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Defining and classifying serial murder in the context of perpetrator motivation

Christopher J. Ferguson*, Diana E. White, Stacey Cherry,
Marta Lorenz, Zhara Bhimani

Department of Psychology, University of Central Florida, P.O. Box 161390, Orlando, FL 32816, USA

Abstract

The last several decades have seen increased research attention to the subject of serial murder. Unfortunately, an empirical understanding of serial homicide continues to be impeded by difficulties in establishing a working definition for serial murder. Current definitions for serial homicide tend to focus on frequency and timing of homicide behaviors, and thus leave some confusion as to which groups of individuals should be included under the heading of serial murders. This article suggests alterations to the definition of serial murder, which focus not only on frequency and timing of homicide behaviors, but also on the motivation and context of those behaviors. © 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The phenomenon of serial murder, although a rare form of homicide, has attracted an increased degree of both public scrutiny and research interest in the last few decades (Fisher, 1997). Although some argue that the phenomenon of serial murder is, in part, an exaggerated social construct (Jenkins, 1994), government statistics document that the clearance rate for homicides in the United States has dropped from 93 percent in 1962 to approximately 65 percent in 1995 (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 1995). Holmes and DeBurger (1985) suggested that a significant rise in the incidence of serial murder might account for many unsolved homicides. Attempting to assess the incidence and prevalence of serial murder continues to be hampered by the lack of a clear definition of serial murder (Hickey, 1997). It is the

purpose of this article to examine current trends and issues in the way that serial murder is defined, how these definitions affect empirical understanding of serial murder, as well as to examine ways in which the definition of serial murder may be improved.

Defining serial murder

Jenkins (1994) argues that serial murder is a socially constructed phenomenon. To the extent that differences in the use of definitions can widely change the reported prevalence rates of this phenomenon, he is correct. Yet it is the definition of serial murder that is socially constructed, the homicides themselves are actual physical realities. Deciding which homicides fit under the umbrella of “serial murder” is a difficult process. At the present time, there does not appear to be any standard for making this distinction, either within the media or within scientific research. As a result, prevalence figures on serial murder can and do vary widely, possibly reflecting the individual reporter’s own view on

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-407-823-2216.

E-mail address: CJFerguson1111@aol.com
(C.J. Ferguson).

whether serial murder is common or uncommon rather than any objective reality. Establishing a set definition of serial murder that demonstrates reliability would be a first step in standardizing the reporting of prevalence statistics, as well as educating both criminal justice professionals and the public on exactly what is meant by “serial murder.” At such point, though a definition of serial murder may still arguably be socially constructed, at least it would be one definition and not many separate definitions used interchangeably. Before examining possible components to a definition of serial murder, this article will concern itself with a discussion of those definitions of serial murder in current use.

In the *Crime Classification Manual*, Douglas, Burgess, Burgess, and Ressler (1992) define serial homicide as “three or more separate events in three or more separate locations with an emotional cooling off period in between homicides” (p. 21). The emotional cooling off period may last days, weeks, months, or years. This definition discusses the time frame in which the homicides occur, which distinguishes serial murder from other forms of multiple murder such as mass or spree murder. Though the specific number of victims specified by the definition may vary, the basis of this definition is generally common to most definitions of serial murder (e.g., Egger, 1984; Hickey, 1997; Holmes & Holmes, 1998b). The *Crime Classification Manual*, which arguably forms the basis of the FBI’s understanding of serial murder, does not include motive specifically in the definition of serial murder. In a book intended for a nonresearch audience, however, the first author of the *Crime Classification Manual* states that “Along with manipulation, domination and control, a significant motivator for almost all serial killing is sexual, even if, as with Son of Sam David Berkowitz, the crimes themselves are not overtly so” (Douglas & Olshaker, 1999, p. 238). Blanchard (1995) agrees with this assessment stating that, “Male serial killers almost universally include a sexual assault as an integral part of their ritualized murder patterns” (p. 62). This linkage of serial murder with male perpetrated sexual homicide arguably forms the implicit basis for the FBI’s understanding of serial murder. Unfortunately, this may result in a form of both empirical myopia, as well as investigative blockage, as serial homicides that do not fit the stereotype are discounted. For instance, Douglas and Olshaker (1999) suggest that Aileen Wournous is the only known female serial killer in the United States. Even were serial murder to be defined as sexual homicide, the authors seem to ignore cases such as Gwendolyn Graham, Catherine May Wood, Judith Neely, Carol Bundy, Karla Homolka, and others who participated in serial sexual homicides. Curiously, the authors themselves

acknowledge some of these cases in their discussions, yet discount them as serial murderers. Moreover, if a sexual motive is not required for serial homicide, the number of female serial murderers increases significantly, accounting for 10–15 percent of known serial murderers (Holmes, Hickey, & Holmes, 1998). This is an important point to note, as female suspects may be ignored in cases of serial murder if the perpetrator is assumed to be male and acting out of sexual desire. Analyses such as those of Douglas et al. seem to tacitly (though perhaps unreliably) include male serial murderers without sexual motives, while ignoring females with similar circumstances. At the same time, it should be noted that analyses of serial murder that utilizes definitions that are not dependent on sexual motive would likely increase the total number of male serial murderers identified, as well as female.

Egger (1984) provides a detailed definition of serial murder which focuses not only on the number and spacing of victims, but also on the role of fantasy in the act of serial murder. According to Egger, serial murderers spend a great deal of time fantasizing and preparing for their eventual crime. The act of serial murder then fulfills some intrinsic internal need and is not primarily for financial gain or other pragmatic ends. Although the fantasy element to Egger’s definition does not explicitly demand that the fantasies be of a sexual nature, this appears to be the implicit understanding. Arguably, an individual may have homicide fantasies which revolve around power, non-sexual torture or even religious themes, yet the “fantasy” element of Egger’s definition fits most neatly with a sexual theme. Egger, then, may be similar in his views regarding serial murder as Douglas and Olshaker (1999) and the FBI. Some serial murderers who do not meet this sexual homicide stereotype, such as David Berkowitz or the Zodiac Killer, are rationalized with notions of symbolic sexual expression or the possibility that the perpetrator may masturbate at a later time while fantasizing about the murders he has committed.

Hickey (1997) finds Egger’s definition of serial murder to be too restrictive and too focused on implied sexual elements. In particular, Hickey notes that law enforcement definitions of serial murder may ignore forms of serial murder other than sexual homicide. For example, female or male medical employees who engage in power-motivated murder of patients, as well as individuals who systematically murder their family members for financial or personal gain would be ignored by this definition, even though such individuals murder serially. Hickey argues that a working definition of serial murder should be as broad as possible. Specifically, Hickey argues that serial murder should be defined as “all offenders who through premeditation killed three or more victims

over a period of days, weeks, months or years...” (p. 12). Hickey notes that definitions of serial murder which exclude financial motives, victims who are not strangers, or female perpetrators are based on speculation rather than on any empirical foundation. Hickey’s definition of serial murder and particularly his inclusion of nonsexual motives for serial murder represents a significant advance over definitions that rely on male perpetrated sexual homicide. In particular, this definition sets a standard of consistency that is set apart from the FBI’s often contradictory understanding of serial murder. At the same time, Hickey’s definition may actually be too broad.

Using Hickey’s (1997) definition of serial murder, a wide range of individuals may now be included with widely disparate motives. In addition to males and females who are motivated to engage in serial murder for pleasure, individuals such as terrorists, assassins, and armed robbers who kill multiple victims over time would be potentially classified as serial murderers. While Hickey makes the case that all such individuals share behavioral similarities, it may be argued that this definition is too broad to be empirically meaningful. For example, though a male who murders for sexual pleasure may have distinct behavioral patterns from a female who murders hospital patients for the sense of power that it gives her, these two individuals have some commonalities, namely, that for both, the murder itself is the primary motivating act. By contrast, an armed robber who kills may be motivated primarily by financial gain, and could arguably be distinct from the first two individuals. Thus, a definition which is too general and focuses primarily on temporality and broad classes of behavior may result in including individuals into one category who are fundamentally different from each other.

Keeney and Heide (1994) provide a slightly different definition of serial murder. They suggest that serial murder is “the premeditated murder of three or more victims committed over time, in separate incidents, in a civilian context, with the murder activity being chosen by the offender” (p. 384). The primary difference between this definition and that of Hickey (1997) is regarding the civilian nature of the homicides. Although this was meant to rule out cases of multiple killings in the context of military engagements, as well as political assassinations, and thus represents an improvement, it still presents some ambiguities. It is unclear that killings committed as an act of war would likely have been included under the heading of serial murder by any researcher. Similarly, it is not clear why political assassins would be excluded, while organized crime assassins would remain under the heading of serial murder. Further, although it was not likely the authors’ intentions, this

definition may imply to some that any act of multiple killings occurring on a military base would not be included under the heading of serial murder. Yet a soldier who systematically killed several of his or her own comrades, or prisoners of war could reasonably be labeled a serial murderer.

Each of these studies presented a valiant attempt to operationally define serial murder, and the deficiencies of each approach detailed the difficulties of attaining a definition which was both reasonably inclusive of all serial murderers, yet capable of discriminating between serial murderers and other groups of homicide perpetrators.

Power and serial murder

While some researchers (e.g., Hickey, 1997) assert that serial murderers are by and large acting out of a need to reassert themselves against a society in which they feel powerless, it is not necessarily true that all serial murderers are motivated by a need to reduce negative affect. Suggestions that serial murderers are psychologically maladjusted may stem from several sources. The first of these is an arguably natural inclination for researchers and lay people alike to assume that individuals who are capable of such highly deviant and violent behaviors must themselves be psychologically disturbed. Fox and Levin (1999), however, note that serial murderers may neither be mentally deranged nor products of an abusive childhood. Thus, serial murders may be psychologically functional. Further, if psychological disturbance is noted in serial murderers who are apprehended, this may be because their psychological disturbance is the cause of their apprehension, rather than their pattern of homicides. Thus, apprehended serial murderers represent an essentially self-selecting sample who are not representative of serial murderers as a group.

Rather than serial murder being a deviant coping mechanism for stress or a poor childhood, with some individuals serial murder may function as a source of pleasure by obtaining gratuitous power over individuals the perpetrator views as less than human. Thus, serial murderer phenomenon may not have root in psychopathology (or at least not mental illness), but rather in a system for obtaining pleasure that focuses on violence toward others who the perpetrator has dehumanized. Serial murder, then, may be a source of pleasure that is similar to hunting or fishing for other individuals, only with the “catch” being human rather than a nonhuman animal. A number of serial murderers, including Karla Homolka, Ted Bundy, Wayne Williams, David Berkowitz, and others have neither any clear history of psychological disturbance nor childhood which involved physical or sexual

abuse. An examination of Ted Bundy's childhood, for instance, revealed that the most unusual component of his upbringing was his relationships with his family. Bundy's mother gave birth to him while she was still quite young, and for many years she pretended to be his sister, while his grandparents took on the parental role. Only during young adulthood (age 23) did Bundy discover the truth of his family background (Holmes & Holmes, 1998a). While this circumstance was certainly unusual, and made some researchers quick to form hypotheses about how this situation might have affected Bundy, it should be added that this unusual family situation was identical to one experienced by the guitarist, Eric Clapton (Clapton & Roberty, 1995), and likely many other individuals.

Aspects of motive in serial murder

While Douglas and Olshaker (1999) define serial murder explicitly in terms of sexual motivation, Hickey (1997) avoids discussion of motive altogether. From Douglas and Olshaker, one can observe a potential warning regarding the inclusion of motive into a definition of serial murder. Motive is often difficult to discern, and there is a risk that researchers or investigators may project motives onto a murder that may be inaccurate. Yet without the inclusion of motive in the definition of serial murder, research may be unable to be focused onto a distinct group of individuals. It should be recognized that attempts to find clearly delineated boundaries for a definition of serial murder for which there is no "gray space" are unlikely to be successful. In particular, attempting to include motive into a definition of serial murder will often result in some degree of subjectivity on the part of the researcher. For instance, if "power" was included as a motive for serial murder but "financial gain" was not included within the definition of serial murder, where would a woman who systematically murdered several husbands for the insurance money fall? In this case, clear financial incentives are one motive of the perpetrator's behavior. Yet, on a more subjective level, it could be argued that the perpetrator is also acting out of a sense of power. One potential problem with including "power" as a motive for serial murder is that it is possible to argue almost any criminal is acting out of a desire to express power. As such, specific motives shall be avoided in attempting to construct a motive-based definition of serial murder.

In an attempt to recognize serial murderers as a distinct class of individuals divergent from other types of criminals, it is suggested that a definition

of serial murder should include the following elements:

- (1) Three or more victims killed during multiple and discrete events.
- (2) Causing death to the victim, at the time of the killing, was considered to be pleasurable, stress relieving, or otherwise consistent with the perpetrator's internal set of values. The attacks themselves did not fulfill only functional purposes.
- (3) The murders did not occur under the discretion or blessing of any political or criminal organization.

The first element to this definition, namely, that three or more victims are killed during multiple and discrete events with a significant cooling off period in between, bears much resemblance to those of Douglas et al. (1992) and Hickey (1997). This portion of the definition is intended to distinguish serial murder from other types of murder, particularly mass murder and spree murder. In cases of serial murder, each event should essentially be unrelated to each other event. For example, if a murderer were to kill a witness to a prior murder, these two murders would be considered to be linked, and nondiscrete from each other. By contrast, a woman who kills her husband with poison, and years later similarly kills one of her children, then a second child still years after that would be considered to be conducting discrete murder, even though all of the victims are biologically related. Discrete homicides, then, imply that the motive for each homicide is autonomous from that of each other homicide. That does not mean that the motive for each homicide cannot be identical in each case, but rather, that one homicide does not generate the motive for the next homicide. Discrete homicides may still be linked by police organizations due to similarities in modus operandi or in signature, although it should not be assumed that all serial murderers have clear signature elements to their crimes.

The second element of this definition of serial murder is that causing death to the victims, at the time of the killings, was considered to be pleasurable, stress relieving, or otherwise consistent with the perpetrator's internal set of values. This is to distinguish the motive for killing from those that may be limited to rage, crimes of passion, or hatred or that may be limited to functional, emotionally neutral homicides. While serial murderers may feel a sense of hatred or rage toward their victims, this form of hatred may, in and of itself, be pleasure inducing. In other words, the perpetrator enjoys or feels justified in hating his or her victims. Thus, the act of murder, though motivated by hatred, is still pleasurable. As an

example, a man who believes that prostitutes are dirty or immoral and sets out to rid the world of them in the name of God would be acting out of a sense of justified hatred, and thus would find the homicides pleasurable, or at least consistent with his value system. By contrast, a man who murders his wife because he has discovered she is having an affair would also be acting out of hatred or rage. Yet in such a case, the perpetrator may often experience his emotions as a negative event, resulting in either distancing oneself from the crime or shifting blame for the crime onto the victim (Felson & Ribner, 1981). Unfortunately, little empirical analysis of levels of guilt in convicted murderers has been conducted, though a report by Ihalainen (1989) suggested that convicted murderers suffered more sleep disturbances and nightmares which the author attributed to feelings of guilt. If Ihalainen was correct, the perpetrator would feel himself (or herself) to be in pain, and the murder itself would be out of step with his value system, or displeasing. This is not to suggest that serial murderers never feel negative emotions, such as guilt or depression, related to their homicides, but these emotions likely come after the commission of the homicide, not during the homicide itself. Further, the perpetrator is able to overcome any negative emotions and continue to perpetrate further homicides in order to obtain repeated pleasure. Functional homicides, in which the perpetrator commits murder in order to reach a secondary goal such as an armed robbery, would be considered to be motivated by concerns other than pure emotional gratification and thus not pleasurable. As such, an armed robber who tends to panic during the robberies and kills several people would not be considered a serial murder if he was motivated only by attaining financial resources. By contrast, a woman who murders several husbands in succession for their insurance policies would be considered a serial murderer, so long as she attains a sense of fulfillment or pleasure from the homicides themselves. Although, in this case, the perpetrator benefits monetarily, it is arguable that the primary motive was not financial gain, but rather pleasure or a sense of power. Although unlikely, it is not inconceivable that an individual might perpetrate a series of homicides which he or she finds unpleasant. For example, a mother (or father, for that matter) with a sick child requiring expensive medical care might lead a series of spouses to “accidental” deaths out of desire for the insurance which could be used to care for the child. Such an individual may gain nothing from the act of homicide itself and indeed find the act quite unpleasant, but necessary to fulfill the “ultimate” motive. Thus, money (and not pleasure) is the only motive, and this case would not be consistent with the current definition of serial murder.

This aspect of serial murder as consistent with an individual's sense of values can further be understood as a sense of personal justification, that the homicides were justified by the perpetrator's own sense of morality. Theodore Kaczynski, who killed three individuals and wounded twenty-three over an eighteen-year period with a series of letters or placed bombs, made statements suggesting these attacks were a justified personal war against an industrial and academic social environment. An individual who preys upon and kills prostitutes because they are “Godless” would fit this description, as would a woman such as Aileen Wournous who viewed men as sexual predators, or an individual who kills abortion providers as “murderers.” In each case, the homicide is viewed not as the end result of an emotional trauma that is rationalized as “temporary insanity,” but rather an event which, to the perpetrator, is understandable and even desirable.

The final facet of this definition of serial murder is that the murder did not occur under the discretion or blessing of any political or criminal organization. Though serial murderers can, and sometimes do, come together in teams to commit a number of homicides (Hickey, 1997), serial murders do not function under the blessing of any established organization, legal or criminal. As such, serial murderers operate in the context of motives that are intrinsic unto themselves, rather than those which are supplied by an outside organization. Team killers, such as Douglas Clark and Carol Bundy, commit murders as a team because they agree upon, or share intrinsic motives. Clark and Bundy, for example, agreed on some level that sexually motivated homicides were appealing. By contrast, most political or organized crime assassins work under an established political or criminal organization. As such, they are endorsed by a larger group and often told who to kill by that larger group. Although killing for these individuals may be both pleasurable and a source of fantasy, these individuals would not qualify as serial murderers. By contrast, were an individual to commit assassinations for his or her own reasons, outside of the auspices of a political or criminal organization, he or she could reasonably be classified as a serial murderer. Theodore Kaczynski would be an example of a self-motivated assassin. As such, he would fit this definition of serial murderer.

The limitations of defining serial murder

Definitions of serial murder in the research literature continue to lack agreement and uniformity (Keeny & Heide, 1994). As a result, studies which purport to examine incidents of serial murder may focus on

differing populations of offenders, depending upon the definition of serial murder employed. The current article is viewed as an attempt to both clarify the definition of serial murder, to distinguish serial murder from other types of homicide offenders, and to foster communication and discourse on the topic of serial murder.

Unfortunately, no one definition of serial murder will achieve the ability to identify and distinguish serial murderers without error. Most definitions of serial murder, including the one presented in this article, present dichotomous constructs in which offenders presumably do or do not fall. It is unlikely that all offenders will so easily conform their behavior to match established categories. To succeed on a categorical basis, a definition of serial murder would need to focus only on clearly identifiable behaviors, such as the definition suggested by Hickey (1997). Yet such definitions run the risk of lacking the ability to discriminate between serial murderers and other offenders. Arguably, the critical components of serial murder exist not in broad, clearly identifiable behaviors, but rather in the mind and motives of the perpetrator himself or herself. Unfortunately, intrinsic motives are difficult to assess. Motive will often need to be inferred from the nature of the murders committed, as well as the statements of the perpetrator if he or she is caught, and if he or she is willing to be interviewed. A further cautionary note must be raised however, namely, that the self-report of a serial homicide perpetrator may be tainted with self-serving efforts either to appear less malevolent or conversely to stir up media interest in him or herself. In essence, perpetrators of serial homicide may lie about their motives to fulfill a secondary set of motivations. The study of serial murder is likely to remain an inexact science at best. Examinations of serial murder perpetrators are further hindered by the observation that the population of serial murderers available for quantitative study is essentially self-selecting. For example, as argued by Holmes and Holmes (1998b), there may be two hundred active serial murderers in the United States at any given time, most of whom are not apprehended. Arguably, those serial murderers that are apprehended may be less skilled, or more impulsive than those who evade capture. If this is true, studies of apprehended serial murderers may be biased and misleading.

The establishment of a reliable and valid definition of serial murder may help to create a foundation upon which empirical research into this

phenomenon can rest. Without such an established foundation, researchers with differing operation definitions of serial murder may, in essence, be comparing “apples and oranges.” It is hoped that the presentation of the definition in this article may be useful in focusing the scope of the phenomenon of serial murder as well as fostering dialogue regarding the topic of serial murder and other forms of mass homicide.

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