

## 5. METHOD OF RESEARCH

Previous chapters have discussed the body of theoretical work on serial murder. The approach used to interpret the current findings, namely family systems theory, has also been discussed. In Chapter 1, the purpose of the study was spelt out, namely: to investigate serial murder from a systemic point of view. To achieve the above, the following question was proposed as focus:

- “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.

This chapter explains the methodology, research design, procedures, ethical considerations, data analysis and data integration of the study.

### 5.1 METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research has been understood as “the interpretive study of a specified issue or problem in which the researcher is central to the sense that is made” (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994, p.2). Qualitative research focuses on the meaning of experience, actions and events as they are interpreted through the eyes of certain researchers, participants and cultures or groups, and is sensitive to the particular contextual nuances of the study topic (Harre & Secord, 1972) as well as the impact that the relationship between researcher and the participant/s and context has on interpretation of the study topic. *Quantitative* research focuses on measuring, manipulating

and specifying relationships between certain variables in order to test causal hypotheses (Henwood, 1996).

Parker (1992) describes the differences between quantitative and qualitative research in terms of three “methodological horrors” (Woolgar, 1988). These are indexicality, inconcludability and reflexivity.

In terms of *indexicality*, an explanation is always tied to a particular context, and will change as the context changes. This is viewed as problematic in quantitative research and is addressed via reliability and validity. Qualitative research does not view this as a problem and instead it into the research process by focusing on specificity with respect to the topic of study. The qualitative researcher does not and cannot generalize his findings, but provides an understanding of the phenomenon as it occurs.

In the current study, the researcher focuses specifically on serial murder in the South African context and acknowledges that this phenomenon is subject to change as the South African political and socio-economic and cultural climate changes, or as policing initiatives targeting individuals who commit this crime become more sophisticated and accurate. Consequently, the current research is framed by specific contextual parameters, and findings will be interpreted with reference to those parameters.

In terms of *inconcludability*, an account can always be added to, and as more is added to it, so it will mutate. Quantitative research deals with this “problem” by having a representative sample size; however, in qualitative research, the inconcludable nature of research is accepted and therefore, methods such as single case studies are acceptable. In fact, much qualitative research treats each study as if it was a case study and aims to provide an in-depth examination of the different meanings at work within a different context.

As will be discussed further, this study will focus on case studies of individuals who have committed serial murder in South Africa and will attempt to develop an understanding of

these individuals and their family systems. The researcher acknowledges the sample size and findings that will be generated are by no means complete; and that these findings may be contradicted, elaborated or supplemented by other research on the same topic, or with the same individuals, for example. Yet, understanding and knowledge about serial murder within the context of family may shed light on aspects such as interpersonal familial patterns, emotional processes within the family and family structures.

Finally, *reflexivity* refers to the researcher's awareness of his own subjectivity in terms of the way that a topic is conceptualized, and findings are interpreted. The way in which a researcher characterizes a phenomenon will change how it operates for him and that will change the way that that phenomenon is perceived. Rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity as quantitative research attempts to do, qualitative research includes the researcher's subjectivity as a resource in the research process.

In this study, the researcher has chosen to define the concepts under investigation in a certain way – see definitions of serial murder (Chapter 2) and family (Chapter 4). It is understood that these definitions impact upon the cases selected for analysis and data collection and that another researcher may have chosen different definitions, and obtained different findings possibly as a result. Additionally, the conceptual framework for family systems theory devised by the researcher will also impact upon the analysis of the data and findings generated, and will be kept in mind throughout the analysis and assessment of findings.

### **5.1.1 Evaluating qualitative research**

As opposed to quantitative research, which focuses on validity and reliability to evaluate the strength and generalizability of a study, quantitative research has its own set of criteria by which a study can be evaluated.

These criteria are:

- credibility;
- transferability;
- dependability; and
- confirmability (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

*Credibility* requires that the researcher must demonstrate that the study was conducted in such a manner that the subject was accurately identified and described.

*Transferability* refers to the question, how applicable or transferable are the findings to another setting or group of people? The burden of demonstrating transferability lies with the investigator who would make that transfer rather than the original investigator.

*Dependability* refers to the degree to which one can be sure that the findings would be replicated if the study were conducted with the same participants in the same context. In order to satisfy this criterion, the researcher has to account for changing conditions in the phenomenon.

*Confirmability* refers to the extent to which the findings are reflective of the subjects and the inquiry itself rather than being brought about by the researcher's own prejudices. This study will be evaluated by the researcher in relation to these four criteria, and this evaluation will be included in Chapter 8.

## **5.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research design is exploratory in nature. Exploratory or descriptive research does not concern itself directly with causal explanations but rather details empirical observations made by the researcher (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). Consequently, the researcher does not specify research hypotheses prior to the study but rather generates findings that may be used in other

studies in ways that may or may not be causal. Exploratory research is frequently used when the topic under study is novel; when little research is available on the topic of interest; when a researcher wishes to test out methods or approaches that may be formalized in a future study; or when the researcher wishes to generate findings that may be tested in a more formal manner in another study (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991).

As discussed previously, although serial murder has not been researched extensively in South Africa, a few studies (Du Plessis, 1998; Hodgskiss, 2003; Hook, 2003; Pistorius, 1996; Labuschagne, 2001) have been conducted. Additionally, no prior study has assessed the role of serial murder within a family systems theoretical approach. Therefore, the topic of serial murder in South Africa is suited to an exploratory research design, which will be adopted for the current study, and which hopefully will yield findings that can be tested further in future research.

### **5.3 SAMPLING**

Given the usual small population targeted by qualitative research, in this case individuals who have committed serial murder and are currently incarcerated in prisons in South Africa, the sampling strategy is a non-probability purposive sampling strategy. Non-probability sampling does not involve random sampling and consequently is limited with respect to how well it can be said to be representative of a particular population (Trochim, 2002). Given that qualitative research does not require representativeness in as strict a sense as quantitative research, and that the sample population is limited, non-probability sampling is suitable for this study.

There are two types of non-probability sampling, namely accidental and purposive sampling. This study will use a purposive sampling strategy. According to Trochim (2002)

purposive sampling is ideal when the researcher is seeking a certain predefined group; when a targeted sample is needed quickly; and where proportionality is not a primary sampling concern. The current study meets the first and third criteria, namely:

- individuals who have committed serial murder constitute a certain predefined group; and
- proportionality is not of primary importance given the small population size.

According to the various types of purposive sampling strategies proposed by Patton (1990), the strategy adopted by this study can be further classified as a criterion-based purposive sampling strategy. This means that cases are selected on the basis of meeting some criterion – in this case, the generic definition of serial murder discussed in chapter two. Patton also states that this sampling strategy allows for quality assurance in purposive sampling.

The selected sample for this study consists of individuals who are currently serving sentences in various prisons in South Africa. A case consists of instances of serial murder behaviour and the family systems of which they are a part. It was important to select cases from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds (namely, White, Afrikaans-speaking) as opposed to others (such as Black and speaking an African language) due to the researcher's objective of obtaining a thorough, in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within a family system. In order to do this, the researcher selects the sample according to those with which she feels that she could communicate most adequately without potential contamination or influences that may have resulted due to lack of familiarity with linguistic practices. The introduction of a translator may also affect the system's response and may dilute the investigation further. Future research may possibly aim at extending the realm of cultural backgrounds with regards to serial murder.

Two individuals who meet the criteria for an offence of serial murder are chosen. A brief description of each and their family follows:

### **5.3.1 Case study one: Mr X and family**

Mr X is a White, Afrikaans male in his early forties who is currently incarcerated in a prison in South Africa. He was convicted on five counts of murder, seven counts of rape and one count of attempted rape. His victims were all females, of various ages and ethnicities and he committed his crimes over a period of two years. His immediate family consists of a mother and father and no siblings. The mother and father are pensioners and are of the same ethnic background as Mr X. Mr X's mother still works in the catering industry whilst his father is retired.

### **5.3.2 Case study two: Mr Y and family**

Mr Y is a White, Afrikaans male in his late forties who is also currently incarcerated in a prison in South Africa. He was convicted of three counts of murder, three counts of robbery and one count of attempted murder. His victims were all White males, of various ages and he committed his crimes over a period of ten months. Mr Y's family is estranged and both his mother and father are deceased. After extensive unsuccessful attempts to contact other members of Mr Y's family, it is decided to proceed and document the family of Mr Y via interviews conducted with him: the way he experiences his family.

The reasons to proceed with Mr Y, without having had any available support for the research from his family members are follows:

- He was one of only a few who fulfills the basic cultural criteria, namely from Afrikaans background and origin.
- He was from the White ethnic group.
- He is of male gender.
- He fulfills the criteria set for the definition of serial murder.
- From a theoretical point of view as explained in Chapter 4, the individual is still important in family theory. The individual can still be interviewed and evaluated especially where the genogram is applied as instrument to identify repetitions, adaptive and maladaptive interactional patterns across generations (Guttman, 1991). Given that the genogram information may lead to a decrease in reliability (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985) the ethical responsibility now rests fully on the shoulders of the researcher to allow for this limitation. In effect, it means that the researcher should apply his/her clinical skills to the full. She should listen carefully, but with openness, weighing and evaluating the person's manner of communication, interpersonal style and involvement (Beyers, personal communication, 2006).

For both cases, the family system in each instance is defined in line with the operational definition of family in chapter 4, namely, as those individuals included by Mr X and Mr Y in their conceptualization of their "family". Where these individual are alive and give consent, interviews are conducted with them as outlined below. Alternatively, the individual's own description of their family and relationships within the family system is accepted, as with Mr Y.



## 5.4 DATA COLLECTION

This study uses four sources of data collection, namely:

- clinical observations of the participant/s;
- interviews with
  - individuals who have committed serial murder;
  - their family members; as well as
  - prison staff, investigating officers and/or other professionals involved in the cases of these individuals;
- genograms of the families of individuals who have committed serial murder; and
- archival records in the form of
  - police case files for the individuals concerned;
  - psychological reports or evaluations;
  - newspaper reports; and
  - recorded television interviews.

These four sources will now be discussed in further detail.

### 5.4.1 Clinical observations

Clinical observation refers to the direct observation of an individual in order to learn more about that individual's behaviour and, more specifically, their mental health or psychological functioning (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Aspects of the individual that are focused upon may include appearance, body size, hygiene, eye contact, attention and concentration, speech and language, mood, thinking process, memory, ability to interact with others, problem-solving strategies, and repetitive behaviours such as tics. The context in which clinical observation

can take place ranges from more formal settings such as the psychiatric ward of a general hospital to less formal contexts such as casual conversation in a non-psychiatric setting.

This study uses clinical observations of the individuals interviewed (participants and their family members). These observations provide information regarding the behaviour of the individuals interviewed and their interaction with their immediate surroundings (including kinetic aspects such as tone of voice, posture, body language, and use of affect) as an additional data source.

#### **5.4.2 Interviews**

The interview used in this particular research study is a qualitative one. In line with the research design, the purpose of the interview method is exploratory as opposed to hypothesis testing and aims to elicit and explore the family and individuals who have committed serial murder. The intention is to allow the data and themes to emerge relatively unrestricted from the interviewees. The researcher conducts all the interviews personally and makes use of interpreters/translators where necessary. The potential influence of such a device on the narratives and themes drawn is noted and included in analysis. Informed consent and confidentiality are ensured.

The interviews are semi-structured and consist of open-ended questions about the family system. The interviews are structured only in the sense that the interviewer will keep the focus on serial murder, the family system, the views of family members about the occurrences and feelings towards the incarcerated member, and the subject's views or perceptions of his own family. The basic format of the interview follows the interviewee's interpretations, explanations, and sense/meaning-making of the topic (Breakwell, 1995). Effort is made to interpret and clarify meanings expressed by the interviewee throughout the interview so as to

ensure the quality of analysis. Sensitivity to the emotional well being of the interviewee is practiced throughout the interview process and is used to inform interview questions.

The semi-structured interviews are open ended, which means that the researcher listens carefully and proceeds by reacting to the cues given by the participant (Kvale, 1996). The researcher's actions are based on her own manner of communicating, the messages of meta-communication, and could be explained in a simple way as the constant phrasing of questions in her mind, such as:

- what is happening in the interview between researcher and participant?
- under what circumstances is it happening (what and where)?
- how does it happen?
- why does it happen?
- how is what is happening connected to what follows?
- how and with what can the researcher behave to intervene without contamination of the research process?

### **5.4.3 Genograms**

The genogram is “a format for drawing a family tree that records information about family members and their relationships over at least three generations” (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985, p.1). It provides an effective graphical representation of family patterns, which enables the researcher to view how problems within the family or affecting individual members may be related to these patterns across the system. A genogram is a flexible assessment instrument and can be used for research purposes, as well as a clinical tool to inform therapeutic interventions (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985).

The genogram has traditionally been paired with Bowenian family systems theory but is not exclusive to it (Mauzey & Erdman, 1995). Within this framework, the genogram assists with formulating hypotheses about family systems and designing interventions into them. Additional clinical benefits of the genogram include organizing data in a graphical way; engaging a family in sessions; teaching systemic ideas; clarifying family patterns and characteristics; and developing intellectual understanding of issues in family systems (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985; Wachtel, 1982). Consequently, it would appear that the genogram is useful as both a clinical intervention and tool for working with family systems, as well as from a research-oriented perspective in terms of understanding and representing family systems.

Most traditional approaches to genogram construction focus upon the basic structure of the family; demographic information; and relationships. However, it is possible to expand creatively on these bases (Mauzey & Erdman, 1995). Additionally, the genogram has been shown to have considerable usefulness in terms of developing cross-cultural understandings of family systems, as well as validity for application to multi-cultural groupings in studies conducted in South Africa (Marchetti-Mercer & Cleaver, 2000).

This study makes use of the genogram method to organize and interpret data gathered on the family systems of individuals who commit serial murder. The decision to use a genogram is based on its proven utility in organizing data related to family systems; graphically representing such systems and illuminating relationships between members; fit with theoretical approaches utilized for the current study (such as that of Bowen (1978)); and its proven cross-cultural suitability and applicability, especially given the multicultural composition of current South African society.

The standardised method for compiling a genogram as outlined in McGoldrick and Gerson (1985) is used. The standardized method consists of three steps, mainly:

- mapping the family structure;
- recording family information; and
- showing family relationships (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985).

These will now be elaborated upon in turn.

- **Mapping the family structure.**

The graphic depiction of family relationship and structure involves constructing a map of how different family members are related (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). This map consists of figures, lines and symbols, representing people and their relationship to each other. The main information represented on the map includes marriages, deaths, divorce or separation, adoption or fostering of children, twins and households.

- **Recording family information.**

The family structure can be considered the “skeleton of the genogram” (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). Once compiled, further family information is added, namely:

- demographic information;
- functioning information; and
- critical family events.

Demographic information includes dates of birth and death, ages, locations, occupations and educational level. Functional information refers to the medical, behavioural and emotional functioning of family members. Critical family events refer to important events that may have impacted upon family functioning or the functioning of the individual concerned. These include transitions, migrations, failures and successes, demographic events such as births and deaths, and loss of job, for example.

McGoldrick and Gerson (1985) stress the importance of including housekeepers, extended family such as aunts, uncles, cousins, foster children and adopted children in the analysis of families for clinical or research purposes. They also state that ethnic groups may vary considerably in the structuring of their family trees and that for this reason godparents and other kinship networks should not be ignored in terms of the role that they might play for a particular family group. Stack (1974) states that when a close friend is especially important to a family, this individual may become a member of the informal extended kinship network and that he or she should be included in any analysis of the family.

- **Showing family relationships.**

The final step of creating the genogram involves delineating the relationships between family members. This process is largely inferential and is based on information gathered from family members as well as observation of the family members.

The definition of family discussed in chapter 4 will be used to designate the group of individuals that would be used to construct the genogram for each case. The genogram for each family system is compiled from interviews with, and direct observation of family members as well as the primary research participants in the study, and will go back three generations to the grandparents of the individuals concerned. Due to the fact that the index individuals are incarcerated, and as a result of strict Department of Correctional Services access regulations, it will not be possible to observe the interaction between them and their family members.

Analysis and interpretation of the genogram data takes according to the following categories, namely:

- Category one: Family structure, with respect to
  - household composition;

- sibling constellation; and
- unusual family configurations;
- Category two: Life cycle fit;
- Category three: Pattern repetition across generations, with respect to
  - patterns of functioning;
  - patterns of relationships; and
  - repeated structural patterns;
- Category four: Life events and family functioning, with respect to
  - the coincidences of life events;
  - the impact of life changes, transitions and traumas;
  - anniversary reactions; and
  - social, economic and political events;
- Category five: Relational patterns and triangles; and
- Category six: Family balance and imbalance, with respect to
  - the family structure;
  - roles;
  - levels and style of functioning; and
  - resources (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985).

#### **5.4.4 Archival data and other records**

Archives are the “ongoing, continuous records of a society” (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991, p. 354). Archival records may include actuarial records of births, deaths, and marriages; political and judicial records; other government records (such as crime reports, and police

case files); the mass media; sales records; industrial and institutional records; and various other written documents.

This study uses archival records in the form of police records, and case files in order to select participants and psychological reports together with documentation in the form of newspaper reports as well as video interview footage as part of the data analysis.

It is hoped that by using multiple sources of data, the study will obtain a rich and complex interpretation of the topic of interest (Patton, 1990), and satisfy the criterion of credibility. By using interviews with individuals who have committed serial murder and their families, together with reports from psychologists who assessed them, and direct observation of family interaction, the consistency of the overall impression of the family system can be established and any contradictions can be included in the analysis and/or explored by accessing other sources of data, which may become available as the process of evidence enquiry develops.

To be able to review the drafts of participants, all information gathered is put together and assessments and analyses conducted with the aim of possibly determining if any new or additional information is needed. Additionally, the participants are asked to confirm the researcher's understanding of their beliefs, ideas and perceptions as expressed during interviews and in this way, key informants are allowed to review the information collected in the study and relative consistency in understandings between the researcher and participants is ensured, thus attempting to fulfill the criterion of reflexivity.

## **5.5 PROCEDURE**

The procedure followed by the research study consists of the following steps, namely:

- review literature;



- choose approach and design;
- research media for possible cases;
- identify possible cases;
- get permission from University of Pretoria and Department of Correctional Services;
- review case files and other archival data; speak to experts;
- approach subjects for permission;
- interview individuals who have committed serial murder;
- interview family, prison staff and other professionals;
- compile genogram;
- examine data in light of theoretical approach (Family systems theory); and
- compile results.

All interviewees are briefed before interviews. Briefing consists of defining the situation for the subject, describing the purpose of the interview as well as allowing for any questions on the part of the interviewee. This includes a semi-formal social introduction, the sharing with the participant the aims of the research, as well as ethical and confidentiality issues. This also includes the participants' permission or willingness to participate. Confidentiality is stressed and anonymity guaranteed with regards to interview data, collection and publication of the research.

A statement is made that participation will possibly contribute to the understanding of violence in general and more specifically to serial murder. Initial questions in the interviews are unstructured and open-ended, aimed at developing a sense of rapport with participants. Later, more focused, semi-structured questions are introduced in order to gather information about the family, using circular questions and the genogram to further generate questions and

information for clarity. In addition to the above, some structured questions are also included to obtain biographical and chronological data about the family.

Debriefing after the interview(s) consists of summarizing the main points of the interview and allowing for feedback from the interviewee. Such feedback may go towards verification in later stages.

The above examples of how the interviews are to be introduced may differ depending on the immediate meta-communications and interactional/interpersonal cues in the researcher's relationship with the interviewee (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967). The processes and interactions during the interviews are also described and analyzed.

The researcher conducts between three and five interviews of approximately two to three hours with each individual who has committed serial murder, and approximately one interview of one to two hours with family members. The idea is to continue until some form of saturation of information is reached before interview(s) are terminated.

Interviews with prison psychologists are used for both Mr X and Mr Y (approximately one interview of one hour each); in the case of Mr X, the psychiatrist who assessed him for competency to stand trial is also interviewed (one interview of approximately one hour); and with Mr Y, his cell-mate, Mr Z, is also interviewed (approximately five interviews of two hours each). These interviews are unstructured and are integrated into total data analysis, together with primary interviews (with participants and family members), as supplementary data sources. These interviews consist of semi-structured questions concerning the interviewees' perspectives on the individual concerned; the topic of serial murder and their impressions of the families of these individuals where is contact with these individuals.

## **5.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In order to safeguard the privacy of the family members interviewed, names of people and places are withheld in line with ethical considerations concerning confidentiality. This is done in spite of the fact that the details of the crimes committed, as well as identity of the individuals sampled for the case studies, are public record. Many of the family members interviewed have avoided public attention due to the sensitive nature of the crimes committed by a member of their family, and their wishes with regards to privacy in this respect are observed.

Additionally, all individuals interviewed are offered the opportunity for debriefing after every interview if they experienced stress or trauma as a result of recounting painful or other experiences. Informed consent is obtained from all individuals interviewed.

Permission to conduct the study is granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria, and the Department of Correctional Services, after carefully scrutinizing the nature and conditions of the research.

## **5.7 DATA ANALYSIS**

After data is collected via the various methods discussed above, analysis takes place in two ways, namely:

- a case study method; and
- content analysis.

### 5.7.1 Discussion of the case study method

The case study method selected for this study is a multiple case study exploratory research design, as described by Yin (1994). A case study approach is selected due to the fact that the author desires an in-depth, rich, descriptive conceptualization of the participant and the family system of the participant concerned. On account of the fact that the study does not wish to make any causal attributions about the phenomenon in question, namely serial murder, it is not necessary to use an experimental design with control groups or a quasi-experimental design (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1981). The case study approach is also amenable to the epistemology and theoretical framework of the study.

- **Yin's criteria for defining a case study.**

Yin (1994) has two main criteria for defining a case study, namely that the study must consist of “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 13); and that “the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13).

Serial murder is a contemporary phenomenon, especially in South Africa, where, as discussed in the literature review, it has been particularly prolific over the last ten years (Pistorius, 1996). It is the opinion of the author that serial murder is frequently linked to the context in which it is situated, which, for the purposes of this study, is the family, as well as broader social, cultural and political contexts, to a lesser degree. Additionally, in accordance with Yin's second principle, it is often difficult to draw definite lines between serial murder as a behaviour of one particular individual (as well as serial murder as a cultural phenomenon),

and the context in which this behaviour takes place. This can be seen in the numerous theories discussed in the chapter 3 that attribute serial murder to an individual's upbringing in a "dysfunctional family". Consequently, it would appear that Yin's (1994) two definitional criteria are satisfied, and that a case study methodology is appropriate for this study, and the topic of serial murder.

- **The unit of analysis.**

The unit of analysis is defined by establishing:

- what constitutes a case;
- the time boundaries of a case; and by
- distinguishing what is inside a case from what is outside (Yin, 1994).

A case in this study refers to an individual who has committed serial murder and meets sampling criteria, together with the available family members of this individual. This is because the author intends to study the role played by the family in contributing towards serial murder behaviour in the participant concerned. Family is defined according to the definition in chapter 4 (see p.133).

This study uses the two cases discussed above, taking into account that there are not many individuals incarcerated for serial murder in South Africa.

The time boundaries of the cases that are used in this study consist of the amount of time necessary to establish rapport with the participant concerned as well as their family, and the time necessary to complete enough interviews to reach saturation with the participants and their families.

### 5.7.2 Content analysis

This study uses a content analysis method to analyze the data collected. Content analysis is a technique whereby messages (in the form of written or oral statements) are studied via being exposed to criteria of selection (Holsti, 1968), after which statements are made about such messages with regard to frequency, grouping or other interpretative frameworks. As a technique, content analysis has been interpreted as both quantitative and qualitative in nature (Smith, 1975). Content analysis involves a consideration of what to count, the nature of levels and units of analysis and how to use coding frames or categories (Berg, 1995; Franzosi, 2004).

It is thought that seven major elements in messages can be counted in content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Berg, 1983; Merton, 1968; Selltitz, Jahoda, Deutsch & Cook, 1959). These are words or terms; themes; characters; paragraphs; items; concepts; and semantics. These elements can be considered types of units of analysis that are then organized in terms of coding frames (Berg, 1995). Coding frames or categories are used to sort cases or units of analysis into some specified special class according to certain criteria. Franzosi (2004) states that coding categories for content analysis have a number of properties, namely:

- the design of coding categories follows the theoretical interest of the researcher;
- coding categories are abstract, general and highly aggregated;
- since the coding categories follow the theoretical interest of the researcher, a researcher with different interests with respect to the texts used or subject matter may choose different categories;

- coder discretion plays a role in trying to fit concrete text into abstract coding categories and thus there may be ‘contamination’ of the measurement which needs to be addressed in terms of reflexivity;
- links and connections between categories are not specified, that is, causal statements are not usually made; and
- coded output bears little relationship to the original text.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to the content analysis method used. The unit of analysis for this study consists of themes that emerge from the collected data (namely, interviews, clinical observations, genograms and archival records) for each case study, and coding proceeds on the basis of theoretical classes based on the family systems conceptual framework discussed in chapter 4 (see p. 167), such as emotional process, multigenerational patterns and relationship patterns. These coding frames or categories are further structured with respect to their various constituent elements (as specified by the conceptual framework in chapter 4).

Therefore, emotional process are further subdivided into differentiation within the family system and differentiation in the social milieu, and themes coded on the basis of how they fit into the various categories. A similar procedure is repeated with multigenerational processes (in terms of Bowen’s projection and Minuchin’s sub-system or structural approach) as well as with relationship patterns (in terms of triangulation and triads, as well as interactions and hierarchies).

## **5.8 DATA INTEGRATION**

Data collected and analysed as outlined above is integrated in order to explore the topic of serial murder as outlined in the research focus, namely: “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.

After data analysis, there should be an awareness of possible meta-patterns in the family system of each case, which illuminate the connections or relationships between the serial murder pattern of behaviour of one of the members of the family system and other patterns of behaviour in the family system.

## **5.9 CONCLUSION**

This study investigates the role that serial murder plays within the family system via an exploratory qualitative research design. The various criteria for evaluating such a study have been outlined and will be referred to again in chapter 8, when assessing the limitations of the current study.

Importantly, analysis of data first examines each case individually, and then explores the patterns that emerge across cases. In this way, findings may reveal patterns that can be elaborated upon in future research by the addition of other cases or testing of particular patterns. The following chapter will examine the results of the current study.