

Chapter 7

Results: theoretical implications

7.1 Introduction

The above mentioned discussions have important implications in terms of the current literature understanding of serial murder. Therefore I will briefly discuss the tangent points between the literature study and the current discussion.

7.2 The psychoanalytic theory

The psychoanalytic literature differentiates between ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic behaviour. The literature indicates that serial murder may also be divided into these two categories. From the discussion of the results it seems as if both ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic behaviour were reported.

Mr. N.'s murders were ego-dystonic. This is illustrated by his reactions in court when he saw the crime scene evidence. His despair regarding the ego-dystonic behaviour even led to a failed suicide attempt. In the case of Mr. C., the first murder seems to be ego-dystonic, while the following murders were more ego-syntonic. Both Mr. N. and Mr. C. had dissociative experiences during the murders, which is indicative of the ego-dystonic nature of such behaviour (Leibman, 1989).

However, Mr. M. displayed ego-syntonic behaviour. His delusions may be described as ego-syntonic, because they fit in with his self perception. This strong belief may in turn be a defense mechanism against the unacceptability of the murders. If this is true the murders may have indeed been ego-dystonic, because they directly oppose his self perception. Mr. D. seems to display a similar dynamic as Mr. M. His behaviour during the interviews is ego-syntonic, because it fit his self perception of being a good person.

However, the fact that he never speaks about the murders and his strong moral condemnation of crime may be a defense against the unacceptability of his murders. It may be said that both Mr. M. and Mr. D use reaction formation as a defense mechanism.

Mr. N. experiences two types of dissociative episodes that differ in intensity or severity. Within this frame dissociation is viewed as a defense mechanism which serves the purpose of protecting Mr. N. against ego injury. This means that the perceived threat of the situation may unconsciously determine the intensity of the defense mechanism. In other words, if the threat is not too intense he may be aware of, but not in control of his reaction. In terms of his ego functioning he would split up into two different parts. This emerging "other part" serves the purpose of providing him with resources which protect him. This may be called splitting, which is a very pathological, though effective, defense mechanism. However, if the threat is too intense his unconscious would not even allow him to be aware. His unconscious seems to remove him from the situation while the "other part" of him takes care of the situation. In this way he is saved from the traumatic experiences.

The defense mechanism of dissociation and splitting may be indicative of Mr. N.'s inadequate ego functioning and ego integration. This may reflect on the nature of his primary object relation with his mother. This could indicate that this first relationship was not safe and nurturing enough to accommodate an integration of his ego functions.

From the above it seems that both ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic behaviour have been found in this study. It seems that varying degrees of dissociation may occur during the act of murder. Thus, dissociation may vary from person to person, or even for a single individual. However, dissociative experiences were only found in two of the four people. Therefore this cannot be generalized to all people in the sample or to all people who commit serial murder. This is in contrast with the literature which reports sublimation and projection as the main defense mechanisms in people who commit serial murder (DeHart & Mahoney, 1994). The defense mechanisms used by the people in this sample ranged from reaction formation (Mr. M. and Mr. D.) and dissociation (Mr. N. and Mr. C.) to splitting (Mr. N.) and denial (Mr. M.).

7.3 The psychodynamic model

One of the few similarities between the four people is that they all display, in varying degrees, dependent characteristics. This dimensional placing within the frame of personality disorders has specific psychodynamic and theoretical meaning.

The literature suggests that the personality development of people who commit serial murder is dimensionally placed within the cluster B personality disorder range. However, the sample in this study suggests that the personality development of these four people rather lies within the range of the cluster C personality disorders, more specifically within those of the dependant personality characteristics.

Mr. N.'s intense dissociative experiences need closer inspection. Dissociative experiences are much more commonplace than dissociative disorders. However, his dissociation seems to transcend the mere dissociative experiences and may even be classified as a "disorder". It is not within the jurisdiction of this study to make a differential five axis diagnosis. However, Mr. N.'s experiences closely resemble the criteria for certain forms of dissociative disorders, for example dissociative identity disorder, depersonalization disorder or dissociative disorder not otherwise specified.

From Mr. M.'s discussion we see that he struggled with serious abandonment issues. This may be seen as a reflection of the abandonment he may have experienced in very early childhood. The primary object relation with his mother was severed at the age of two. In terms of personality formation, such abandonment may contribute to his dependent character traits.

7.4 Learning theory

Individual behaviour may also be explained in terms of the social learning theories, namely the conditioned conscience theory and the social learning model.

7.4.1 Conditioned conscience

Mr. C.'s dissociative experiences were far less intense and less central in his experience than in Mr. N.'s case. According to this explanation, the failure to demonstrate ordinary social conditioning may point to profound isolation and alienation in childhood (DeHart & Mahoney, 1994). This may manifest symptomatically in what Mr. C. refers to as a "boring life". Mr. C. grew up as an only child. The only way he could escape his boring life was to physically create stimulation through risk taking and excitement seeking behaviour.

He knows the difference between socially acceptable (right) and unacceptable (wrong) behaviour and by transgressing the social norms he created excitement. On the one hand his gradual conditioning process taught him that he can get away with risk taking behaviour and transgressions. On the other hand he grew accustomed to transgressing the social norms. One may conclude that he became desensitized to the transgression of the social norms.

Thus, although he experienced the first murder negatively, he seemed to be much more used to transgressions than Mr. N.. This may explain why he did not experience such intense dissociation during his first murder. However, with Mr. N., it was different. Mr. N. has a strong moralistic atunement and he does not have the same desensitization with regard to the transgression of social norms. Thus, his level of subjective discomfort seems to be much higher than that of Mr. C. and therefore he may have had more intense dissociative experiences.

7.4.2 Social learning model and psychosocial explanation

This model places great emphasis on the modelling of behaviour during childhood. Mr. M. grew up in a family characterized by violent and criminal behaviour. In terms of the social learning model one may say that he may have modelled such behaviour as acceptable. It may also be that his family's violent behaviour may have disinhibited him, causing him to act out violent behaviour at a later stage of his life.

7.5 Themes from the research

The following tangent points were found with themes from the research of Ansevics et al. (1991):

- tenuous societal adjustment (Mr. M. and Mr. D. both have prior criminal records, and Mr. C. and Mr. N. are loners);
- puritanical attitude towards sex (Mr. N. displays this in his strong dislike of people whom he regards as sexual deviants); and
- reported rape prior to murder (in Mr. C.'s case he reported several cases where he raped the woman before he murdered her)

Tangent points with other researchers include:

- absent father figure during childhood (this is true for both Mr. C. and Mr. M.) (Holmes & DeBurger, 1989, p. 99);
- an abused childhood, characterized by deprivation, and unfair, harsh and inconsistent punishment (Mr. M. grew up in such a household and Mr. N. reported sexual abuse from a family member) (Holmes & DeBurger, 1989, p. 99);
- being introverted, shy and unable to establish healthy peer group contact (all four subjects fit this description to a certain degree) (Levin & Fox, 1985, p. 56);
- an inability to maintain meaningful and lasting relationships, socially and/or sexually (Mr. N. is divorced, Mr. M. has literally no friends or relative with whom he has a good relationship, and Mr. C. broke off his engagement) (Leyton, 1986, p. 36);
- self-centredness is displayed in their enjoyment and indulgence of the media sensation which followed their apprehension (Mr. C. followed the investigation of his murders in the media and was amused by media reports about him, after his arrest, and Mr. D. indulged in the attention provided by the research) (Leyton, 1986, p. 73); and
- a charming, "normal personality" and a marked absence of hallucinations and gross pathology (this applies to all four subjects) (Leyton, 1986, p. 150).

7.6 General systemic approach

In the literature survey a person who commits serial murder, is referred to as the system's index patient (IP), as is the case in family therapy. System, in this sense, also refers to the larger system (society) or smaller sub-systems (community and/or family).

There are various ways of looking at the behaviour of any given IP in relationship to his system(s): a) what is the function of such behaviour in that person's system, b) what happens within that person's system(s) that necessitates such behaviour, and/or c) what is the person trying to convey regarding his system(s).

Mr. C. reported misconduct since early childhood and this misconduct extended into adulthood. He grew up as an only child in a family that may be described as detached. He described his life as boring and alone. The system (family) seemed to lack stimulation, hence excitement. With detached parents and no siblings he then acted out this lack of stimulation by engaging in risk taking and excitement seeking behaviour.

Another explanation may be that: a) through his behaviour he shifted the focus away from possible family problems, b) as a "problem child" his behaviour acted as a cohesive force which kept the family together, or c) his behaviour was an attempt to seek his parents' attention.

When this behaviour extended into adulthood, it seems as if he still takes responsibility for protecting his family: he takes full responsibility for his behaviour and denies that his parents may have contributed in any way to his behaviour.

His violent and murderous behaviour may also be a comment on the lack of stimulation/excitement in the larger system (society): he still needed to provide his own stimulation. In a similar fashion he took responsibility for the larger system (society): due to his violent behaviour the system labelled him as a "serial killer" and thus he provided the system with macabre stimulation.

Mr. M. experienced that the larger- and sub-systems had both abandoned and persecuted him in various ways: he was abandoned by his biological parents and his step-family; he was victimized in his own family system through violence; his lawyer has abandoned him by not appealing against his sentence; the court has abandoned him by not listening to his appeals of injustice during the trial; both the court and the police have persecuted him; and legal aid has failed him.

Mr. M.'s behaviour may also be interpreted from an eco-systemic perspective. His violent behaviour, as an essential part of the larger and sub-systems, may be seen as symptomatic of the dysfunctional nature of the eco-system. Following the eco-systemic premises, the eco-system (family and/or society) may be seen as the basic unit of his survival. Given the hostile and insecure nature of his eco-system he may not have been able to survive in such a system. Serial murder as a radical form of human behaviour may serve the purpose of removing him from the hostile ecology of his system and thereby sustaining his own survival.

According to the cybernetic perspective, for the system to survive it needs to be in a state of equilibrium. There must be a balance between human constructive and human destructive behaviour. Although such violent behaviour may also be seen as a comment on the social order within the systems, it also creates a disequilibrium. In order to survive the system needs to rectify the disequilibrium by removing the extreme behaviour.

Mr. D. is characterized by religious-moralistic messages, which need to be heard. The question may arise: "What message is he trying to bring across by committing serial murder?". Maybe his behaviour is indicative of a normlessness that exists within his systems. Through his behaviour he may have exaggerated the moral-religious crisis to such an extent that the system would have to pay attention to it.

7.7 The biological perspective

During the search for psychological themes from the interviews, it seemed as if neuropsychological themes were prominent, specifically in the case of Mr. D. Thus, there

may probably be some sort of neurological damage involved. This hypothesis is supported by the neuropsychological effects present in the interviews. The dilemma still exists, that is, it does not logically bring us closer to understanding serial murder. However, a possibility exists that neuropsychological factors may play a role in violent behaviour such as serial murder. This possibility warrants further investigation.

7.8 Conclusion

This chapter illustrates that the four people who participated in the research are unique and those reported similarities are only similar in the definition of the theme. Within those themes of similarities however, they also differ. These differences are with regard to the relationship between the dynamic interaction of their life stories, the way of description and the nuances in communication.

It seems as if the intrapsychic models at present provide the most fitting understanding of people who have committed serial murder. However, in order to understand serial murder within a complex framework, such an understanding should not be limited to intrapsychic explanations. The intrapsychic explanation is only one dimension of human behaviour and therefore the other dimensions should also be explored.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

In this study a historical, contextualized account of serial murder in South Africa and internationally has been provided. This has been followed by a comprehensive literature overview of serial murder, which incorporates various perspectives on the phenomenon of serial murder.

For research purposes the main procedure deals with abstracting themes from interviews with four people who have committed serial murder. Primary and secondary themes have then been provided and eventually integrated with the literature findings and theoretical investigation.

8.2 Conclusions from the research

The following verifies the already existing information regarding serial murder:

- people may have different ways of theoretically understanding and explaining serial murder;
- serial murder is a historical-contextual phenomenon;
- there are tangent points between the research undertaken and existing theories (specifically with the intrapsychic explanations, the learning theory perspective, themes from the research, the neuropsychological model and the general systemic approach);
- both ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic behaviour seems to be confirmed;
- varying degrees of dissociation were reported during the murders;
- at present it seems difficult to integrate the information into a unitary model of

- serial murder;
- tenuous societal adjustment seems to be confirmed;
 - puritanical attitude towards sex was reported;
 - rape prior to the murder occurred;
 - an absent father figure during childhood was reported;
 - an abused childhood, characterized by deprivation, and unfair, harsh and inconsistent punishment were specific themes;
 - being introverted, shy and unable to establish healthy peer group contact were strong themes in the interviews;
 - an inability to maintain meaningful and lasting relationships, socially and/or sexually for most of the participants; and
 - a charming, "normal personality" and a marked absence of hallucinations and gross pathology (all four subjects).

New information generated by this research includes the following:

- in terms of personality formation all four people displayed signs of a dependant personality structure;
- there were signs of varying degrees of anxiety present;
- serial murder in South Africa seems to be quantitatively and qualitatively different to serial murder else where in the world;
- the historical recollection of serial murder in South Africa yields a different racial composition than does the European-American history (The ratio of White:Black perpetrators is 1:2 in South Africa, and 2:1 in the United States of America); and
- it seems as if this category of "serial murderer" is of purely academical and jurisprudential value and does not seem to be grounded in these people's experience of themselves.

8.3 Critique

The research had a very small sample size, which makes the results prone to scrutiny. Although the small sample size may be criticized, the candidates represent an availability

sample and therefore a larger sample was not possible. However, the internal validity of this study is above suspicion. Thus, the results may not be generalized to all people who have committed serial murder. In the bigger picture of research on serial murder, this research may serve as a reminder: there may be people who have committed serial murder who are different from the stereotypical view of serial murder or from the findings of previous research.

A second point of criticism is that the main aim of this research have been concentrated on the abstraction of psychological themes from interviews. Other types of information such as clinical history, family genograms, comments by extended family members and friends have not been taken into account. The aim however was to allow the person who had committed serial murder to speak for himself and then to apply psychological themes to his communication and interaction, with the minimum external influences. These are, in themselves, aspects which have been neglected in previous research undertakings.

A further point of criticism is that the research does not yield much practical value for those who are actively involved in the detection and profiling of serial murder. Although this was not the purpose of this study, there may be some valuable practical implications from this research. Profilers and researchers may see that European-American standards do not necessarily apply to the South African context. Therefore it seems that profiling and detection should rely more on the individual qualities than on the collective qualities of people who commit serial murder.

Lastly, no research is ever uncontaminated by the various contexts within which it takes place. In this research it is difficult to determine the effect of the different variables such as the interaction of the researchers, the environment of the correctional facility, the attention received during the research and cultural differences between the researcher and the subjects.

8.4 Recommendations

Future researchers may find the case study method more useful in serial murder research.

Although it is also a qualitative method it may be more encompassing than the grounded theory approach.

In order to understand serial murder with the complexity that has a bearing upon it, research should not be limited to the intrapsychic explanations. Intrapsychic theory is only one theoretical explanation of human behaviour and, therefore, other dimensions should also be explored. Future researchers should focus more on the other neglected psychological dimensions of serial murder, such as the interactional, systemic and post-modern approaches.

Similarly, discourse analysis is another way in which research could be undertaken, specifically in South Africa. It may provide a source of information regarding the public perception of serial murder. To aid such future research on the phenomenon of serial murder, an additional reading list is provided (see Appendix D).

However, in the greater picture of the phenomenon of serial murder, it seems that the psychological understanding thereof only advances one step at a time. This is possibly due to the fact that serial murder only occurs in small numbers. Generalized conclusions are thus not feasible.

This does not mean that research on the phenomenon of serial murder should not be undertaken. Research methodology should rather be updated, and larger programs which include large research teams investigating the phenomenon from several angles, could provide better insight into extreme behaviour such as serial murder.

8.5 Conclusion

Serial murder, as a form of human behaviour, continues to pose a challenge for the human sciences, especially psychology. It still remains difficult to understand how one person can murder several people, seemingly without motive. Many questions remain unanswered.

Society seems to protect itself through unwritten, social and legal rules/laws of order. When people transgress the social system's rules, the non-compliant behaviour is significant and meaningful. However, it is not clear what serial murder means with regard to its conversational language within the system. Possible answers may include: we are different; and we abhor the society we live in, especially the rigidity of the rules.

The answers to these questions, however, lie in future research and possible other avenues of investigation.