

Serial Murder: A More Accurate and Inclusive Definition

Belea T. Keeney

Kathleen M. Heide

Abstract: *A review of research on serial murder revealed that the 10 definitions frequently cited failed to adequately represent the totality of serial murder. This article reviews the evolution of these definitions in the professional literature. A more complete definition is proposed that encompasses all types of serial murder, not only those committed by roaming males who act out of lust. By being more inclusive, this definition is broad enough to include acts of multiple destructiveness committed by men and women for both instrumental and expressive purposes.*

*Dorothea Puentes, 59, was charged in 1989 with the murders of nine of her tenants in a Sacramento, California boarding house. The murders occurred over a four-year period and were alleged to have been overdose poisonings of legal substances.

*Brian Rosenfeld was charged in 1992 with the murders of three nursing home patients in St. Petersburg, Florida. The murders occurred over a five-year period and were alleged to have been overdose poisonings by injection of legal substances. Rosenfeld was suspected by law enforcement officials of murdering over 20 other patients.

*Christine Falling, 19, was charged in 1982 with the murder of three children she was babysitting. The murders occurred over a three-year period and were alleged to have been strangulations or smotherings. Law enforcement officials also suspected Falling of two other child murders.

Three murderers, three types of victims, three methods of killing with common elements: the murders were multiple and spaced over time. Despite evidence of having killed several people over an extended period of time, these offenders would not have been classified under traditional definitions of serial murder. With few and isolated exceptions, the professional literature on serial murder published before 1990 would not have considered these individuals to fit within its parameters.

In the past two decades, serial murder has received increased attention from both law enforcement agencies and the popular media (Keeney & Heide, 1994). A series of highly publicized multiple murders committed by men prompted predictions of an "epidemic of serial homicide" (Norris, 1988, p. 249). Research on this topic has been extremely limited, however,

Presented at the 46th annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Miami, Florida, Nov. 1994.

International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 39(4), 1995

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due to the relatively rare occurrence of this phenomenon and the difficulty in obtaining access to these offenders. Basic research in this area is literally in its infancy; to date, little traditional, academic, or empirical research has been attempted (Jenkins, 1994; Keeney & Heide, 1993).

One frequently encounters two implicit assumptions in the psychiatric literature on serial murder: (1) the serial murderer is male, and (2) serial murder is a type of "lust murder," perpetrated by a "sexual sadist" (Liebert, 1985; Palermo & Knudten, 1994). All too often writers fail to define the phenomenon of serial murder in their manuscripts, preferring on occasion to defer to law enforcement and criminology experts to do so in another forum (Liebert, 1985). Others, such as Sears (1991), appear to assume that the phenomenon is so obvious that the operationalization of the term is unnecessary at this point in time (Heide, 1994).

The failure of others to examine their implicit criteria for classifying a killer as a serial murderer affects the cases examined and the conclusions drawn. In his recent chapter on serial killers, Palermo (1994), a forensic psychiatrist whose cases included Jeff Dahmer, cited more than 20 cases of serial murder. These cases extended back into the nineteenth century, crossed continents, and included cases in Europe and Great Britain as well as the United States. Interestingly, all the serial murderers he referenced were male and all appear to have been motivated by "lust."

Definitions of serial murder, when provided, have typically been so narrow and exclusionary that they have not adequately represented the totality of multiple murder behavior. This article reviews the evolution of the definition in professional literature and proposes a more complete definition for future use. In order to understand and prevent serial murder, social scientists need an accurate definition of the phenomenon; one that encompasses *all* of the multiple murderers who kill in separate incidents over time.

SERIAL MURDER DISTINGUISHED

Prior to 1980, serial murder was grouped into the more general classification of mass murder. Scholars have since agreed that multiple murder can be grouped into one of three classifications: mass, spree, and serial murder (Gebreth, 1986).

The killing of three or more victims in one event has been defined as *mass murder* (Hickey, 1991; Levin & Fox, 1985; Leyton, 1986; Norris, 1988). For example, George Hennard opened fire on diners at the Luby's cafeteria in Killeen, Texas in October of 1991 and killed 23 people before he committed suicide. Because he remained in the same location and only a short amount of time elapsed overall, his crime was categorized as a mass murder. Another example of mass murder was the case of James Huberty. In July of 1984, he killed 21 people in what was dubbed the "McDonald's Massacre."

The killing of three or more victims in different locations but within the context of one event has been termed *spree murder* (Gebreth, 1986). William Cruse of Palm Bay, Florida killed a total of six people at different locations without ceasing criminal activity in April of 1987. Because there was no "cooling off" period between the murders, the locations changed, and his homicidal activities continued, his crimes were categorized as spree murders.

The killings of multiple victims spaced over time was a core element in the definitions of *serial murder* (see Table 1) frequently cited in the professional literature (Cormier, Angliker, Boyer, & Mersereau, 1972; Egger, 1990; Hickey, 1991; Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Levin & Fox, 1985; Leyton, 1986; Linedecker, 1990; Norris, 1988; Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988; Rule, 1980). The killings have occurred over a period of days (Levin & Fox, 1985) or weeks (Fox & Levin, 1994) to months or years. Well-known examples included Ted Bundy, John Gacy, and Albert DeSalvo. Ted Bundy, after conviction, confessed to the murder of over three dozen women in Washington, Utah, and Florida over an estimated four-year period. John Gacy was believed to have killed and buried over 30 teenage boys under his home near Chicago over six years. Albert DeSalvo, "The Boston Strangler," murdered 13 women in 1962 and 1963.

Cormier and colleagues (1972) were the first researchers to attempt clarification of this crime. They used the term *multicide* to refer to a number of murders committed by one perpetrator and spread over a significant period of time. Cormier and associates stated that the motivation was primarily pathological. They maintained that the murderer consistently selected a certain type of victim and was likely to continue killing until arrest.

Table 1 summarizes six dimensions of serial murder typically considered by Cormier and colleagues and the nine authors that followed them: motive, victim type, relationship with victim, sex specific, time period, and psychological state of the murderer. Two observations are apparent following perusal of this table. First, some authors did not address one or more dimensions in their definitions. Second, often the authors narrowly restricted the range of variability on specific dimensions.

Nine of the ten authors cited an internal, nonrational motive as a factor in defining serial murder (Egger, 1990; Hickey, 1991; Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Levin & Fox, 1985; Leyton, 1986; Linedecker, 1990; Norris, 1988; Ressler et al., 1988; Rule, 1980). Eight definitions included a similar victim type as another factor in their definitions (Cormier et al., 1972; Egger, 1990; Hickey, 1991; Levin & Fox, 1985; Leyton, 1986; Linedecker, 1990; Ressler et al., 1988; Rule, 1980).

Of the eight authors who examined the killer's relationship with the victim, seven concluded that the relationship was typically either nonex-

TABLE 1
DIMENSIONS OF SERIAL HOMICIDE CONSIDERED BY AUTHOR

Definition Elements	Motive	Victim Type	Relationship With Victim	Sex Specific	Time Period	Psychological State
Author Cormier et al., 1972		yes, usually type selected			months or years	deep-seated psychopathology
Egger, 1990	power over victims	powerless, symbolic value to killer	none	usually male	over time	compulsive behavior
Hickey, 1991	pleasure and/or gain	victims have common factors	any	males and females	over time	"Jekyll and Hyde" aspect
Holmes & DeBurger, 1988	intrinsic and nonrational from within killer		none or little		months or years	nihilistic and often sociopathic
Levin & Fox, 1985	excessive need for domination & control	usually similar victims	none	usually male	over time	typically sociopathic
Leyton, 1986	destruction of established societal order, sex secondary	usually special social class		male	over time	"lustmord," enjoyment from killing
Linedecker, 1990	power, domination & control	helpless, vulnerable	none	usually male	over time	usually sadistic, sexual psychopathic
Norris, 1988	no apparent rational motive		fragile			"addicted" to murder
Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988	sexual maladjustment with violent fantasies	yes, peculiar to offender	usually none	male	months or years	
Rule, 1980	no apparent motive	yes, vulnerable	none	usually male	over time	psychopathic & egotistical

istent or limited (Egger, 1990; Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Levin & Fox, 1985; Linedecker, 1990; Norris, 1988; Ressler et al., 1988; Rule, 1980). Of the seven authors who specifically addressed gender, six stated or implied that participation in serial murder was limited to men (Leyton, 1986; Ressler et al., 1988) or an almost exclusively male phenomenon (Egger, 1990; Levin & Fox, 1985; Linedecker, 1990; Rule, 1980).

Nine of the ten definitions of serial murder have emphasized repetitiveness and a specific time frame (e.g., months or years) between homicides (Cormier et al., 1972; Egger, 1990; Hickey, 1991; Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Levin & Fox, 1985; Leyton, 1986; Linedecker, 1990; Ressler et al., 1988; Rule, 1980). Furthermore, nine of these definitions held that an abnormal psychological state existed in the murderer (Cormier et al., 1972; Egger, 1990; Hickey, 1986; Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Levin & Fox, 1985; Leyton, 1986; Linedecker, 1990; Norris, 1988; Rule, 1980).

LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING DEFINITIONS

In reviewing existing definitions, it became apparent that some researchers have defined serial murder very narrowly; others, too broadly. For example, Egger (1990) included numerous indicators as to motive, victim type, relationship with victim, sex of offender, time period, psychological state, and geographical base. He stated that a homicide is a serial murder when "a second murder and/or subsequent murder" is committed by one or more people whose killings share certain characteristics. Egger indicated that the killers, who are typically men, have no prior relationship with their victims. The second or subsequent killing occurs at a different time and has "no apparent connection" to the first murder and is typically committed in a separate geographical site. The murderer in these types of cases is motivated to kill to achieve power over his victim rather than material gain. Victims may be selected for their "symbolic value," and are perceived as lacking status in society. Those killed are generally not capable of fighting back or alerting other people to the mortal situation in which they find themselves. Egger gave examples of "vagrants, prostitutes, migrant workers, homosexuals, missing children, and single and often elderly women" as classes of people who are viewed as powerless "given their situation in time, place or status within their immediate surroundings" (p. 4).

Heide (1991) noted that "Egger's definition may exclude some 'killers' who would fit under this general rubric, were the phenomenon not so over-defined" (p. 1103). In Heide's view, Egger's definition limited further exploration by narrowing the definition "to capture a specific type of serial murder, rather than serial murder in general" (p. 1103).

In sharp contrast to the extensive definition provided by Egger, the definition used by the FBI was brief. Serial homicide was indicated by the

murder of at least three victims with a cooling off period between them. This period could be as brief as two days or it could be longer, such as weeks or months (Ressler et al., 1988).

One of the more broad definitions was offered by Hickey (1991). He maintained that serial murderers should include men or women who kill "a minimum of three to four victims" over time. He noted that there is typically a pattern evident in their homicides (p. 8). Hickey's definition was an important step forward for several reasons. One, it shifted the focus of serial homicide research away from the current and almost exclusive perspective on the male serial "lust" murderer. Two, it explicitly acknowledged the participation of women in this crime. Third, it allowed for the inclusion of offenders who had a relationship with their victims (such as landlords, health care workers, etc.) as part of this phenomenon.

Keeney (1992) developed the following definition in an attempt to refine this concept and further scientific investigation:

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. 7)

This definition obviously excludes killings performed by military functionaries as part of their job duties and political assassinations by terrorist groups. It does include health care workers who murder their patients, parents who murder their children, professional assassins who operate under the confines of organized crime syndicates, and persons who kill multiple spouses/lovers. The minimum number of murder victims is set at three, which coincides with the FBI designation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The proposed definition has several benefits. It appears to encompass all types of serial murder, not only those committed by roaming males who act out of lust. It is premature at this time, given the empirical knowledge available on serial murder, to equate serial murder with sexual sadism. It is currently unknown whether the incidence of multiple murders perpetrated by sexual sadists over time is the most prevalent type of serial murder because the phenomenon of serial murder has not been operationalized by many investigators. Hence, samples of "serial murderers" have often been generated by the investigators' unstated conception of which multiple murderers do and do not qualify as serial murderers.

The traditional exclusion of women from consideration as sample subjects by many investigators is an excellent example of how prevailing beliefs can limit science when not subjected to scrutiny. In a sample of serial murderers who killed from 1795 through 1988, Hickey (1991) found that 34 of the 203 individuals who killed multiple victims in separate incidents over

time were female. These data suggest that over the last two centuries, approximately one of six serial murderers has been female.

In the last several years, other authors have examined the participation of women in serial murder and illustrated the ways in which women kill (Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Holmes & Holmes, 1994; Jenkins, 1994). In contrast to their pioneering work on *Mass Murder* published in 1985, the analysis and discussion of serial murder by Fox and Levin (1994) in *Overkill* included several examples of women who killed multiple victims over time. Jenkins (1994) argued that feminist writers have obscured the real participation of women in serial murder to advance their ideological platform that women are exclusively victims in this regard.

A recent study compared male and female serial murderers on 14 variables. Gender differences were found on nine variables: damage to the victim, torture of the victim, weapon/method used, stalking vs. luring behaviors, crime scene organization, reasons for the murders, substance abuse history, psychiatric diagnosis, and household composition at the time of the murder. Similarities between male and female serial murderers were found on the remaining five variables: broken homes, race, educational level, childhood abuse, and occupation (Keeney & Heide, 1994).

The FBI typology of serial murderers (disorganized asocial type vs. organized non-social type), which was based on male serial murderers (Ressler et al., 1988), may need to be expanded when cases of females are entered into the data analysis pool. In addition, the commonly held position by European criminologists that multiple murderers are either paranoid schizophrenics or sexual sadists (Palermo, 1994) may bear re-examination when women are included in the sample.

In contrast to many earlier definitions, the proposed definition includes murders committed by those who do have a relationship with their victims such as spouses, parents, or caretakers. In addition, unlike the recent definition proposed by Jenkins (1994), it does not exclude multiple killings committed over time for presumed financial gain. Instead, the definition seeks to focus attention on those who murder serially for instrumental as well as expressive reasons. Given the paucity of scientific knowledge, those who kill repeatedly need to be studied to further understanding of this phenomenon. Finally, by being more inclusive and broad, the proposed definition opens up areas for future exploration in the field of homicidal behavior.

The authors acknowledge Christine Sellers, Ph.D., and James B. Halsted, J.D., Ph.D. for their contributions.

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Request for reprints: Kathleen M. Heide, Ph.D., Professor

Kathleen M. Heide, Ph.D., Professor
 University of South Florida
 Department of Criminology
 4202 East Fowler Ave.
 Social Sciences Room 107
 Tampa, Florida 33620
 U.S.A.

Belea Keeney, M.A.
 Criminal Justice Consultant
 P.O. Box 40974
 St. Petersburg, Florida 33743
 U.S.A.