SERIAL MURDER:
PSYCHOLOGICAL THEMES

BY

JACOBUS JOHANNES DU PLESSIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

IN THE

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

FACULTY OF ARTS

AT THE

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

SUPERVISOR: PROF. D. BEYERS

FEBRUARY 1998
I would like to acknowledge the following persons and institutions for their contributions:

- My wife, Marinda, for her support and encouragement
- Prof. Dave Beyers for his supervision and guidance
- Gérard Labuschagne my friend and fellow researcher
- Ms. M Bergh (director, psychological services, Correctional Services) for her instrumental role in this research
- To my family
# Table of contents

Acknowledgements ................................................... i  
Table of contents ................................................. ii  
Summary .......................................................... vii  
Opsomming ......................................................... viii  

## Chapter 1: Introduction
1.1 Introduction .................................................. 1  
1.2 The aim of the study ........................................ 2  
1.3 The use of descriptive terminology ...................... 2  
1.4 A chapter-by-chapter overview .......................... 3  
1.5 Conclusion .................................................. 3  

## Chapter 2: Literature study: a brief introduction
2.1 Introduction .................................................. 4  
2.2 An operational definition of serial murder .......... 5  
2.3 Historical context ......................................... 6  
2.4 Prevalence .................................................. 7  
2.4.1 Statistical versus experienced prevalence ...... 8  
2.5 The stereotype ............................................. 9  
2.6 Themes from research .................................... 11  
2.7 Serial murder in South Africa ........................... 12  
2.8 Conclusion .................................................. 14  

## Chapter 3: Literature survey
3.1 Introduction .................................................. 15  
3.2 The current literature understanding ................. 16
3.2.1 Toward an intrapsychic explanation

3.2.1.1 The psychoanalytic approach

3.2.1.2 The psychodynamic approach

3.2.2 The learning theory perspective

3.2.2.1 Conditioned fusion of sex and aggression

3.2.2.2 Conditioned conscience

3.2.2.3 A social learning model

3.2.3 The psychosocial explanation

3.2.4 Systems theory and cybernetics

3.2.4.1 Cybernetic epistemology

3.2.4.2 Eco-systemic thinking

3.2.4.3 Social constructionism, discourse analysis and feminism

3.2.5 The biological perspective

3.3 Conclusion

Chapter 4: Method and procedure

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Qualitative research

4.3 The "team approach" explained

4.4 Method

4.4.1 Nature of literature

4.4.2 Techniques in Grounded Theory

4.5 Procedure

4.5.1 Selection of candidates

4.5.2 First meetings

4.5.3 First interviews

4.5.4 Defining the concept "themes"

4.5.5 Context

4.5.6 Analysis of the data

4.6 Conclusion
6.3.1 Innocence 69
6.3.2 Being framed 69
6.3.3 Being forsaken 69
6.3.4 Persuasiveness 70
6.3.5 Seeking confirmation 70
6.3.6 Secondary themes 70
6.3.7 Concluding with Mr. M. 71
6.3.7.1 Being innocent 71
6.4 Discussing themes from Mr. D.'s interviews 72
6.4.1 Religiously moralistic 72
6.4.2 Cognitive impairment 73
6.4.3 Being interpersonally dependent 73
6.4.4 Secondary themes 74
6.4.5 Concluding with Mr. D. 74
6.5 Discussing themes from Mr. C.'s interviews 74
6.5.1 Cocaine addiction metaphor 75
6.5.1.1 Secondary themes 75
6.5.1.2 Learning process 75
6.5.1.3 Feeling out of control 76
6.5.2 Concluding with Mr. C. 77
6.6 Conclusion 77

Chapter 7: Results: theoretical implications
7.1 Introduction 78
7.2 The psychoanalytic theory 78
7.3 The psychodynamic model 80
7.4 Learning theory 80
7.4.1 Conditioned conscience 81
7.4.2 Social learning and psychosocial explanation 81
7.5 Themes from the research 82
7.6 General systemic approach 83
7.7 Neuropsychological model 84
Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction 86
8.2 Conclusions from the research 86
8.3 Critique 87
8.4 Recommendations 88
8.5 Conclusion 89

Reference list 91

Appendix A: A brief historical overview of serial murder in South Africa 97

Appendix B: Legal undertaking in English 106

Appendix C: Verbatim transcriptions 107

Appendix D: Additional reading list 116

Appendix E: Audio-visual recording of research interviews 142

Appendix F: Video recording agreement 142
The goal of this research is to abstract psychological themes from interviews which were held with people who have committed serial murder. This research thus contributes to a better understanding of the phenomenon of serial murder, which occurs from time to time in communities. Serial murder is operationally defined as three or more seemingly unmotivated murders. Four people who met the operational definition and criteria of serial murder were identified to participate in this research.

The research is based on the principles of Grounded Theory and the themes are presented in a descriptive manner. Different theoretical perspectives, which serve as explanation for serial murder, are presented as a point of departure. These explanations are eventually tentatively integrated with the results.

Some of the most important themes that have emerged are: these persons display a dependent personality structure with underlying anxiety; these person come across as reasonably normal without indications of severe pathology; these persons have an incapacity to form meaningful relationships; and there is a possibility that these persons grew up in a psychologically deprived environment.

Simultaneously, despite the fact that these findings may lead to generalization, the unique composition of each individual who has committed serial murder is advocated and categorization is avoided.
Die doel van hierdie navorsing is om sielkundige temas uit onderhoude, met persone wat reeksmoord gepleeg het, te abstraheer. Die navorsing kan sodoende hydra tot 'n beter begrip van die fenomeen reeksmoord, wat van tyd tot tyd in gemeenskappe voorkom. Vier persone, wat aan die navorsing se operasionele definisie en kriteria vir reeksmoord voldoen, is geïdentificeer en het aan die navorsingsprojek deelgeneem.

Die navorsing geskied volgens die beginsels van Grounded Theory en die temas word beskrywend aangebied. As vertrekpunt word verskeie teoretiese perspektiewe as verklarings rakende reeksmoord aangebied. Hierdie verklarings word uiteindelik op 'n tentatiewe wyse met die bevindinge geïntegreer.

Van die belangrikste temas wat na vore gekom het is dat die persone 'n afhanklike persoonlikheidstruktuur openbaar met onderliggende angs, dat die persone redelik normaal voorkom sonder aanduidings van ernstige patologie, dat die persone 'n onvermoe het om betekenisvolle verhoudinge te kweek, en 'n moontlikheid dat die persone in 'n arm sielkundige omgewing groot geword het.

Ten spyte van die feit dat sekere van die bevindinge tot veralgemening mag lei, word die unieke samestelling van elke individu wat reeksmoord gepleeg het bepleit en word kategorisering vermy.