

1. INTRODUCTION

Crime and criminal behaviour have been studied and analysed since before the end of the nineteenth century (Stephenson, 1992). Disciplines as diverse as sociology, psychology, criminology, penology, medicine, psychiatry and philosophy have all studied crime, often focusing on the individuals who commit crime as well as criminal behaviour. A crime that has attracted some scientific and much popular attention for the greater part of the twentieth century is serial murder (Hickey, 2006).

Research in the field of crime and criminal behaviour has focused on its causes, prevalence, nature and impact, with the aims of enriching our understanding of crime and criminal behaviour; developing methods of preventing crime; apprehending individuals who commit such acts; assisting victims; as well as conceptualizing ways of punishing, managing or “treating” convicted individuals. As man’s way of understanding himself and his surroundings has changed with the particular Zeitgeists of the last centuries, so has man’s method of conducting social research. From a positivist view, man has expanded his research approach to include post-modern ways of conducting research, including systemic and social constructionist paradigms.

This research study has chosen to tap the above two areas, namely serial murder and post-modern research approaches, by exploring the phenomenon of serial murder from a systemic perspective, specifically with regards to the role played by serial murder in the family systems of individuals who commit such crimes. This chapter will briefly discuss serial murder as an international and local phenomenon and outline the motivation and purpose, as well as focus of the study.

1.1 SERIAL MURDER AS PHENOMENON

One of the academic issues regarding research on serial murder is the difficulty to determine a precise definition of the concept serial murder. The reason is probably that definitions differ with regard to various disciplines' views (e.g., criminology and psychology - these similarities and differences will be discussed in chapter two), despite overlapping to various degrees regarding their descriptions of serial murder. For the purpose of this study, a generic definition was developed, namely: multiple murders committed over a period of time by one or more individuals.

Serial murder constitutes a very specific category of criminal behaviour. After emerging and increasing rapidly in prevalence in the United States of America (USA) during the 1960s and 1970s, figures for serial murder prevalence in the USA show that 50% of the known cases of serial murder in the USA occurred during the time period 1975-2004 (Hickey, 2006). Gorby (2000) found the same pattern for most non-European countries in comparison to European countries that show a slight decrease from 1975-1995, after peaking in the period before this (1950-1974). Consequently, it would appear that serial murder, as a type of criminal behaviour, has been noticed and attended to largely during the last and current century.

South Africa has a particularly high crime rate, specifically in terms of violent crime. Between 1994 and 2004, South Africa's national rate of murder was 57.7 per 100 000 (http://www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/crimestats/2004/_pdf/crimes/Murder.pdf), while that of rape was 120.6 per 100 000 (http://www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/crimestats/2004/_pdf/crimes/Rape.pdf). Despite the fact that the above figures show a decrease in both murder (by 8.8%) and rape (by 2.8%)

over the last two years, South Africa's crime statistics are still comparatively high in relation to the rest of the world. For example, the USA recorded 7.1 homicides per 100 000 people for 2001 (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/homtrnd.htm>), in comparison to South Africa's rate of 47.8 per 100 000 for the same year (http://www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/crimestats/2004/_pdf/crimes/Murder.pdf).

South Africa shows a similar pattern to the USA in terms of the proportion of murders accounted for by serial murder (namely, less than 1.0%, with 55 recorded cases of serial murder between 1994 and 2004). The obvious question to be posed is: why is there a crime such as serial murder; a crime that includes several victims, where it seems as if usually one person shows a repetitive pattern of killing people? Hickey (2001) has attempted to explain the USA data in relation to the proliferation of violence in the media; sado-masochistic and violent pornography; and the patriarchal societal system. In terms of the South African situation, Labuschagne (2001) and Gorby (2000) have argued that the less extensive infrastructure; less robust economy; and rapid urbanization and crowding that characterize developing societies may make them more vulnerable to serial murder. Given the large number of answered questions that remain concerning serial murder, it is evident that further research into this phenomenon is required.

1.2 MOTIVATIONS FOR THE STUDY

1.2.1 Interaction of popular and academic sources

Despite the general increase in serial murder cases over time in the USA during the latter part of the last century, this type of criminal behaviour accounts for less than one percent of the total homicide rate for the USA in any given year (Meloy, 2000). However, this

phenomenon attracts a large amount of attention and fascination from the general population. Public fascination with serial murder overseas/internationally has been reflected in, and sustained by, many fictional books and films on serial murder. Examples of these are the books of Thomas Harris, namely *Red Dragon* (1987), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and *Hannibal* (1999), as well as films such as *Copycat* (1995), *Se7en* (1995) and *Kiss the Girls* (1997). Hickey (2006) states that during the 1990s there were 150 films upwards with the theme of serial murder.

It would seem that serial murder has featured frequently in the popular media and that a large proportion of knowledge production and information dissemination on serial murder has taken place via this channel and possibly influenced academic or scientific exploration of the phenomenon. In South Africa, this popular media attention to serial murder has been in the form of newspapers, television programmes, non-fiction crime literature and fictional works.

With regards to newspaper sources, references and articles dealing with serial murder can be found across South African newspaper types. The following are examples of serial murder references in the press: Rapport (31 January, 1999) ran an article titled “Spanwerk los reeksmoord op” (team work solves serial murder); the Weekly Mail and Guardian (9 September, 1994) featured an article titled “Station Strangler – Who’s Fooling Whom”; City Press (7 December, 1997) featured an article titled “ ‘Electrician’ may be next serial killer”; Beeld (14 August, 1995) featured an article titled “Reeksmoordenaars nie ‘dieselfde mens’ ” (Serial murderers not the same person); and The Star (21 August, 1997) featured an article titled “18 murders linked in hunt for serial killer”. These form part of a considerably larger sample of articles on serial murder that have featured across newspapers in the past two decades.

Television programmes featuring serial murder have occurred on local series such as *Carte Blanche*, *Third Degree* as well as in the form of documentaries such as *Criminal Minds* (2003) and *Psycho Factory* (2004). *Carte Blanche* has aired episodes on Micki Pistorius, previous head of the Investigative Psychology Unit of the South African Police Services, on serial murder cases in South Africa, as well as episodes on forensic entomologist Mervyn Mansell and the serial murder case of Samuel Sidyno, the Capital Park serial murderer (“Crawling with evidence”, April, 13, 2003). The local actuality programme on e-tv, *Third Degree*, has also featured an episode on serial murder in South Africa (“Copy Cat Killers”, March 13, 2001).

Examples of popular non-fiction crime literature in South Africa include the works of Micki Pistorius, namely *Catch Me a Killer* (2000), *Strangers on the Street* (2002) and *Fatal Females* (2004). Local fictional works featuring serial murder include Deon Meyer’s *Dead Before Dying* (1999) and Amanda Patterson’s *I See the Moon* (2003).

In addition to popular sources of serial murder information, there are scientific or academic sources of information; but these seem to influence perceptions of the phenomenon to a lesser degree. International academic research has been conducted by David Canter, Kim Rossmo, Harold Smith, Al Carlisle, Steve Egger, Eric Hickey, Ronald Holmes and James DeBurger and Philip Jenkins, as well as John Douglas, Robert Ressler, and Robert Keppel; locally academic studies also exist and have been conducted largely as part of post-graduate studies by individuals such as Micki Pistorius, Gerard Labuschagne, Cobus Du Plessis, Jackie De Wet, Brin Hodgskiss, and Derek Hook.

The interaction between academic and popular sources of information on serial murder, both locally and internationally have led to certain problems. As described by Hook (2003), there seems to be a tension in the processes of knowledge production on the topic of serial murder, between “biases of popular opinion” (p. 6) as reflected in and by the popular media,

and scientific or academic fact. This would appear to be further complicated by the apparent frequency with which academics and professionals in South Africa feature in the popular realm on the subject of serial murder and make knowledge claims about the topic with limited experience or reference to sources of empirical support. For example, Robert Ressler, an ex-member of the FBI Behavioural Science Unit, chose the *Beeld* (17 July, 1995) to make his claim that the end of Apartheid ushered in a new era for serial murder in South Africa due to the lifting of tight police controls and the exposure of consequences relating to brutal, unfair and unjust practices of the 70's and 80's. His statements in this article featured no details about supporting arguments or evidence upon which such claims were based. Often these academics and professionals make opinions in the popular media without ever having consulted the investigator or seen the case file materials (Labuschagne, personal communication, 2006).

In the same vein, Pistorius (1996) attributed serial murder in South Africa to poverty, crime, violence and the disbanding of families in the press, despite her academic work that places emphasis on intrapsychic factors in the etiology of serial murder. Dr Mark Welman, previously of Rhodes University (*City Press*, 11 January, 1998), Dr Rika Snyman, a Unisa criminology researcher (*Independent Newspapers*, 1997), and Dr Irma Labuschagne, a criminologist (*Maxim*, August 2000) are individuals who have also been featured in newspaper articles on the topic of serial murder, in the context of more popular rather than scientific understandings of serial murder.

As a result, it would seem that some of the confusion surrounding understandings of serial murder, both locally and internationally, may be attributed to the blurring of popular and professional contexts, with professionals frequently failing to support their arguments or make claims in the way expected of them in the scientific community when they feature in the popular media. This may also be as a result of the manner in which the popular media

reports on the statements and arguments of the afore-mentioned professionals, as well as general lack of clarity on aspects such as definitions and psychological/investigative tensions. Thus the two systems of academia and popular media become interlinked often with problematic consequences for their “creations”.

In the absence of frequent productivity in the research and academic field with regards to serial murder, there is little evidence or support with which to challenge popular misperceptions, especially when voiced by “experts”, or to stem the sensationalism with which this topic may be covered. Hence, it would seem that an encouragement of valid and reliable productivity in this area is advantageous.

1.2.2 Limited available research on serial murder in South Africa

Despite a period of awakened interest in serial murder as a research topic in South Africa in the mid-nineties running through to the early part of the year 2000, there has been a tapering off of formal research into the area (possibly due to less media focus on serial murder that has also taken place during this period). Serial murder as a type of crime continues to sustain itself in South Africa, however, and, in the absence of a large volume of available local research, much still has to be done to understand South African serial murder, especially in light of its significant difference from international serial murder in areas such as offence, offender and victim characteristics (Hodgskiss, 2003). Consequently, this study’s exploration of South African understandings of serial murder would be useful in developing the existing pool of South African research on the topic of serial murder, and making novel contributions from a systemic perspective.

1.2.3 The novelty of the systemic perspective

Many approaches have been made to understand serial murder by theoretical contributions on the causes of serial murder (Jenkins, 1994; Meloy, 1988; Norris, 1988); geographical profiling techniques (Canter, 1994, 2000; Rossmo, 1995, 1997); and typologies (Holmes, 1990; Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Ressler, 1985; Ressler, Burgess & Douglas, 1988). These will be discussed in further detail in chapter three. However, none of the above has attempted to understand serial murder from a systemic perspective, specifically with respect to the family system of each individual. Some theories on serial murder (Keeney & Heide, 2000; Ressler et al., 1988; Sears, 1991) have made reference to “dysfunctional” families in this context.

The dysfunctional family type has served as a means of attributing responsibility for the serial murder behaviour to experiences of abuse (sexual, physical or emotional) in the family settings of the individuals concerned. However, no prior study has attempted to directly interview members of the families of individuals who commit serial murder to elicit their interpretation of this behaviour; to understand the individual who committed serial murder as he sees himself in relation to his family; and to see the role of serial murder within such a system.

Family plays a big part in most of South Africa’s diverse cultures. Across the majority of cultures that make up South Africa’s ethnic demographic, the family system is an important source of support (financial, emotional or practical) for individual members. In terms of the form of South African families, the 1996 South African census demonstrated that the nuclear family is the most prominent household type (23, 89%) across all ethnic categories (Ziehl, 2001), with groups who traditionally displayed a more extended family form moving

increasingly towards the nuclear family form with greater urbanization and employment or financial opportunities (Amoateng, 1997; Moller, 1998).

Locally and internationally, the researcher is aware of no research that focuses on the family systems of individuals who commit serial murder, or which has interviewed family members of such individuals. The novel approach afforded by a family systems theory to serial murder would resist interpreting the phenomenon within the framework of linear causality, and as such, would provide unique input points at which change could be initiated at a systemic level to bring about changes in the behaviour of individuals who commit serial murder. In the literature, rehabilitation is frequently negated as an option for individuals who commit serial murder (Pistorius, 1996; Ressler, 1997). However, this has largely been based on linear notions of causality. Family systems' approaches, with their emphasis on "circular causality" (Bateson, 1979), would be of particular use to those groups and individuals who could play a role in effecting change in individuals who commit serial murder such as prison warders, psychologists, as well as family members.

Additionally, an individual can be recognized as a system within such a theoretical paradigm (Guttman, 1991; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) in the absence of other members of the family system of which he/she is a member. Although a social systems approach addresses family or groups of people, the individual in and part of the system is still recognized as a system: in itself as well as part of a specific group or family. This aspect will be discussed again in Chapter 4.

1.2.4 Applications to correctional and investigative systems

Locally and internationally, there is little research that has been conducted with actual offenders. Consequently, a research study that could add to the limited pool of research that

has managed to interview offenders directly would be advantageous, specifically with regards to understanding criminal behaviour.

This study of serial murder from the family perspective in South Africa may also assist with police investigations and the use of techniques such as offender profiling. By attending to the particular way in which serial murder exists in the South African context, police work can benefit from greater accuracy and consequently efficiency in the apprehension of individuals who commit serial murder in this country.

An exploration of a South African understanding of serial murder from a family perspective could reflect the degree to which the application of overseas theories to the above areas is applicable or not. The family systems approach to understanding serial murder adopted in this study might also illuminate certain patterns in family systems that increase the probability of serial murder occurring within a family system, and allow for proactive, preventative interventions based thereon, or even assist investigators by providing patterns of family behaviours they can look for in families of potential suspects in a serial murder investigation.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Given the above discussion on the motivations for the current study, the purpose of this study is to:

- investigate serial murder from a systemic point of view with the aim of increasing local understandings of serial murder.

1.4 RESEARCH FOCUS AND DESIGN

In order to achieve the above ends, the following question is proposed as focus of the study:

- “How does the family system of a person who commits serial murder function?”

That is, what is the family structure, who are the people in the family system and how do they maintain the family system.

1.4.1 Research design

The research design will be exploratory and qualitative in nature, adopting a case study method to thoroughly investigate specific examples of individuals who have committed serial murder in South Africa and their particular family systems. Data will be analysed by means of a content analysis in line with the theoretical framework of family systems theory and interpreted with reference to the research focus above. It is hoped that this study will yield novel and useful findings about serial murder in South Africa, as well as the utility of the family systems approach in understanding such phenomena.

1.5 A NOTE ON THE PATHOLOGICAL MODEL

The so-called pathological model is not addressed in this study and seems to be overlooked. Models based solely on individual psychopathology (i.e. those focusing on intrapsychic factors or internal pathologies of an individual) seem to be a preferred way of

trying to understand crime in general. Many studies have already attempted to explore crime as well as serial murder specifically in a similar manner (see Douglas & Olshaker, 2000; Harbort & Mokros, 2001; Pinto & Wilson, 1990). However, for this study, pathology is defined from a systemic theoretical point of view, as explained by Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967). To these authors, it is essential to take into account interpsychic factors that play an important role towards the understanding of human behaviour. This needs to be applied in research; therefore the theoretical aim of this thesis is to study serial murder from an interpersonal, systemic perspective.

1.6 RESEARCH OUTLINE

The introductory part of the thesis will be followed by a discussion of the literature on serial murder; a review of the body of theoretical work on serial murder; as well as theories of family systems. The methodology chapter will discuss the research design and epistemology that will guide the study, as well as the research method, data collection techniques, sampling strategies and methods of analysis. This will be followed by the results for the cases used; a discussion of the results; and finally, a conclusion that will include an assessment of the limitations of the study as well as suggestions for possible future studies.

1.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has briefly outlined the topic of the current study, namely serial murder in South Africa. The motivation and focus for the current study has also been provided, together with an outline of the proposed study procedure and thesis outlay.

To summarise, this study will attempt to investigate the topic of serial murder in South Africa from the perspective of family systems theory. It is hoped that this study will thereby develop an understanding of serial murder from a systemic perspective that may contribute a novel perspective on the subject and hopefully allow for better management of individuals who commit serial murder, and the prevalence of this type of criminal behaviour in larger society.