 11 people (*Saturday Star* 1996). This indicates that it is not such a rare phenomenon. Keeney and Heide (1995) state that over the past 20 years serial murder has received and increase in attention from law enforcement and the media, this can also attribute to the "increase" in the phenomenon.

As stated above, in the South African context people are charged for murder irrespective of the number of victims. How can one then distinguish academically between various types of murder and between murder and serial murder?

### **TYPES OF MURDER**

Douglas, Burgess, Burgess and Ressler (1992) distinguish between 32 different forms of homicide. The four broad categories that homicide has been

divided into are as follows: criminal enterprise homicide, personal cause homicide, sexual homicide, and group cause homicide. Hale defines serial murder as a form of murder falling in the category of multicide (Hale 1994). Multicide implies more than one homicide. The other two types in Hale's categorisation are spree and mass murder.

### **DEFINITION OF SERIAL MURDER**

Creating a common definition for serial murder is a difficult task, specifically if one aims to label the person as a serial murderer instead of trying to understand it within the context of the person and his circumstances. McKenzie (1995) feels that the issue has been complicated by authors using various terms interchangeably. These terms include: lust murder, serial murder, mass murder, sexual homicide, multicide and multiple murder. She defines serial murder as "one-on-one murder, repetitive, involving a stranger, with a motive known only to the murderer" (McKenzie 1995:3).

Currently scholars have come to agree that multiple murder should be grouped into three categories: spree, mass, and serial murder. Mass murder would be killing three or more individuals at one time (Hickey 1991; Keeney & Heide 1995; Leyton 1986; Norris 1988). The killing of three or more individuals in different locations but within the context of a single event is called spree murder (Keeney & Heide 1995). For serial murder it is the killing of multiple victims and the time factor comes into play when creating many of the definitions for serial murder (Keeney & Heide 1995). The time period varies between days and years.

There are two common assumptions in psychiatric literature with regard to serial murder:

- The serial murderer is male.
- This type of murder is a form of "lust murder"

perpetrated by a "sexual sadist".

Keeney and Heide (1994 1995) dispute the notion that serial murder is the domain of the male person. Other researchers assume that the phenomenon is so obvious that creating an operational definition is unnecessary (Keeney & Heide 1995). Holmes and DeBurger (1988) have divided the phenomenon of serial murder into four "profiles". The differences are based on behavioural background, victimology, modus operandi, and geographic mobility. *Visionary* serial murders occur because of a motivation of psychotic delusions or hallucinations. *Mission-orientated* serial murder occurs when an individual seeks to rid society of a certain "undesirable" group of people. *Hedonistic* serial murder occurs for pleasure, thrills, or contentment. *Power/ control* serial murder occurs as a compensation for a lack of social or personal mastery by exerting control over victims (Holmes & DeBurger 1988).

Definitions tend to be either too narrow or too broad or too ignorant. For communication and research purposes the following operational definition was created according to which the term serial murder will be used:

- It is the murder of three or more persons.
- The killings occurred at different times.
- The killings were not connected.
- The motive is not primarily for material gain.
- The motive is not primarily revenge. Revenge may play a role but it is not revenge against a single person or individual but rather against a category of individuals and the murderer selects his victims accordingly.
- Elimination of a witness is not the intention.

- The person(s) are motivated to kill.

The author feels that the definition offered here helps determine which persons could participate in the study, gives appropriate leeway yet has set parameters. It allows for the type of person who murders people staying at a boarding house and thereby having at least some pre-murder contact. It allows for the presence or absence of sexual activity during the murder. It also allows for revenge but not against specific individuals for actions directly committed against the murderer prior to the murder. In addition this definition is not gender biased and acknowledges that women are just as capable of committing serial murder as men are.

### THE SERIAL MURDERER AND THE VICTIM

The following questions can be posed: What picture does literature offer on who serial murderers are and secondly, who are the victims of serial murders?

#### Developmental themes in serial murder

Ansevics and Doweiko (1991) examine various literature sources on 11 individuals who committed serial murder and formulate a number of themes that suggest common developmental characteristics for these people during childhood and adolescence. Their average age at the onset of the killings is 24,7 years, and the average number of years of education is 13,45 years. In terms of religion, 64 percent were Roman Catholic and 36 percent were born-again Christians. In terms of marital status 73 percent were single (36 percent were single and living with someone) and 27 percent were married. The average IQ was 116, 73. Regarding drug abuse history, 82 percent displayed no substance abuse history while 73 percent used drugs and/or alcohol before commission of a murder. The average height was 71 inches. Ninety-one percent had some form of police affiliation or collected police paraphernalia; 82 percent had a history of family violence and 9 percent a sexual

abuse history. Seventy-three percent had viewed violent pornography; 91 percent had a history of adolescent sexual acting out without treatment while all of them (100%) had some or other sexual fetish.

### Victims

Often victims will share common characteristics but the events surrounding the murder may differ. The victim need not have taunted or threatened the person in any way. Victims may share common features of being prestigeless, powerless, and from lower socioeconomic groups (vagrants, prostitutes, migrant workers, homosexuals, missing children and the elderly). Holmes and DeBurger (1988) list five primary elements of serial murder:

- First, the murders are usually one-on-one events.
- Second, the relationship between victim and assailant is usually that of strangers.
- Third, due to the stranger perpetration the motives are not obvious.
- Fourth, the individual is motivated to kill, yet often the murder comes at the end of a long period of brutality.
- Fifth, the central element is repetitive homicide.

Frequently the pattern of a person committing serial murder is revealed through his choice of victims. In many cases the victims are chosen solely on the basis that they crossed the path of the murderer. Victims are self-selecting only in the sense that they were at a certain place at a certain point in time (Egger 1984). These common features in serial murder victims contribute to the fear instilled in communities when such events occur.

### THEORY: THE INTERACTIONAL VIEW

The interactional approach is concerned with how individuals cope with the problems they experience in everyday-life, the interactions between individuals, and the perceptions and relations individuals experience within themselves, with others and the world. It is concerned with people as they function "in relation to" since one cannot be removed from a context (Nardone & Watzlawick 1993). Since every person is involved in one or more contexts simultaneously more than one reality exists. Therefore every interpretative model that claims to hold an all-encompassing, single truth as to the explanation of human behaviour will inevitably refute itself due to self-reference. If a theory finds confirmation within itself or through its own instruments it falls into the trap of becoming nonfalsifiable. An example would be the dogmatic assumption that the discovery of the real causes of the present problem constitute a *conditio sine qua non* (essential condition) for what the philosopher, Karl Popper, has called a self-sealing proposition; that is, a hypothesis that is validated both by its success and its failure and thus becomes unfalsifiable (Nardone & Watzlawick 1993:2). In essence the search for the cause of a problem becomes a never-ending cycle only put to an end by a theory creating its own definition of what the answer should be. The interactional view focuses rather on the interaction between individuals and their world. These interactional patterns underpin a problem. Here lies the reason for the emphasis on process rather than content. The interactional view holds the assumption that an individual's rigid perceptive-reactive system leads to the individual applying a "good solution" indiscriminately to a variety of problems (Nardone & Watzlawick 1993; Watzlawick 1997, personal communication).

From these theoretical assumptions the therapist needs to come to an understanding of the client's interactions with his world. The therapist needs to

gather certain information that hopefully answers questions from the therapist's framework. While traditional therapists would try to diagnose the person, the "interactional" therapist tries to gain an understanding of what lies at the root of the problem and the person's role in the system. He or she then aims to analyse the interactions of the client. One can almost call this a method of "diagnosing" the system instead of the person.

### **The interactional analysis**

Nardone and Watzlawick (1993) feel that the following questions need be answered to arrive at such a conclusion:

- What are the client's observable behaviours and usual behaviour patterns?
- How does the client define the problem?
- How does the problem manifest itself?
- In whose company does the problem appear, worsen, disguise itself, or disappear?
- Where does it usually appear?
- How often does it appear and how serious is it?
- What has been done so far to solve the problem?
- Who would be most affected by the disappearance of the problem?

Swart and Wiehahn (1979) have a similar approach but term it a descriptive interactional analysis. They posit that the following five steps will lead the clinician to arrive at fairly complete understanding of the client's situation:

### **How does the client talk to the therapist?**

Is his speech logical, coherent, or are there any thought disorders? Is there aggressive speech, ambivalence, anxiety, sympathy? It is also necessary to take note of any non-verbal actions which may validate or contradict the verbal communication.

### **How does the individual talk about the problem?**

Is there blaming, insight, denial, intellectualisation, vagueness on behalf of the person?

### **What is the nature of the patient's relationships with other people?**

How does the person talk about these relationships, and how are these relationships helping to maintain the symptom in the here-and-now? By examining the client-therapist relationship and the client's previous relationships, an understanding of how the person relates to others and his environment can be reached. The relationship is regarded as a microcosm of the client's world (Yalom 1995; personal communication June 1997) and serves as a basis for "analysing" the client's interactional style. For the author this serves as the most important aspect of the interactional analysis in that the interaction taking place in front of one in a therapeutic situation is the only reality the therapist has.

### **What does the individual achieve by his actions?**

Here secondary gain plays a major role. On a meta-level, what is the function of the symptom? Here the effect on others is vitally important. If the "others" behave in a consistent way that benefits the individual then the behaviour will most likely continue. If the "others" start to behave differently then the same "benefits" might not be there for the individual and the action therefore loses its meaning and becomes purposeless. The individual must then find other means to achieve the same goal. In layman's terms, the individual can only behave in a certain way if the "others" allow him to. Hence the systemic viewpoint of

altering the feedback and the ability to “cure” “sick” individuals without having ever seen them in therapy. The therapist may use his own feelings and reactions in therapy as a “springboard” for the therapeutic interventions he embarks on (traditional therapies such as psychoanalysis may term these feelings and reactions as “counter-transference”).

#### **In what context is the interview taking place?**

The context can have an influence on the type of interaction taking place. An individual who has been ordered by a court to enter therapy, or because of a spouse who has insisted on the therapy, is going to bring to the therapeutic situation a different style of communicating than someone who has entered therapy voluntarily. Taking the context into account allows the therapy to be adapted to the individual, thereby being respectful of the client's situation instead of drawing certain conclusions about the client's “resistance” or “denial” and forming a therapeutic base on hypotheses attached to these “defence” mechanisms as is the case with more traditional approaches.

Beyers (personal communication 1995) believes another question needs be asked to complete the analysis - what are the client's strengths? By determining these as far as possible the therapist aims to find out which interactional factors, which may even include the above, could contribute to a positive prognosis in therapy. It is necessary to exploit these strengths to help affect change in even a small area of the individual's interactional style.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In this article a review of the current literature on the criminological relevance of serial murder as well as some traditional viewpoints on crime were given. An interactional perspective on the phenomenon of serial murder in which the contextual aspects, based on the interview situation between researchers and the

individuals in question, were also provided. This review moved away from traditional methods of focussing on the murders and the individuals in isolation and tried to include broader factors such as the influence of other people.

Definitions of serial murder were discussed and a definition was operationalised for the purpose of future research with an explanation of the nature of the interactional view and the methods and procedures which can be used.

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