

8. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, CRITIQUE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To recapture, the focus of the study was to investigate serial murder from a family system point of view. To achieve this, the following question was proposed:

- “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 will discuss the findings critically and then make suggestions or recommendations for future work. The two case studies of Mr X and Mr Y from Chapter 6 will now be compared and contrasted with regards to their similarities and differences according to their biographical data, genogram and the respective categories of thematic content analysis that were utilized, namely emotional processes, multigenerational patterns and patterns of relationships in the family systems.

8.1 COMPARISON OF MR X AND MR Y AND THEIR FAMILIES

8.1.1 Biographical information and genogram

In terms of biographical information, both Mr X and Mr Y are Afrikaans-speaking White South African males. They are of a similar age group, with both Mr X and Mr Y in their early forties. Both individuals trained as policemen, as part of the railway police. Mr X worked as part of the police force until his arrest, whilst Mr Y left the police and worked in various security firms and as a bouncer. Mr X has been involved in one significant heterosexual

relationship with Miss N while Mr Y has been involved in a number of homosexual relationships, the most significant of which appear to have been that with his co-accused, Mr H. Both individuals received the death penalty for their crimes, which was later revoked due to a change in the legislation. Both are currently serving life terms for their crimes. Mr X's victims were females of varying ages and races, while Mr Y's victims were predominantly white, homosexual males. Mr X's crimes involved rape and murder, whereas Mr Y's crimes involved murder predominantly. Mr X committed his crimes alone, whilst Mr Y committed his crimes together with his partner, Mr H.

With regards to family structure, both Mr X and Mr Y appear to be part of a nuclear family system that is relatively cut-off or isolated from the extended family system. Mr X appears to be part of a triadic structure, involving himself, mother X and father X, while Mr Y appears to be part of a predominantly dyadic relationship with mother Y. Both individuals appear to have occupied the position of functional only child. Despite having two half siblings it would appear that Mr Y speaks of his role in his family system as one as the only child, possibly on account of the short amount of time that the half-siblings were a part of the household and their isolation from the dyad involving Mr Y and his mother once they left the household.

Table 8.1

Comparison between Mr X and Mr Y (Biographical Information and Genogram)

	Mr X	Mr Y
Gender	Male	Male
Racial/ethnic background	White, Afrikaans-speaking	White, Afrikaans-speaking
Age (at time of research)	Early forties	Early forties
Occupational history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained as policeman (Railway police) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained as policeman (Railway police) Security officer; bouncer
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	Predominantly homosexual
Sentence	Death penalty (later changed to life terms)	Death penalty (later changed to life terms)
Victims	All female – various ages and races	All male – white and predominantly homosexual
Nature of crimes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked alone Mixed rape and murder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked with co-accused, Mr H Mixed murder, attempted murder and assault
Education	Completed high school	Completed high school
<u>Family characteristics</u>	Traditionally nuclear	Single parent household; later introduction of step-parent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary relationship type 	Triadic, with mother and father	Dyadic, with mother
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sibling position 	Only child	Youngest, with two half-siblings but functional only child

- **Emotional processes.**

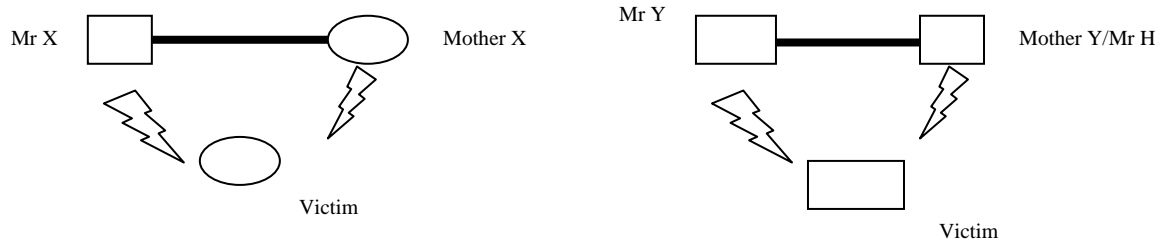
In terms of emotional processes, it would appear that both Mr X and Mr Y have family systems that seem to have exhibited low levels of differentiation. Both individuals also appear to have been involved in a dyadic, fused or enmeshed relationship while growing up and seem to have dealt with this in different ways. In both cases, the fused relationship appears to have served a central function in maintaining the family system and members of the respective family systems appear to have interacted with each other in manners that preserved the central fused relationship for this purpose. In the case of Mr X, this relationship involved him and mother X and appears to have persisted into his adult years. Mr X's murder and rape victims may have possibly functioned as a means to absorb some of the excess anxiety and other threatening emotions in the fused relationship so that this relationship could be maintained thus maintaining the homeostasis of the family system.

In the case of Mr Y, this fused relationship also involved Mr Y and his mother, but it would appear that Mr Y repeated this pattern with his co-accused, Mr H. It seems that in the same way as Mr X, Mr Y's murder victims may have also served as a means to absorb threatening emotions and anxiety that may have jeopardized the homeostasis of the dyadic relationship and family system created by Mr Y and Mr H. It would appear that the information above, namely close relationships with a maternal figure in the case of both Mr X and Mr Y, challenges much of the existing literature on individuals who commit serial murder (see Burgess *et al.*, 1986; Douglas & Olshaker, 2000; Ressler *et al.*, 1988).

It would appear that in both cases, anger as an emotional response was unacceptable within the respective X and Y family systems on the parts of Mr X and Mr Y, with only certain other members being able to engage in anger responses (such as father X and the maternal grandfather in the X family and the step-father in the Y family). As a result, Mr X and Mr Y may have been indirectly responsible for the management of anger within their

respective family systems, by refraining from adding to existing anxiety within the systems (via expression of their anger) and thereby maintaining emotional homeostasis of their family systems. Anger or other negative, anxiety-provoking emotions experienced by Mr X and Mr Y may possibly have been suppressed and accumulated over time until they were possibly expressed explosively outside of their family systems in the form of violence (or murder). The ensuing relief may have acted as positive feedback that encouraged the repetition of such behaviour as a means of relieving pressure from suppressed anger and maintaining homeostasis in the family system.

Figure 29. Emotional Processes in X and Y Family Systems



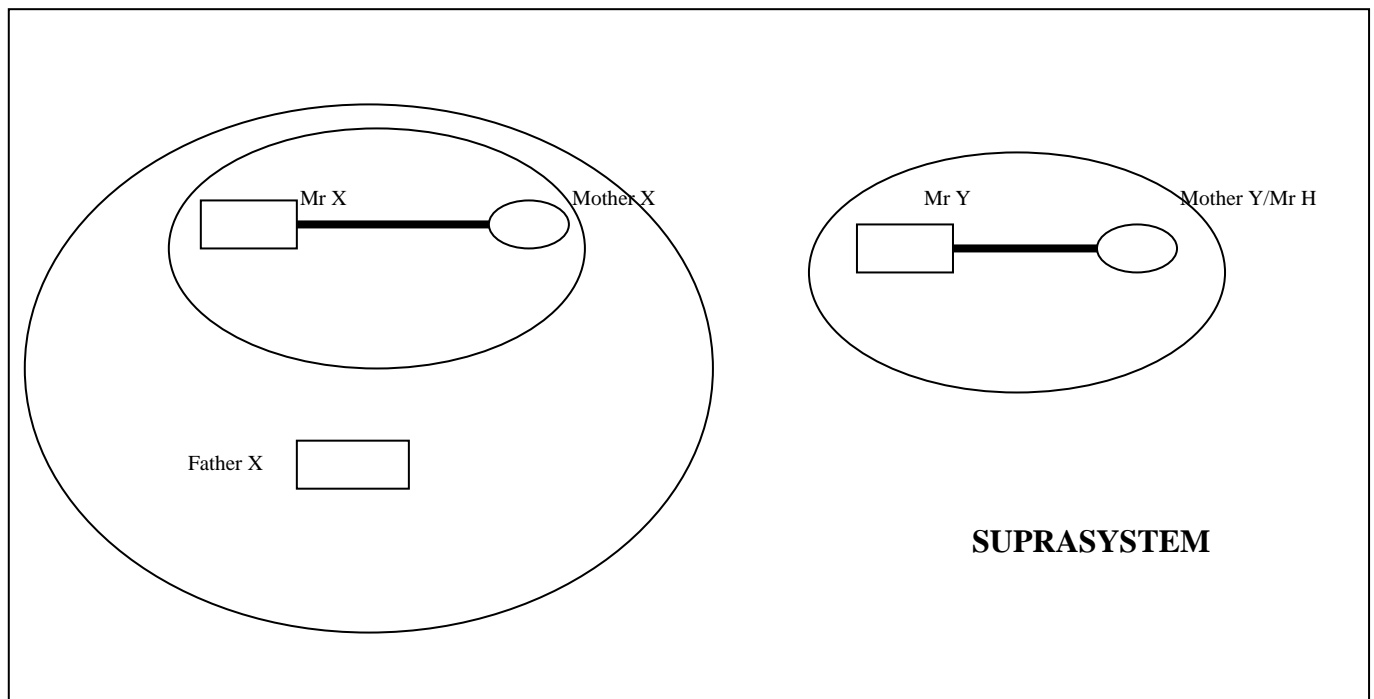
Due to their involvement in fused, enmeshed relationships, both Mr X and Mr Y may have feared a loss of self or identity in such relationships. However, both appeared to attempt to assert themselves in different ways. Mr X appears to have used the role of murderer or social deviant to achieve this, while Mr Y appears to have attempted to fill roles within his family system that deviated from the expected patterns associated with extended family such as Matriculant, intelligent and cultured man, and homosexual. Paradoxically, he ultimately repeated the behaviour pattern of his father by committing murder and being sentenced to death. Mr X also appears to have enacted a paradox in the sense that he ultimately repeated

his maternal grandfather's pattern of addictive behaviour (whereas his grandfather was addicted to alcohol) with regards to his murders.

The family systems of both Mr X and Mr Y also appear to have consisted of members that were emotionally cut-off from others in the system. In the case of Mr X, this appears to have been father X who was emotionally cut-off from Mr X and mother X, while with Mr Y, this appears to have been Mr Y and his mother who were emotionally cut-off from the extended family system (and later, Mr Y and Mr H who were cut-off from their respective family systems). Additionally, both Mr X and Mr Y appear to have been emotionally cut-off from the societal supra-system and positioned within rigidly closed family systems.

Figure 30.

Emotional Cut-Offs in the X and Y Family Systems



In terms of both Mr X and Mr Y, both of their respective family systems appear to have struggled to find effective ways of managing and expelling excess stress and anxiety that threatened homeostasis within the system. This may have been influenced by the paucity of

resources available to the respective systems, the rigid, closed nature of the family system boundaries as well as the 'symptomatic' patterns of behaviour passed down across generations of the family system, discussed in the following section. In both cases, Mr X and Mr Y appear to have assumed a particular role within the system with regards to managing anxiety and maintaining homeostasis by facilitating release points for excess emotion in the system. One way in which they achieved this function may have been via the introduction of new members to the system in the form of murder victims, onto which some of this emotion could be channeled. These were members who physically were also "cut-off" from the family; being the murder victims but into which some of the emotion could be channeled.

- **Multigenerational patterns.**

It would appear that both individuals were members of family systems consisting of parental and other sub-systems that were poorly defined with weak generational boundaries. In the case of Mr X, this appears to have been the case mainly in relation to his mother and maternal grandfather, where the parental and grandparental sub-systems had very diffuse boundaries with the maternal grandfather taking on the role of father to Mr X on many occasions. In the case of Mr Y, the parental and child subsystems appear to have had diffuse boundaries with Mr Y frequently taking on a parentified role in relation to his mother. Mr Y appears to have repeated this pattern in his relationship with Mr H as well.

Additionally, both individuals appear to have inherited the patterns of previous generations with regards to coping and management of anxiety and homeostasis in the family system. Mr X appears to have repeated the patterns of addiction (to murder in his case) and belligerence or aggression apparent at the grandparental level of the family system, as well as behavioural patterns of emotional cutting-off evident with regards to father X as well as the X nuclear family and the extended family system. Mr Y appears to have repeated patterns of

criminal behaviour and violence as seen at his father's level of the family system, as well as maternal patterns of relationship style. In this way, both individuals appear to have performed a role in maintaining the homeostasis of the family system, albeit in ways that were not necessary beneficial to individual members, including themselves.

- **Relationship patterns.**

In terms of relationship patterns, there appears to be evidence of the use of triangulation in the family systems of both Mr X and Mr Y. However, it would appear that the manner in which each individual was involved with triangulation processes in their respective family systems differed. Mr X appears to have played a more passive role in the triads of which he was a part, usually taking the position of the triangulated third. This appears to have taken place in relation to his father and mother, as well as his mother and grandfather. In these relationships, Mr X appears to have served as a means of preserving the relationship between the individuals concerned by absorbing some of the excess anxiety in these relationships in his role as triangulated third.

Mr Y, conversely, appears to have taken a more active role in the triads of which he was a part. In this sense, it would appear that he formed part of a dyadic relationship that frequently needed to introduce a third member in order to absorb excess anxiety in the dyadic relationship. This can be seen in Mr Y's relationship with his mother, where others such as his stepfather took the role of the triangulated third member, as well as in his relationship with Mr H where the victims of their crimes frequently took the role of triangulated third member. This also appeared to be evident in Mr Y's relationships whilst in prison, where prison staff such as warders and social workers, as well as other prisoners frequently took the role of triangulated third to preserve his dyadic relationships with individuals such as his cell-mate, Mr Z, as well as his various lovers.

In both case studies, it would appear that crime victims frequently took the role of triangulated third members as a means to possibly absorb excess anxiety in the family systems of Mr X and Mr Y, or in the relationships that they were involved in within the context of such systems. In this way, they also appear to have assisted the system in maintaining homeostasis with regards to levels of differentiation and relationship patterns. For example, in the case of Mr X, the spouses of his maternal grandfather appear to have functioned in a similar light, whilst with Mr Y, the spouses of his mother appear to have functioned in a similar way.

Another difference in the positions and relationships that characterized Mr X and Mr Y's participation in triads and triangulation within their family systems involves the manner in which threats to the relationships that characterized these triads were perceived. Whilst Mr X appears to have been part of triads where the threat to homeostasis within such triads came from one of the members of the family system, Mr Y appears to have had threats to homeostasis constituted by a blend of individuals from inside the family system and external to the family system. In the case of Mr X, the stability of the triadic relationship between himself, mother X and the maternal grandfather was frequently threatened by increased anxiety on the part of the maternal grandfather and mother X, whilst in Mr Y, threats to the stability of his dyadic relationship with mother Y appeared to come largely from his step-father, or extended family members, whilst with Mr H, these threats came from outside of the system in the form of members of the societal supra-system (such as other homosexuals, or members of the police force or social welfare).

In terms of coalitions and types of relationships within the family systems of Mr X and Mr Y, it would appear that there were some differences between the two individuals' involvement in such relationships. Mr X appears to have been involved predominantly in complementary relationships in his family system, with him predominantly taking the one-

down position, specifically in relation to his mother and maternal grandfather. It would appear that any attempt on Mr X to occupy a different, one-up position contributed further to anxiety in the family system and was prevented by homeostatic mechanism in the family system. This can be seen in Mr X's arguments with his mother while growing up and with his grandfather in later life. In relation to his victims however, Mr X appears to have taken a one-up position, thus lending weight to a possible hypothesis that these relationships with victims served possibly to balance the extent to which Mr X took the one-down position in his own family system. Additionally, Mr X's occupation of the one-down position in his complementary relationships in the family system appears to have repeated the patterns of father X, who appears to have also predominantly taken the one-down position in his relationships.

Mr X's relationship with his maternal grandfather appears to have been an important coalition within the family system, specifically with regards to regulating processes within the nuclear family system and with regards to empowering Mr X within the family system. His falling out with the maternal grandfather, and the death of this individual soon afterwards may have depleted Mr X's power and the stability of his position within the family system. The escalation in criminal behaviour of Mr X during this period may have served as an attempt to regain stability and power.

With regards to Mr Y, there is a variation in the character of his relationships within the family system with regards to symmetrical and complementary types. The fused dyads of which Mr Y was a part within his family system appear to have consisted of complementary relationships with Mr Y in the one-up position. In this way, he appears to have held considerable power within the family system. In terms of the symmetrical relationships of which he was a part, these appear to have been in relation to a specific type of individual, namely a powerful male, possibly in a competitive context. This can be seen with regards to Mr Y's relationship with his father (and the memory of his father), as well as his step-father.

In contrast to Mr X, Mr Y's relationship with his victims appears to have operated on a similar symmetrical premise, where many of the men were seen as threats to his relationship with Mr H, and escalated until Mr Y forced a complementary form of relationship by positioning himself in the one-up position by violent means.

In both cases, it may be that the individuals concerned committed murders to escape the homeostatic processes in the family in the sense that the experience of this was so destructive or annihilating that the individual concerned may have felt the need to perform some extreme act to voice his individuality or difference and prevent complete loss of self in fused or enmeshed relationships.

8.2 CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE GENERAL LITERATURE

As discussed in chapter 1, serial murder is a phenomenon that has been studied from a number of different perspectives, such as law enforcement in terms of developing profiling techniques and typologies or classification systems (Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Leibman, 1989; Ressler & Schachtman, 1992); psychological perspectives in terms of attempting to understand factors such as personality and its impact on criminal behaviour (Douglas & Olshaker, 2000; Harbort & Mokros, 2001; Pinto & Wilson, 1990), as well as possible (or impossible) rehabilitation or offender management strategies (Pistorius, 1996; Ressler, 1997); and many other fields such as criminology, sociology and psychiatry.

This study has demonstrated that it is possible to understand the phenomenon of serial murder from another domain within the broader realm of the psychological approach, namely, via family systems theory. Additionally, this study has also indicated that adopting such an approach may yield novel possibilities in terms of contributions to the wider body of literature

on the topic as well as possible rehabilitative or management applications after such individuals have been apprehended and sentenced. These will be discussed in greater detail.

The application of family systems theory to the study of serial murder has also raised the possibility of using such an approach with other types of criminal behaviour in order to understand the role that the family system plays in maintaining such behaviour or patterns of relationship, as well as the role of this “symptom” within the family system. Findings could then be compared and contrasted across sub-types of criminal behaviour, as well as different family structures and individuals. The genogram, in particular, may be a powerful tool for achieving these objectives, as will be discussed below in terms of methodological developments.

Finally, this study makes a considerable contribution to the international body of literature on the topic of serial murder due to the accessibility of individuals who have been incarcerated for serial murder. In other countries, researchers are frequently unable to gain access to incarcerated individuals and hence lack the opportunity to explore related topics (Beyers, personal communication, 2005). As a result, the findings in this study may be of use to those who are not able to conduct similar research in their own countries.

8.3 DEFINITIONS

In terms of definitions of serial murder, the family systems perspective illuminates new possibilities for a framework that views serial murder as a function by which a system attempts to communicate a particular message; deal with a set of circumstances; manage disequilibrium or instability as part of negative and positive feedback mechanisms and homeostasis; or facilitate outlets for excess anxiety within the system. Such a definition may then focus explicitly on a definition of serial murder purely in terms of the behaviour involved

and thus preclude issues related to factors such as specification of gender, victim number, and sexual aspects to name some of those discussed in chapter two, as well as other demographic factors such as race, age, or socio-economic background. The generic definition specified in chapter two could still be maintained in terms of identifying an instance of serial murder; however, the above conceptualization of serial murder in terms of family systems and behaviour could then be added to the other definitional elaborations (such as Douglas & Olshaker, 2000; Labuschagne, 2001; Pistorius, 1996; Ressler *et al*, 1988, for example) as an alternative way of understanding the phenomenon.

8.4 HISTORY

In terms of the history of serial murder both internationally and in South Africa, a systemic view of serial murder raises a number of possibilities with regards to the perspectives from which the emergence of serial murder as a phenomenon and its development over time can be viewed. Firstly, it may be the case that different systemic configurations with regards to the larger societal supra-system influenced the role of serial murder within such a system. Consequently, this behaviour may have served different systemic purposes over time. This may also have altered with regards to emerging alternatives, as the family as a system has evolved, developed and changed over time. Changes in the historical, societal system may have impacted upon family types, and in turn, family systems may have found alternative ways of communicating messages; alternative types of relationship patterns and interactions; as well as alternative means of maintaining homeostasis. One of these alternative symptom presentations may have involved the development of serial murder. Therefore, over time, one may possibly be able to link the

“emergence” of serial murder to the emergence of changes in the societal supra-system and/or different family types.

With reference to discussion in chapter 2 regarding the history of serial murder, a systemic perspective challenges the predominant linear perspective that has been adopted by researchers (such as Anderson, 1994; Ferguson *et al.*, 2003) and would appear to make questions such as when was the first case of serial murder less important than those that explored the nature of societal systems that produce serial murder as a symptom or as a means to achieve a certain function. In this light, the systemic perspective would appear to extend understandings of serial murder from a historical aspect along the lines of researchers such as Jenkins (1994), Simpson (1999), Whitman and Agutagawa (2003), and Wilson (2000).

Secondly, the history of serial murder has traditionally examined such a phenomenon by focusing primarily on the individual. By viewing this phenomenon as a type of interaction or relationship pattern within a system (in line with a systemic view), an alternative history could be traced or documented to supplement existing historical data, and possibly illuminate different patterns or developments in the form and nature of serial murder over time.

Lastly, the history of serial murder viewed in a more systemic light may indicate when the systemic context (in terms of the type of family or larger societal supra-system) was amenable to reflect serial murder as a message or communication. In other words, what is it about a system that makes serial murder as a relationship pattern or message visible and communicable? And historically, what developments occurred to facilitate this?

8.5 CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS AND TYPOLOGIES

With regards to the typologies discussed in chapter 2, many of the categories and classifications of serial murder could be interpreted via a more systemic view, in line with

certain theoretical principles. For example, the power/control serial murder type of Holmes and DeBurger (1988), could be viewed as an individual who frequently possibly repeats complementary patterns of relationship and finds it necessary to be in the one-up position. Consequently, the emphasis moves away from a focus on intrapsychic factors such as need for omnipotence to more systemic, interactional factors such as relationship. In terms of profiling initiatives, this could be used to predict other situations in which the individual would be able to repeat such a relationship pattern in other areas of his/her life such as work or social situations.

8.6 THEORETICAL ASPECTS

This study makes a considerable contribution to the body of traditional theoretical data that explores the phenomenon of serial murder, due to the fact that such a body is devoid of any attempts to examine serial murder from a systemic perspective. Consequently, not only does this study illuminate different ways of understanding serial murder, but it also produces novel opportunities for the further study and investigation of serial murder.

The systemic viewpoint does not exclude the possibility of other theoretical perspectives (such as psychodynamic, neurological and cognitive theories, for example, in chapter 3) but rather chooses to focus on a different aspect or contextual setting in which this phenomenon is explored, namely the family system (or societal system alternatively in future studies).

The systemic theoretical viewpoint also raises the question of whether serial murder should be viewed as an outcome of a certain personality type, or intrapsychic, individual characteristics of the individual concerned; or whether it should be viewed as the result of a particular type of interaction in a system. As discussed in chapter 3, traditional theories that have explored serial murder appear to have focused on the former approach, and have adopted

a largely linear causal model to explain serial murder (see Douglas & Olshaker, 2000; Holmes & Holmes, 1996; Pistorius, 1996; Ressler et al., 1988; Ressler & Schachtman, 1992; Whitman & Akutagawa, 2003, for example). To date, serial murder continues to evade comprehension and comprehensive explanation.

A systemic approach that allows for more circular notions of causality, together with a focus more on the behaviour or patterns of relationship concerned, may be able to explain the phenomenon more effectively, especially if used to supplement existing theories in a holistic framework, rather than being forced to situate itself on either side of the individual/behaviour theoretical dichotomy. Such applications can include extension to possible rehabilitation or management of incarcerated individuals who have committed serial murder if such behaviour is viewed within a systemic framework that understands serial murder behaviour as a symptom of instability or problems in the family system, and sees the development of the symptom as a possible attempt to enlist resources from the larger societal system with regards to restoring prior patterns of functioning. These resources could be seen as deriving from the criminal justice and/or correctional system. This would then contradict the proposals of both Pistorius (1996) and Ressler (1997), which state that rehabilitation is not a possibility for individuals who commit serial murder.

Related to the above suggestion, the question then arises as to the reason for the manifestation of serial murder as the particular symptom within a family system; explanations as to why some other symptom could not have possibly served the same purpose (for example, stealing or fraud); and why other family systems with similar circumstances do not “produce” serial murder. This may be a significant area that could be explored in further research studies and possibly yield answers that differ from traditional focus on genetic factors (such as Kumra *et al.*, 1998; Schroder *et al.*, 1981; and Stephenson, 1992) to explain

individual differences in manifestation of criminal behaviour (especially when environmental factors remain constant).

In the spirit of circularity, and second order cybernetic approaches, it may be hypothesized that systemic theory may in turn be influenced by its application to studies of criminal and deviant behaviour such as serial murder, and that further engagement in such areas may spur new theoretical concepts within the broader area of systemic theory. This reciprocal process does not appear to be possible with other theoretical approaches such as psychodynamic (Schwartz, 1999) and cognitive-behavioural and learning theory (Moorey, 1996) models where interpretation and application appears to operate in a top-down, linear fashion with respect to serial murder.

Finally, this study did not address possible systemic influences with regards to the larger societal supra-system. In a country such as South Africa, that has undergone considerable changes in the societal supra-system over the last 10 years, and where the emergence of serial murder appears on the surface to be related to such changes, it would be interesting to examine the possible impact of the societal system on family systems and the interaction between the two systems as well as their assimilation or resistance to assimilation which may have characterized, and possibly continues to characterize, such interactions. This is particularly salient also given the role that Bowen (1978) hypothesizes that societal regression may play in affecting anxiety levels and levels of differentiation within systems, as well as the permeability of system boundaries. Additionally, this would not limit the “emergence” of serial murder as a societal symptom to certain periods of time in South Africa’s history (such as post-1994), as has been postulated in existing theory (see Hodgskiss, 2003; Labuschagne, 2003; Pistorius, 1996, for example). It would rather view serial murder as a symptom that could emerge at any point in time given certain societal circumstances.

8.7 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodological approach also facilitates a more interpretative approach to serial murder, and its emphasis on relationship rather than causality made it very amenable to the systemic theoretical paradigm that informed the study. Given the important role that contextual factors play in understandings of family, as well as the flexibility required to appreciate and incorporate the nuances of different family systems and interactional style, the qualitative approach has shown potential for illuminating possible explanations for differences in the manifestation of instances of serial murder, and for exploring each instance in its entirety and its own right as opposed to searching for underlying commonalities that may be generalized across the phenomenon type.

In terms of methodological contributions, this study has demonstrated the usefulness of the genogram as a method for illustrating family systems and relationships diagrammatically. With regards to serial murder, this method could be applied to an individual who has committed serial murder once incarcerated in terms of his/her relationships within the correctional system. One might then be able to predict how such an individual may function in terms of his/her relationships with other inmates and staff based on repeating patterns in the family system genogram. In this way, the genogram may be a useful contribution to offender management and may inform possible interventions in this regard.

The qualitative research criterion of reflexivity with regards to the researcher also lends itself well to the systemic principle of second order cybernetics, or the importance given to how the therapist or researcher or individual (“outsider”) who interacts with the family system is assimilated into such a system, and transformed as part of such a system, in addition to making his/her own impact on the family system (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). In this sense, it was important for the researcher to assess how she may have been influenced by the

family system she was temporarily a part of; whether the system assimilated her easily or resisted; and how her observations, interview style, interactions with family members, and view of the study may have been shaped by such an interaction.

For example, conducting interviews at the family home (as was the case with Mr X's family) resulted in the researcher taking a one-down position due to her own concerns about intruding upon frequently rigid family systems who had little room for the introduction of outsiders. As a result, interviews may have been more social than initially intended, and potentially painful questions phrased carefully or avoided. It would possibly be interesting to conduct follow-up interviews at some point with families to assess how the system may have been affected by the brief participation of the researcher.

The study will now be evaluated in terms of its fulfillment of the four criteria for qualitative research.

8.7.1 Evaluation of qualitative research.

As discussed in chapter 5, qualitative research should be evaluated according to the principles of:

- 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. In line with the stipulated definition in chapter two, namely, multiple murders committed over a period of time by one or more individuals and difference between a generic definition and elaborations thereof, the

researcher made use of case studies that fulfilled these criteria and additionally, added an additional, alternative elaboration of the generic definition, namely that serial murder may reflect a pattern of behaviour that functions as a symptom within a family system; as a means to maintain homeostasis; or as an outlet for excess anxiety in the family system. Additionally, all families used for the purpose of the study (real and perceived) conformed to the stipulated definition in chapter four, namely the group of individuals or individual, biologically related or otherwise, with whom one is involved in intimate, interactional relationship/s over time; and whom one subjectively recognizes as playing a significant role in this regard.

Transferability refers to the question, how applicable or transferable are the findings to another setting or group of people? As discussed previously, the findings of this study could be transferred to the individual concerned in his current correctional setting to inform and predict relationship patterns that he may be involved in or repeat given those present in his genogram and family system. Findings could also be applied to different types of case studies (for example, individuals of different races or having committed different types of crimes) in order to compare and contrast family system processes and factors. Findings could also be applied to different contextual settings such as other countries or cities to examine differences and similarities in patterns.

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. Given the rigidity and premium placed on homeostasis within the family systems involved in this study, there is considerable probability that the study would yield similar results in conducted with the same participants and the same context. Changes that might compromise dependability may consist of possible transformations or alterations of interactional patterns or introduction of new input in other systems in which participants are involved (for example, the researcher's own family system or the correctional system of which the individual who

commits serial murder is a member). Additionally, changes in theoretical aspects (in line with the continual evolution of epistemology) might result in different results if the study were to be conducted again.

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. To this end, it is important to address certain prejudices or biases that may have influenced the researcher's interpretations of the phenomena studied. In the current study, the researcher may have been influenced by preconceptions concerning the "types" of families that individuals who commit serial murder are members of. This may have been influenced by literature that has addressed the role of the "dysfunctional family" in serial murder as well as popular preconceptions. To this end, she attempted to compensate for any preconceptions by adopting a more neutral stance towards such families, and may have tended to overcompensate by emphasizing positive aspects related to such systems in her own mind and playing down, not noticing or rationalizing more negative (or less positive) aspects.

The researcher also comes from a background that has involved predominant work within linear causal, pathology-oriented and intrapsychic approaches. Consequently, she may have occasionally viewed processes and interactions within family systems in these terms as opposed to a more systemic, relational, circular approach, and have had to adjust accordingly on noting her alternative punctuation of events in the former manner.

The researcher's own ethnicity (namely, White, English-speaking) may have inclined her towards cases of individuals from a similar background (namely, White) that could speak the same languages (namely, English and Afrikaans). This may have resulted from an ease of communication as well as possible interest in personal commonalities. In light of the above, confirmability should be evaluated accordingly, with the stipulation that the researcher did

integrate the above into her analysis of the data and compilation of findings, as well as critique and recommendations below.

8.8 CRITIQUE

Firstly, the **sample** is relatively small albeit this is not a particularly salient concern given the qualitative nature of the research undertaken. However, one may argue that considerably different data and results may have been obtained with other individuals. This research did not aim to generalize to the population of individuals who have committed serial murder as a whole and it is understood that the findings obtained pertain specifically to a small segment of those individuals who have committed serial murder in South Africa, at a particular geographical and temporal point, and from a particular background, and should be applied and interpreted as such. It would be of interest to compare findings from possible future research that targeted other individuals who have committed serial murder from similar and different backgrounds to those individuals used in the current study.

Family information available also varied between case studies and it was not always possible to get the **desired quality or quantity of data**. For example, details surrounding the paternal side of the X family system were relatively vague and less elaborated than those for the maternal side of the family system due to the avoidant and guarded interpersonal style of father X. This style also appeared to have resulted in the X nuclear family members also being less able to discuss the paternal side of the family system. Consequently, statements proposed with regard to the family background and organization of family of origin of father X are particularly tentative. However, this aspect of data collection may be integrated as further information of the relational styles and interpersonal interaction between father X and other systems, as well as members of the X nuclear family, especially Mr X.

With regards to Mr Y, it was not possible to interview other members of the Y family system, other than Mr Y. Consequently, statements proposed with regard to the family background and organization of extended family are derived entirely from interviews with Mr Y, and may reflect a singular perspective on the family system. Steps were taken to guard against such an approach to limit a decrease in reliability (see chapter 5). However, this aspect of data collection may be integrated as further information of the isolation and detachment of Mr Y, together with the intensity that characterized the fused relationships of which he was a part.

The above is an indication of the difficulty of addressing serial murder from a family theory point of view. Families appear to be reluctant or “absent” seeing that murder and serial murder within a family system seems to defile other members of that system. This may explain some of the difficulties in obtaining full details from family members, or locating relatives of the individuals who commit serial murder.

With regards to **data analysis**, the themes obtained in this study for Mr X and Mr Y may vary with respect to the perspectives of other researchers who might examine the data in separate studies, informed by their own orientations, as well as with respect to the data obtained (with respect to alternative or additional sources) and method of analysis used.

The use of the family home as a **setting** for interviews with family members was also not ideal due to the lack of neutrality that characterizes such a setting. The researcher felt more inclined to adopt a social and obliging position with regards to interviewees in such settings which may have influenced the ways that interviews were conducted and data obtained accordingly. The families may also have felt intruded on and inhibited in their communication. In future studies, this may be an important consideration. On the other hand, viewing the family within a context where, as a family, they have developed over time (if so),

their interactions and interpersonal styles have developed and patterns have been formed, could prove to be equally valuable.

Like the researcher, researchers should be aware of their positions with regards to **gender**, culture/ethnicity, socio-economic status, education level, religion, and age and consequently should allow for influences by these particular aspects in their interpretations of the data as well as interaction with individuals and systems. In turn, the reciprocal nature of interactions between researchers and respondents should also be kept in mind.

The individuals interviewed in the current study are presently serving prison sentences for their crimes and are incarcerated. It may be the case, that individuals in **different circumstances** (such as those who have not yet been apprehended) would provide different responses and data. Consequently, once again, the specificity and particularity of the current sample and applicability of findings must be held in mind critically. Additionally, the changes in context that occur once a person has been incarcerated may possibly position such an individual within a different “family” system or social structure. Consequently, the processes or patterns of his incarcerated life may have contaminated the research.

One aspect of this process may be the **time lapse** between apprehension and incarceration. The family system may have been slightly different in terms of processes when the individual concerned was committing the murders or when apprehended. This emphasizes the contextual specificities of the current study, that is, that the cases concerned are located at a particular time, place and point in the family life cycle and should be interpreted as such when reviewing the results, findings and conclusions.

Whilst clinical observations, interviews and genogram method were selected as methods of data collection for the current study, a plethora of **alternative data collection methods** exist that could also have been used and which could supplement the existing methods. For example, although in this study, a participant was interviewed separate to his family,

interviewing individuals who have committed serial murder and their families together, and also utilize techniques such as family sculpting to supplement genogram compilation may prove useful. Alternatively, it may also have been of interest to study the family system over a longer period, stemming a number of sessions together with the family. Future work may address this and examine if additional findings yield novel insights.

8.9 RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the findings of the current study, future research may examine the following aspects with the aim of expanding the limited available literature on serial murder in South Africa as well as facilitating novel views and interpretations of the existing international body of work on the topic.

This study is the first to have investigated the phenomenon of serial murder from the perspective of the family system. It may be of interest that future studies also take the families of individuals who commit serial murder as their focus; possibly making use of alternative or similar paradigms to examine this facet further. It would be interesting to compare psychodynamic interpretations of the families of such individuals, for example, with the current study, or other studies that adopted a more systemic view.

Future studies may also attempt to elicit understandings of serial murder within other systems, such as the societal, welfare, justice or political (to name a few examples) systems. In this way, one could also examine the role of the individual who commits serial murder within the prison system, once incarcerated, and potentially compare this with the role of such an individual as a member of other systems. For this purpose, prison warders and fellow prisoners could be interviewed and their data analysed in a similar manner as the current study.

Along a similar vein, given South Africa's political history, it would be of interest to the current researcher to examine the extent to which changes in the surrounding societal supra-system of which the individual who committed serial murder (specifically those whose adult life spanned the transition from Apartheid to current government) is a part may have impacted in his role both as a member of the larger system, as well as processes within his individual family system, and the manner in which such changes may have impacted on his criminal behaviour.

Alternate types of criminal behaviour could also be examined in a similar way, in terms of the role of such behaviour in family systems in future research studies. This might facilitate novel suggestions with regards to proactive, preventative measures in reducing crime as well as suggestions for rehabilitative measures that operated at a systemic level. It would also be interesting to compare findings from studies focusing on one type of crime with others to note similarities and differences across criminal behaviours.

Future research may also want to collect data from a sample of individuals from different geographical, ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. For example, this study made use of individuals from a predominantly White, Afrikaans-speaking background. It would be interesting to examine whether cultural differences in understandings of family (as well as with respect to other areas) impact upon the data and results obtained, and to compare such differences or similarities across variations.