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A REVIEW OF SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON SERIAL MURDER

by

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STATEMENT

I declare that the dissertation which I hereby submit for the degree Masters of Clinical Psychology at the University of Pretoria is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution

Giada Del Fabbro

November 2006



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ABSTRACT

Title: A review of South African perspectives on serial murder

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Pistorius (1996) was the first individual to introduce research on serial murder in the South African context with her psychodynamic approach to the phenomenon. Since then, others have followed, namely Labuschagne (1998, 2001) with his search for interactional and communication connections; Du Plessis (1998) from a grounded theory approach; and Hodgskiss (2001) with his assessment of South African offender characteristics and behaviours. Four more studies have been conducted, namely Hook's post-structural deconstruction of narratives of a person who committed serial murder (2003); De Wet's psychosocial perspective (2005); Barkhuizen's intrapsychic object relations approach (2006); and Del Fabbro's exploration of the phenomenon from a family systems paradigm (2006).

To date, no attempt has been made to review these research endeavors. In this article, these studies are reviewed and their strengths and weaknesses with regard to theory, methodology and research findings debated. The author concludes with several recommendations for future research on the phenomenon of serial murder: greater communication between various disciplines (e.g. psychology, criminology, law) investigating serial murder; expansion of Hodgskiss' research (2001) on offence characteristics for profiling purposes; and the relationship between psychopathology and serial murder.

Key words: serial murder, interactional approach, psychodynamic perspective, grounded theory, narrative, psychometric testing, family systems analysis, criminological review, qualitative methodology, emotional "cooling off" period.



OPSOMMING

Titel: A review of South African perspectives on serial murder

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Pistorius (1996) was die eerste navorser wat die onderwerp van reeksmoord in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks met 'n psigodinamiese studie ondersoek het. Sedert haar ondersoek het ander navorsers gevolg, naamlik Labuschagne (1998, 2001) in sy soeke na interaksionele en kommunikasie verbande; Du Plessis (1998) met 'n gefundeerde teorie benadering; en Hodgskiss (2001) se assessering van Suid-Afrikaanse oortreders se persoonlikheidseienskappe en gedrag. Vier verdere studies is onderneem: Hook (2003) se post-strukturele dekonstruksie van vertellings (narratiewe) van 'n persoon wat reeksmoord gepleeg het; De Wet (2005) se psigososiale benadering; Barkhuizen (2006) se intrapsigiese, objek-verhoudings benadering; en Del Fabbro (2006) se verkenning van die fenomeen vanuit 'n gesinsisteen paradigmaties beskouing.

Tot op datum, is nog geen poging aangewend om 'n oorsig oor hierdie navorsing aan te bied nie. In hierdie artikel word die positiewe kragte sowel as die swakhede met betrekking tot die studies se teoretiese benaderings, metodologie en navorsingsbevindinge gedebatteer. Ten slotte doen die skrywer verskeie aanbevelings vir toekomstige navorsing oor reeksmoord aan die hand, onder andere beter kommunikasie tussen verskeie dissiplines (byvoorbeeld, die sielkunde, die kriminologie, en die regte) wat navorsing oor reeksmoord onderneem; uitbreiding van Hodgskiss se navorsing (2001) ten opsigte van oortreders se eienskappe vir profielbepaling; en die verwantskap tussen psigopatologie en reeksmoord.

Sleutelwoorde: reeksmoord, interaksionele benadering, psigodinamiese perspektief, gefundeerde teorie, narratief, psigometriese toetsing, gesinsisteen analise, kriminologiese oorsig, kwalitatiewe metodologie, emosionele "afkoel" periode.



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1. Introduction

Serial murder has been researched both internationally and locally. International work has been done by several individuals in the law enforcement arena (Douglas & Olshaker, 2000; Keppel, 1989; Prentky, Burgess & Carter, 1986; Ressler, 1985, 1997; Rossmo, 1995), psychological discipline (Canter, 1994; Meloy, 1988), neuropsychiatry and psychology (Money, 1990; Sears, 1991), and studied from feminist (Caputi, 1992), social constructionist and post-modern approaches (Seltzer, 1998). In South Africa, research has been conducted predominantly from a psychological view point (De Wet, 2005; Du Plessis, 1998; Hodgskiss, 2001; Hook, 2003; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001; Pistorius, 1996) – for example, Labuschagne (2001) examined serial murder from an interactional perspective; Pistorius (1996) from a psychodynamic perspective; and Hook (2003) from a post-modern discourse analysis perspective. There have been some exceptions, such as Snyman (1992) and Hurst (2003a, 2003b), who studied serial murder from a criminological and philosophical perspective, respectively.

Internationally, Egger (1990) has published a review on serial murder literature in general, and locally, Snyman (1992) attempted a review of international literature on serial murder. No attempt has been made to compile a review of the research literature on serial murder in South Africa. The aim of the current article is to review the existing psychological research and a few other publications on serial murder in South Africa. Suggestions for how research on serial murder can be expanded and improved, and contribute to the multidisciplinary domain that deals with serial murder, are to be made.



2. South African Research on Serial Murder

The following is an outline of the available research on serial murder in South Africa (see Table 1 on page 22).

Pistorius' Psychodynamic Explanation of Serial Murder

Pistorius (1996) adopted a psychodynamic theoretical perspective to argue that a major causal agent of serial murder is a fixation at one or more of the stages of psychosexual development. This fixation influences the fantasies that characterize later life.

This research was part of a Doctoral dissertation she completed at the University of Pretoria. Her research question was 'What is the origin of serial murder and how does it develop?' Pistorius' research methodology was qualitative and she adopted an explanatory case study method (Yin, 1984). She used the "serial killer" as the focus of her study and defined this as

a person who murders several victims, usually strangers, at different times and not necessarily at the same location, with a cooling-off period in between. The motive is intrinsic; an irresistible compulsion, fuelled by fantasy which may lead to torture and/or sexual abuse, mutilation and necrophilia (Pistorius, 1996, p. 6).

She used two male participants (a Coloured¹ and a Black, incarcerated for serial murder) and data were collected from interviews with subjects, their families and friends; letters and confessions written by subjects; psychiatric reports; interrogation notes; victim statements; court evidence; and reports by detectives. She analysed the data by applying a set of proposed

¹ "Coloured" refers to a racial category established under previous Apartheid rule in South Africa for those individuals who were neither White nor Black nor Asian and who were believed to be of mixed heritage with regards to blood line.



theoretical statements (derived from the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein) to quotes from the data sources. The data was then integrated via Jones' method of structuring (Walker, 1985) into predetermined categories based on Freudian and Kleinian theoretical concepts (such as the id, ego and superego) and psychosexual development. These were then further integrated into maps that could be applied to future replication of the study on other individuals who committed serial murder.

Pistorius (1996) found that super-ego development in individuals who commit serial murder is limited due to the emotional poverty that characterizes the relationship with both parents. As a result, there is an unmediated division between the conscious and unconscious which encourages fantasy life. The poor super-ego development also results in a lack of guilt in these individuals together with an absence of fear of punishment. This, together with a lack of mediation between the conscious and unconscious, is thought to be responsible for a lack of repression of primitive sexual and aggressive impulses which find expression in adolescent and adult life in unmediated form. Early pathological development also results in an inability for these individuals to successfully negotiate the latency phase of development in early adolescence which results in an inability to socialize, empathize and develop positive interpersonal relationships.

Pistorius' work is notable in that it initiated and stimulated research on the topic of serial murder in South Africa. It also indicated that research of this kind was feasible and possible, in comparison to the constraints that characterize similar research internationally. For example, it seems almost impossible to gain access to incarcerated individuals who have committed serial murder for research purposes in the United States (Hickey, 2006).

However, Pistorius' work has disadvantages. Firstly, she attempts to make generalizations about serial murder from a limited sample size. This attempt to make generalisations is also contrary to the perspective of the qualitative research methodology that she used, by



compiling 29 statements about serial murderers. Secondly, her sample is flawed in that one of the individuals that she used has, to date, only been convicted of one murder. This is the “Station Strangler” who was initially suspected of committing 22 murders, yet only charged and convicted of one. Later, DNA tests revealed that his genetic material did not match that found at the crime scenes of the other 21 cases. With regards to terminology, Pistorius’ use of the term “serial killer” seems to sensationalize the type of crime and also adopts a very narrow and reductionist view of the individual who commits serial murder. The term “killer” is neither a legal nor a scientific term, and to kill does not always imply an illegal action. In this way, she denies such an individual any space in which to fill alternate roles such as son, lover, husband or partner, for example. Finally, it would appear that her psychoanalytic interpretations of the case studies are based on limited information and possibly go beyond what is accurately probable given the amount of exposure, time and data obtained from the individuals concerned. In line with Freud’s stipulations (1926), one would require many sessions or years of analysis before drawing such extensive interpretative conclusions. Additionally, to draw such interpretations it is essential that a researcher should have had extensive psychoanalytic training.

Labuschagne’s Interactional Approach to Serial Murder

Labuschagne (1998) adopted an interactional approach to studying serial murder in South Africa. He found that serial murder is a communication or interaction “against”, which means against a “who” or “what” and varies between individuals or cases.



This research was conducted for a dissertation as part of a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology. The research question investigated the meaning of serial murder as a means of interaction or communication. He focused on "serial murder" and his definition was 'three or more consecutive murders, over a period of time and definable space; with cooling off periods in between; not motivated by financial or material gains or the elimination of a witness' (p.7).

He worked as part of a two-man research team, in conjunction with Cobus Du Plessis who also researched serial murder but from a grounded theory approach (Du Plessis, 1998). Labuschagne's research methodology was largely qualitative in nature and the method employed was a case study method. Data collection methods consisted of unstructured interviews (approximately 10 hours per individual); clinical impressions; and psychometric data from the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), which was interpreted by an independent researcher, a clinical psychologist at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. The sample consisted of three participants (White males, all incarcerated). Data was analysed to gain insight into the individual's interactional style and to elicit common themes. Some of these included feelings of interpersonal inadequacy and helplessness; psychopathology in the form of mood disorders, anxiety, substance abuse, paranoid and schizoid traits; and childhood trauma.

For his Doctoral thesis, Labuschagne (2001) extended his focus further to investigate the interactional style of individuals who have committed serial murder and how intelligence and personality are reflected in such styles together with an exploration of serial murder as part of a social system.

His research methodology was qualitative and the research method was a case study method. Labuschagne (2001) focused on "serial murder". He defined this as

a set of circumstances when the following occurs:

- i) The person is motivated to kill.



- ii) The murder of three or more persons.
- iii) The killings occur at different times.
- iv) The killings appear unconnected.
- v) The motive is not primarily for material gain.
- vi) The motive is not primarily for revenge, but it may play a role mostly as revenge against a category of individuals from which the perpetrator selects his victims accordingly.
- vii) The elimination of a witness is not the intention (p. 13).

Labuschagne (2001) used purposive sampling to select individuals who met his definitional criteria for serial murder, for example as being from the same culture, and having been convicted for their crimes. The sample consisted of two individuals (White, male, and incarcerated). Data collection consisted of a review of competency to stand trial, forensic evaluations, clinical impressions, unstructured interviews with participants (approximately 40 hours per individual), interactional analysis of interviews with each individual, and psychometric tests, for example the South African Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised (SAWAIS-R), Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire (16 PF). Data was analysed by comparing similarities and differences between the various sources and examining whether common themes existed.

Labuschagne (2001) found that serial murder is a manifestation of a way an individual interacts with his/her context, for example, as a communication against his/her context or of a symptom of system in which he exists. Serial murder may be symptomatic of a dysfunction in the larger South African societal system. He stated that an increase of crime in general, coupled with low effectiveness of government services equipped to deal with such a phenomenon may have resulted in a change in the social ecosystem which resulted in a mutation or relatively “new” phenomenon, namely, serial murder. Within such an interactional perspective, serial murder could be seen as a negative symptom probably maintained by society due to a perceived secondary gain.



Labuschagne's (1998, 2001) work is advantageous in that it adopted a different stance to previous work at both international and local levels by using interactional and systemic perspectives to understand serial murder, as well as focusing on the individual who committed serial murder, as opposed to serial murder as a crime per se. By understanding serial murder as an aspect of the way an individual's personality or intelligence can be reflected (in much the same way as these are reflected in other aspects of this individual's behaviour), Labuschagne (1998, 2001) allowed for a less reductionistic view of individuals who commit serial murder and broadened the number of roles such individuals can fill. Additionally, by introducing the social systemic level, serial murder can be explained in ways other than traditional theories that view serial murder as the product of certain familial, dyadic, developmental trends and/or intrapsychic factors.

In terms of possible weaknesses in his research, one aspect may be that the nature in which Labuschagne (1998, 2001) analyzes the interaction in question makes any findings context-specific, and one cannot be sure if such interactional styles are replicated by these individuals in other contexts, such as at home, or with victims, with other individuals, such as parents or partners. The role of the other researcher (Du Plessis, 1998) and his study in the interpretations and analyses of interactional styles is also important but receives little attention in Labuschagne's work.

Finally, the introduction of another researcher in the form of a clinical psychologist used to interpret psychometry via blind analysis adds a dimension of reliability to the researchers' constructions of these styles.

On the other hand, an aspect which is not discussed thoroughly enough with regards to the effects of the researchers' behaviour (the clinical psychologist, Labuschagne and Du Plessis) on the research endeavor could have brought an understanding of the reciprocal nature of behaviour and for that matter, of social research in general. Self-reflexivity could

have shown that the researchers cannot remain uninvolved with the focus of the research and could have allowed for the possibility of generating new hypotheses for future research.

Du Plessis' Grounded Theory Approach to Serial Murder

Du Plessis (1998) explored serial murder from a grounded theory perspective. His research study formed part of a dissertation for his Masters degree in Clinical Psychology. His research question investigated the themes that frame understandings of serial murder. Du Plessis (1998) focused on “serial murder” and defined it as

three or more consecutive murders, over a period of time and definable space; with cooling off periods in between; not motivated by financial or material gains or the elimination of a witness; and not related to terrorism, cultism, racism or gang activity (p. 25).

His research methodology was qualitative in nature. Data collection involved interviews with individuals who have committed serial murder (approximately six interviews per person) as well as clinical observations of these individuals. Sampling was based on availability and participants selected on the basis of their fulfillment of the criteria specified in Du Plessis' operational definition of serial murder. The sample consisted of four individuals (two White, two Black; all males and incarcerated). Data was analysed via a grounded theory approach which involved deriving categories and concepts from the first interview with each individual and then using the remaining data to form a conditional matrix with regard to conditions and consequences that influence serial murder.

Du Plessis (1998) highlighted the following themes as the most salient: a dependent personality structure with underlying anxiety; reasonably normal without indications of severe pathology; incapacity to form meaningful relationships; and a possibility of growing up in a psychologically deprived environment.



Du Plessis' (1998) study is useful from a psychological perspective in that, given the extent to which serial murder has been understood as the product of intrinsic motivation (Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Labuschagne, 2001; Pistorius, 1996), a research approach such as grounded theory, (which aims at ethnographically exploring the world view of the research participant from his/her perspective), seems particularly useful in understanding the nature of the afore-mentioned motivation. His systemic interpretations are also meaningful in that the system in which an individual who commits serial murder functions may be enlarged to apply to a particular society or at the level of culture. The integration of both individual/intrapsychic theoretical themes as well as systemic/contextual themes is also useful as it allows serial murder to be understood as the product of multiple possible factors.

However, whilst Du Plessis (1998) introduces cultural diversity into his sample by including White and Black individuals, unfortunately he fails to discuss the impact of such diversity on the findings. Additionally, despite allowing for a framework that includes multiple factors and theoretical understandings of serial murder, at times, it seems that his approach is over-inclusive and instead of contributing themes; there is an impression of competing or enumerated labels with which the individual who commits serial murder can be described.

Hodgskiss' Assessment of South African Offender Characteristics and Behaviours

Hodgskiss (2001) conducted research on the offence behaviours of South African serial murderers. This research formed part of his Master's degree dissertation in Research Psychology conducted in collaboration with the South African Police Services (SAPS) Investigative Psychology Unit, the MTN Centre for Crime Prevention Studies at Rhodes University, South Africa and the Centre for Investigative Psychology of the University of



Liverpool in Britain. His research methodology was quantitative. He focused on the “serial murderer” and adopted Labuschagne’s definition (1998) of serial murder (see above).

His sample consisted of 13 individuals (seven White males, one Coloured male, five Black males, all incarcerated) and data collection involved structured interviews (four to eight hours per individual), together with police case files, court records and interviews with investigating officers. The data was then analysed via Smallest Space Analysis from which a model of offences of South African serial murderers was developed. Information on offender characteristics and backgrounds was also gathered.

Hodgskiss (2001) found that most of the offenders interviewed expressed profound, chronic loneliness and isolation (similarly to Du Plessis’s findings (1998) and had suffered significant childhood trauma, in line with international research. However, South African offenders differed in that none reported using violent pornography or had a sexual fetish, in contrast with American samples. Additionally, Hodgskiss (2001) found that the McDonald triad of behaviours (fire setting, bed wetting and cruelty to animals) traditionally associated with individuals who commit serial murder in American samples, was not found in the life histories of the individuals in his research though isolated elements were. Cruelty to animals was most frequently found with bedwetting and fire-setting being extremely rare.

Hodgskiss (2001) also found that international typologies usually applied to serial murder (such as the Organised/Disorganised typology of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Holmes & Holmes, 1996)) were not applicable to the individuals he interviewed, and did not fit the model of South African serial murder developed in his study. Specifically, factors such as vehicle ownership, level of education and employment history were of little use due to the socio-cultural differences in South Africa, where most of the perpetrators did not own vehicles, had low levels of education and were either unemployed or did “odd-jobs”.



Hodgskiss' (2001) contribution to research on serial murder is that it draws specific attention to differences between South African serial murder and serial murder as it exists in the available international literature. These differences included ethnicity and age of perpetrators and victims (for example, international literature findings reflect that offenders tend to choose victims of the same race whereas in South Africa, offenders and victims are often of different races), together with the length of time over which serial murder is committed (for example, South African offenders tend to commit murders over longer periods of time). Hodgskiss' (2001) work is advantageous in that it highlights flaws in applying international research findings to the South African context and the importance of locally oriented research in order to aid the development of South African understandings of serial murder and investigative initiatives based thereon. Hodgskiss' (2001) research also appears to be particularly useful to investigative applications by virtue of its focus on offence and offender characteristics in South African cases of serial murder.

Hook's Post-Structuralist Approach to Serial Murder

Hook's (2003) journal article was based on a post-structural deconstruction of psychoanalytic narratives surrounding the life history of Cobus Geldenhuys (male, White and incarcerated), the individual labeled as the "Norwood serial murderer". The paper was published in the South African Journal of Psychology. He focused on the "serial killer", but did not define this concept in his research. He aimed to elicit the trends of attempted knowledge production in psychology as pertaining to serial murder. The research methodology was qualitative and the method was a case study approach. Data collected consisted of unstructured interviews with academics in the field of criminology and psychology; analyses of a case study by these individuals; news and print media; a

documentary film; previously published commentaries; and unpublished research. The data was then analysed via a narrative analysis and autocritique of the analysis and interpretation of the case study by the various individuals and parties involved.

Hook (2003) found that accounts of the life history of Geldenhuys and explanation of his criminal behaviour were influenced largely by popular representations of serial murder informed by popular psychoanalytic theory. These were reflected in an emphasis on aspects such as a domineering mother and absent father; prohibition on masturbation and early adolescent sexual experimentation or expression which manifested in a phallic fixation; ambivalent feelings towards women; and insufficient super-ego development.

Hook's (2003) study also provides insights into social processes and the social construction of serial murder, and demonstrates that post-structuralist work lends considerable qualitative richness to understandings of serial murder, specifically in terms of the complex interaction of popular culture and psychology, as well as the politics of information and knowledge production.

However, Hook (2003) does not make any suggestions for how this interaction can be negotiated in a way that prevents sensationalism from entering into the way serial murder is understood. He also does not explicitly define what he means by the term "serial killer". The result of this is that the concept or type of individual that he is referring to remains open for interpretation, mainly the reader's interpretation. Also, by not stipulating his own definitional criteria, he is operating on the basis of some other person or agency's definition of "serial killer" (as used by Hook (2003)), which may be laden with its own set of biases and perspectives. Without a reflexive examination of these perspectives, Hook (2003) may have introduced certain narrative influences of which he is unaware and which may, in turn, influence his findings. Additionally, his data appears to be derived from second or third generation sources.



Additionally, he does not explain how an awareness of the influence of popular culture can assist psychology or other domains involved in the study and management of serial murder. Hook (2003) also uses the psychoanalytic paradigm exclusively to interpret and understand serial murder; it may be the case that other paradigms could produce different findings with regards to their susceptibility to the influence of popular culture. Finally, there appears to be an absence of detail regarding his sources. The detail that is provided would appear to situate such accounts as deriving from “expert” opinion (such as that of the criminologist Irma Labuschagne), and the third year psychology students taught by Hook himself. This would have to be borne in mind when evaluating the reasons why narratives and interpretations may have been shaped in the way documented. Similar exercises in different contexts may confirm or oppose the same themes and processes.

De Wet's Psychosocial Personality Theory Approach to Serial Murder

De Wet (2005) used the theories of Erikson, Adler and Fromm to develop a psychosocial approach from which to postulate how internal and external factors could interact in the personality development of individuals who commit serial murder. Research questions addressed how events in childhood shape the personality and how personality is reflected in behaviour in adulthood, specifically as serial murder. This research study was part of De Wet's Master's degree dissertation in Psychology. De Wet (2005) focuses on “serial murder” and defines this as

committed by an individual, who murders several people, usually strangers, over a period of time at different locations or in one location, with a cooling-off period between the murders. The motivation for the murders is generally intrinsic in nature, while material gain or revenge usually does not play a significant role. A triggering event, whether direct or indirect, precedes each murder and motivates the person to act out his fantasies. The physical act of murder is in essence the re-enactment of the individual's elaborate fantasies. Development of the unique personality structure is influenced by internal and external factors experienced by the individual throughout his development. The factors



that influence the serial murderer's personality development also contribute to the evolution and growth of his fantasies (p. 9).

The sample consisted of two participants (two Black males, and incarcerated). The research methodology was qualitative and the research method a case study method (Yin, 1984). Data was collected via semi-structured interviews; primary documents such as court records, police case-files and psychological reports; and relevant secondary documents such as media reports. Data was analysed via Van Vuuren's descriptive-dialogical method (1991) and Yin's use of applying theoretical propositions (in this case, based on psychosocial theory) to the collected data (1984), in order to develop explanations of the individual case studies and serial murder in general.

De Wet (2005) found that an understanding of the personality of the individual who commits serial murder illuminates many aspects of the person who committed serial murder's criminal behaviour. In essence, he stated that the way that the individual concerned carries out the murders, reflects his underlying personality traits. Additionally, a common desire to improve one's lot in life or excel and achieve comprised the value of serial murder in the lives of the individuals interviewed.

De Wet's study (2005) is useful in that it introduces the possibility of the role of the social sphere in contributing to intrapsychic development of individuals who commit serial murder. In this way, despite still locating the etiology of serial murder behaviour at the intrapsychic level, he does begin to allow for the introduction of social contribution. However, De Wet's work relies on typological classification systems that have been shown to have limited applicability to the South African context (Hodgskiss, 2001). Additionally, De Wet (2005) attempts to make general statements about serial murder from limited data, contradicting the methodological stance of his research, namely qualitative research, and which does not seem



feasible given the unique, varied and individual nature of each of the case studies used as well as the findings elicited from each of the individual case studies.

As with Pistorius's work (1996) above, De Wet (2005) appears to reify serial murder, in terms of identifying individuals who commit serial murder exclusively in terms of a personality type that is prone to committing serial murder. Also, it would appear that he makes interpretations that go beyond the amount of data he has available to substantiate such interpretations (as critiqued in the case of Pistorius (2006) also). Given the qualitative nature of his work, De Wet fails to discuss his own subjective perspectives and orientations in evaluating his own findings, contrary to the objective of reflexivity that characterizes the qualitative methodology. The reader is thus deprived of the opportunity to develop a comprehensive picture of the context in which the research is situated.

Barkhuizen's Psychometric and Intrapsychic Examination of Serial Murder

Barkhuizen (2006) adopted an intrapsychic, object relations approach to the understanding of serial murder, drawing largely on the theories of Freud and Klein and developing research from Pistorius' (1996) initial research. This study formed part of his academic Master's degree dissertation in Psychology. His research question was 'What is the intrapsychic origin of serial murder?' His research methodology was qualitative and he used a case study research method (Yin, 1984). Barkhuizen (2006) focused on the "serial killer" and he defined this as

a person who kills or tries to kill two or more victims, usually strangers, at different times and at different locations, with a cooling-off period between the murders. The motive is psychological (intrinsic). The victims might be tortured, sexually abused and/or mutilated and the serial killer might also participate in necrophilia and cannibalism. The killings are intensified by a fantasy element unique to each killer and the act of serial homicide is behaviour that expresses the personal need of the offender (p.11).



His sample consisted of two participants (Black, males and incarcerated). His data collection methods involved the use of semi-structured interviews and psychometric tools (the TAT, Test of Object Relations (TOR) and Picture Test of Separation and Individuation). He analysed the data using Van Vuuren's descriptive-dialogic method (1991) and linking findings with existing theoretical principles (namely, psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Klein) and typologies (namely, disorganised/organised and ego-syntonic/ego-dystonic).

Barkhuizen (2006) concluded that individuals who commit serial murder experience traumatic, abusive childhoods characterized by rejection by "bad" parental figures. This in turn influences the development of their personality as well as aspects of their crime such as victim selection. Barkhuizen (2006) claimed that his findings have implications for profiling techniques as well as prevention and management of serial murder.

Barkhuizen's research (2006) makes a contribution to the literature in terms of developing an object relations approach to understanding individuals who commit serial murder, extending Pistorius' initial development of this aspect (1996). The use of different kinds of psychometric instruments such as the TOR and Picture Test of Separation and Individuation also introduces a degree of novelty to the interpretations and understandings that can be elicited.

However, as discussed previously with regards to De Wet's work (2005), Barkhuizen's research also has weak points with regards to the reification of serial murder; interpretations which go beyond the amount of time spent with the individuals concerned as well as beyond data obtained; and lack of reflexivity. Additionally, both research studies fail to critically evaluate or explicitly link to the previous work of Pistorius (1996), from which their respective aims and objectives proceed, or to improve on weakpoints of Pistorius' work. As with De Wet (2005), Barkhuizen (2006) makes use of typologies that have been shown to be

limited in the South African context, demonstrating a lack of acknowledgement of previous research in the field that extends beyond Pistorius (1996) (for example, Hodgskiss, 2001).

Del Fabbro's Family Systems Analysis of Serial Murder in South Africa

Del Fabbro's Doctoral thesis (2006) explored the phenomenon of serial murder from a systemic perspective, specifically studying family processes of persons who committed such crimes. This was evaluated with respect to emotional processes, multigenerational and relationship patterns within the family system. The research question was 'How does the family system of a person who commits serial murder function?' The research methodology was qualitative and the research method was a case study. Del Fabbro (2006) focused on "serial murder" and formulated a generic definition, namely 'multiple murders committed over a period of time by one or more individuals' (p. 40).

The study consisted of two individuals (White, male, and incarcerated) and data was collected via clinical observations; interviews with the individuals concerned and members of their families, prison staff and other individuals involved in the investigation of these cases; genograms; and archival records such as police case files, psychological reports, newspaper reports and television documentaries. Data was then analysed via a content analysis in relation to the family systems categories mentioned above.

It was found that in the specific two cases used by Del Fabbro (2006), the family systems of such individuals were characterized by high, undifferentiated anxiety; rigid boundaries in relation to other systems and diffuse boundaries between subsystems within the family system; enmeshed relationships; and multigenerational patterns of poor coping skills.

The value of the study is novel in its approach, namely, examining family systems, interviewing family members, and using techniques for serial murder studies such as the

genogram. It also illuminates possible avenues for future research in terms of the role of serial murder at the level of other systems, such as the societal system.

This study may be critiqued on account of the small, culturally specific sample size used (namely, only White males); however, this may also be applied to previous research studies reviewed (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001; Pistorius, 1996). Although aware of it, this research failed to recognize the possible impact of larger systems such as the societal and social systems of which family systems are part of. Additionally, this research may have benefited from interviews with family members of the more extended family system, as opposed to only focusing on the nuclear family system.

3. Related Studies From Other Disciplines

Snyman's Criminological Review of Serial Murder

Snyman (1992) conducted a brief review of information available on serial murder in the international literature. This was published as a journal article in the *Acta Criminologica* in South Africa. He focused on "serial murder" and defined this as 'a stranger-on-stranger crime committed over a period of time' (p. 35). The aim of the article seems to be to briefly review aspects of serial murder such as definition, prevalence and incidence, causes, profiles and prevention, from the available international literature on the topic. The research methodology is a literature survey but little information is provided as to selection criteria for the sample of literature used.

Snyman (1992) found that serial murder is rare as a type of crime and has low incidence but has a profound effect on society. According to him, the most common profile of a serial murderer is of a young, White male with a troubled childhood. He uses Wertham's



catathymic crisis theory (1937) to explain serial murder as a process that starts in early childhood and that is repeated as a means to ensure control. Prevention of serial murder is seen to necessitate community involvement to right certain social wrongs that contribute to serial murder and to assist with linkage of crimes.

Snyman's work (1992) appears to have responded to a "new" South African phenomenon, namely serial murder, and tried to provide an overview of the phenomenon as experienced in the international context. Additionally, the structure of his article highlights some salient aspects about the topic, such as definition, prevalence, causes and prevention. These aspects have continued to feature in subsequent research studies on the topic (Barkhuizen, 2006; DeWet, 2005; Du Plessis, 1998; Hodgskiss, 2001; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001; Pistorius, 1996). Snyman (1992) also provides considerable support for the systems theory approach to the understanding of serial murder.

The problem with Snyman's work is that he limits the literature sampled to eight sources, which does not begin to capture the extensive volume of research available internationally on the subject matter. For example, he fails to include significant contributors to the topic such as Hickey (1986) and Ressler (1985), amongst others. Also, with regards to the different aspects of serial murder discussed, Snyman (1992) chooses to include certain theorists without specifying reasons for his choices. For example, he only includes two definitions (despite arguing for the lack of clarity that characterizes definitions of serial murder) those by Egger (1990) and Holmes and DeBurger (1988). Snyman's discussion (1992) of the causes of serial murder is limited and neglects aspects such as systemic views or socio-cultural perspectives such as social constructionism.

Additionally, it is difficult to ascertain whether he is applying a specific criminological theory (namely, Wertham's theory of catathymic crisis (1937)) to serial murder or whether Snyman (1992) is conducting a literature survey. With regards to the former, Snyman (1992)



has little data to support his statements regarding the application of Wertham's theory (1937) to serial murder, and does not make links between data and theory explicit enough. Snyman's discussion of the profile of a serial murderer is very generalised and absolute and does not permit any room for exceptions. For example, he states that 'all serial murderers are found to be psychopaths' (p. 39) – which is inaccurate as some individuals who commit serial murder do not meet the criteria for psychopathy, such as David Berkowitz and Edward Kemper in the United States (Lane & Gregg, 1992). Consequently, if such a profile would be applied to investigative endeavors, many individuals who did not fit such a profile but who committed serial murder, would be omitted. Additionally, Snyman (1992) appears to contradict himself by proposing a profile and then later revealing that psychological profiles are generally vague.

Hurst's Philosophical Analysis of Discursive Dynamics in the Court Trial of an Individual who Committed Serial Murder

Hurst (2003a, 2003b) studied the discursive alignments and conflicts that characterized a court trial of an individual who committed serial murder, namely that of Stewart Wilken. This formed part of a journal article written in two parts for the South African Journal of Philosophy. She focused on "serial murder" but did not provide a definition of this. Her research question aimed to discover the operation of discourse in the court trial concerned, specifically in order to replicate Michel Foucault's analysis of the discourses in the trial of Pierre Riviere (circa 1975). Her research methodology was qualitative and the method was a case study (one individual; White, male). Data was collected in the form of court transcripts of the trial of Wilken and analysed via a discourse analysis.



Hurst (2003a, 2003b) found that an Enlightenment Autonomy discourse characterized the approached of the fields of law, psychiatry and psychology at the trial and that these were unified to establish the full culpability of Stewart Wilken for his crimes. In such a way, any counter-discourses that may have yielded further constructive complexity to the subject were silenced but traces of these could be found in the tension of the testimonies of expert witnesses.

This article is advantageous in that it provides an alternate perspective on serial murder; however, it does not specify whether the findings are specific to serial murder trials in particular, or whether the discursive processes elicited could be found in other types of criminal trials. Additionally, it is unclear whether the findings have practical significance for understanding and managing serial murder, or even conducting legal work in the field. The article does seem to highlight the vehement opposition and need to punish and excise individuals who commit serial murder from the general population.

Table 1

Summary of Available South African Literature on Serial Murder

Researcher	Research type	Methodology	Method	Key aspects
Pistorius (1996)	Doctoral thesis	Qualitative	Case study method (two participants)	Psychoanalytic (Freud and Klein); fixation; poor super-ego development
Labuschagne (1998)	Masters dissertation	Qualitative	Case study method (three participants)	Interactional (communication 'against')
Du Plessis (1998)	Masters dissertation	Qualitative	Grounded theory (four participants)	Grounded theory (themes; contributing and consequential themes around serial murder)
Labuschagne (2001)	Doctoral thesis	Qualitative	Case study method (two participants)	Interactional (Personality and intelligence; psychometrics; social system)
Hodgskiss (2001)	Masters dissertation	Quantitative	Multidimensional scaling and Smallest Space Analysis	Empirical (Development of a model of offender characteristics; statistical)
Hook (2003)	Journal article	Qualitative	Case study method (one individual)	Post-structural (narrative analysis; autocritique; knowledge production; popular media)
De Wet (2005)	Masters dissertation	Qualitative	Case study method (two participants)	Psychosocial (personality; Erickson, Fromm and Adler)
Barkhuizen (2006)	Masters dissertation	Qualitative	Case study (two participants)	Psychoanalytic (Freud, Klein); typology (organised/disorganised; ego-syntonic/ego-dystonic)
Del Fabbro (2006)	Doctoral thesis	Qualitative	Case study (two participants)	Family systems (Genogram; Multigenerational patterns; subsystems; emotional processes)
Other studies				
• Snyman(1992)	Journal article	Qualitative	Literature survey	Review of international literature (Criminology)

• Hurst(2003a, 2003b)	Journal article	Qualitative	Case study	perspective) Discourse analysis (Philosophical perspective)
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4. Critical Examination of the Research

The pool of literature focusing on the phenomenon of serial murder in South Africa will now be critically discussed in terms of general strengths and weaknesses and recommendations for future research will be made.

General Strengths and Weaknesses

Theoretical issues. A variety of theoretical approaches have been used in the studies reviewed. Some utilize a psychoanalytic/psychodynamic approach (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Pistorius, 1996) with psychosocial elements (De Wet, 2005). Others have adopted a more post-modern approach (Du Plessis, 1998; Hook, 2003) or systemic outlook (Del Fabbro, 2006; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001) as well as a more empirical, positivist stance (Hodgskiss, 2001). Although there is overlap between the nature of these theories (for example, interactional, systemic and psychosocial), the variety of theories allows for various interpretations and conclusions.

Divergent theories are useful to the extent to which they are able to integrate observations and generate research (Feist & Feist, 1988). Although Hook (2003) criticizes psychoanalytic conclusions or interpretations based on insufficient data, the value of a psychoanalytic approach if limited in scope is to present another perspective on the area of investigation as well as creating an opportunity for hypotheses for future research. Hook's (2003) suggestion



for more valid psychoanalytic research is extensive long-term psychotherapy based data.

Although the studies of Barkhuizen (2006), De Wet (2005) and Pistorius (1996) do not fulfill Hook's criterion, the value of their work is to consider the intrapsychic components that may contribute to serial murder behaviour.

A question with regards to psychological research on criminal behaviour is to what extent knowledge of criminological theory is important. In the case of Hodgskiss (2001), it appears to be the only study conducted that explicitly discusses criminological assumptions underlying his work. Snyman (1992) introduces criminological theory in his article but he writes from a criminological perspective *in toto* to begin with. It seems that all the South African psychological research on serial murder sees criminal behaviour as human behaviour in a particular context (or as a reflection of more generalised underlying or intrapsychic factors) and conducted research as such. An acknowledgement of criminological theory may consequently enrich research conducted on serial murder in as much as the criminological paradigm used may frame acceptable options for human behaviour. For example, Sutherland's (1937) theory of differential association asserts that criminal behaviour is learned in primary group relationships as opposed to secondary sources such as television and the press. Mitchell (1997) has attempted to apply this to serial murder by arguing that many offenders are incarcerated prior to their first murder, and may learn techniques and formally conceptualise their plans in prison stays. Consequently, a research study that incorporated criminological theory could investigate the extent to which aspects of serial murder are learnt behaviours from time in prison or associations with other criminals.

Hook's (2003) study demonstrates that post-structuralist work lends considerable qualitative richness to understandings of serial murder; in Hook's case, this consisted specifically of the complex interaction of popular culture and psychology, as well as the politics of information and knowledge production. It would appear that the other studies

reviewed do not acknowledge such interaction and account for its possible influence on the research and researchers. This would appear to be an important factor to bear in mind when conducting research on serial murder, especially given the seemingly large amount of influence that popular culture has on perceptions of serial murder.

There is a considerable lack of reflexivity in some of the qualitative studies reviewed (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Du Plessis, 1998). The researchers in question do not seem to explicitly incorporate a discussion of their own subjective perspectives and orientations in their evaluation of their findings. This would appear to be contrary to the process of qualitative research studies, which attempt to factor in the researcher's own subjectivity in interpreting the research so as to provide the reader with a comprehensive picture of the context in which the research study is situated. Consequently, it is difficult to ascertain the quality of the research studies above, without considerable critique of this inherent bias. Hook (2003) provides a good example of how this process of reflexivity can be applied to the topic.

A review of South African literature may reveal cultural bias. A predominance of researchers from one particular cultural perspective (namely, mostly White, male, South African) may unwittingly perpetuate a singular cultural view of the phenomenon in question, thus obscuring other narratives or understandings of serial murder. As discussed below in the recommendations section, more research by individuals from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds is necessary to facilitate a more varied cultural perspective on serial murder for comparison and contrast.

Methodological issues. The majority of the psychological studies conducted on serial murder in South Africa are explanatory in nature and use the method of interviewing individuals currently in a correctional institution (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Del



Fabbro, 2006; Du Plessis, 1998; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001; Pistorius, 1996). This may be on account of the comparatively easier access that South African researchers have to individuals who have committed serial murder, in relation to their overseas counterparts. However, this is not to say that future studies using different methods would be less valuable. In fact, diversity of method may enrich understandings of serial murder greatly.

In addition to the type of data collection method used, the type of case study method used also does not appear to vary, with Yin (1984) being the popular choice (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Del Fabbro, 2006; Pistorius, 1996). Whilst this approach may appear to be the most suitable way to capture the individual nuances and complexity that is linked to serial murder, this may also perpetuate certain ways of encountering and exploring the topic in question, and thereby possibly limit or obstruct novel approaches and new insights to the field. In cases where researchers have adopted different methods (Hodgskiss, 2001; Hook, 2003), these have clearly yielded differences in findings as well as slight deviations or subtle distinctions from findings obtained in previous studies.

Different research studies have also varied to different degrees with regards to their definitional emphases. These definitional differences or variations might capture different aspects of serial murder, which may in turn impact on the approach to the research study. For example, definitions that include a sexual aspect to the murders as a criterion might then focus more on this one aspect of the individuals that are studied in terms of interview questions and interpretations of responses.

Another problematic aspect of the predominant use of the case study method is that in many instances (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Pistorius, 1996), the researchers have attempted to generalize to a model or theory of serial murder to be applied to all subsequent instances of the phenomenon, despite alluding to the individuality and uniqueness of individual instances of serial murder cases (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Pistorius,



1996). This attempt seems to persist regardless of differences that occur between individuals used as part of the various case studies (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Pistorius, 1996), and frequently contradictory to the qualitative research paradigm employed in the studies (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005). It is to be expected that the case study method will predominate, because of the small numbers of persons available who committed serial murder and the practicalities involved to arrange and interview these people once incarcerated. A more constructive approach would be to maintain the exploratory research methodology stated in the studies concerned and to present the results, illustrating similarities and differences. However, the impetus towards developing a theory of serial murder behaviour in South Africa is advantageous in that, if rigor and soundness accompanies future attempts, the considerable motivation underlying such a research aim may eventually contribute towards such a theory being developed.

Studies on serial murder in South Africa have used qualitative methodologies predominantly (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Del Fabbro, 2006; Du Plessis, 1998; Hook, 2003; Hurst, 2003a, 2003b; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001; Pistorius, 1996; Snyman, 1992). Of these, some are exploratory (Barkhuizen, 2006; Del Fabbro, 2006; Du Plessis, 1998; Hook, 2003) whilst others are more explanatory (De Wet, 2005; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001; Pistorius, 1996), and others (Hodgskiss, 2001) contain a mixture of the two approaches. No purely quantitative studies have been conducted on serial murder. This is in spite of the important data yielded by quantitative aspects of research such as Hodgskiss (2001) which facilitated a clearer picture of the nature of this type of criminal activity in South Africa, and which facilitated comparison with samples from other countries, and within the local sample itself.

Despite the difficulties and practicalities to conduct quantitative research on serial murder, a study which attempts to compare and contrast quantitative aspects of variables associated



with serial murder such as offence characteristics, location, gender and/or race may yield data which could then be explored either quantitatively or qualitatively to tease out individual nuances. This could contribute to the existing qualitative research in the field and contrasted or reflected upon with regards to the contributions made to understanding serial murder.

The instruments used to collect data in the various studies show little variation. Most of the studies utilized semi-structured interviews (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Del Fabbro, 2006; Du Plessis, 1998; Hodgskiss, 2001, 2003; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001; Pistorius, 1996) with some supplementing this with psychometric testing (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001). In some cases, archival records in the form of police case files, court records, media records (De Wet, 2005; Del Fabbro, 2006; Hodgskiss, 2001; Hook, 2003) have been used. Once again, predominant use of the semi-structured interview with participants means that data has been collected in a singular manner (despite variations in questions asked). As a result, the material for analysis will be consistently presented in the same way and subject to the self-reporting of participants and interpretations of the researcher.

In the absence of some degree of reflexivity and contextualization with regards to this factor, the data obtained will reflect a particular representation of serial murder, that is, by the individuals concerned. A study that facilitated the expression of other representations of serial murder, by individuals close to the victims for example, is necessary. Additionally, predominant use of other data sources from legal and investigative spheres also delimit the phenomenon in question as inhabiting particular spaces, and may neglect other areas such as medical, familial, and community contexts for example.

Other than Hook (2003) and Snyman (1992), the sample used for the research studies above consists of individuals (usually two to four) currently serving prison sentences in correctional institutions for serial murder (and often other criminal) charges. As a result, the



pool of available literature appears to have limited itself to a particular context and particular participants. This may be due to the previously mentioned advantage of the local context where access to these individuals is possible. Findings should consequently be evaluated in that light and applicability to other contexts or individuals critically assessed. For example, one might wonder whether certain factors change once an individual who has committed serial murder is incarcerated. In essence, he is no longer able to exhibit the behaviour of interest and this might alter his presentation or representation of individuals who are not limited with regards to such behaviour. This may explain why the role of contextual and environmental or extrinsic factors has been neglected in some of the available research in favour of more intrinsic factors which can be assumed to remain constant regardless of the individual's context (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Pistorius, 1996).

Perhaps, other aspects of his behaviour (other than the serial murder component) should be focused on to investigate if there are any changes in these aspects once he is incarcerated, or assessed over a certain period of his incarceration to see if changes occur. This suggestion would also avoid the reduction of the individual who commits serial murder to being understood solely in terms of his serial murder behaviour. This would have to involve interviews with persons who knew the individual concerned before he commenced with serial murder behaviour such as teachers, childhood peers or acquaintances, due to the fact that it is hard to conceive of an opportunity where individuals could be identified and then interviewed before they are arrested and convicted of serial murder. Del Fabbro's study (2006) is the only study that attempted to do this by interviewing family members of the individuals concerned directly (as opposed to via secondary sources such as Pistorius (1996)), specifically to determine family interaction and process.



Blurring of boundaries between disciplines. It would seem that attempts to understand serial murder often involve the legal, investigative, criminological and psychological domains. This combination does not always have productive results due to the differing approaches adopted by these disciplines. For example, psychological approaches tend to try to understand the individual, system and/or family context in which the behaviour is manifested in order to better comprehend the circumstances or conditions that facilitate serial murder. Such an approach frequently allows for (and perhaps necessitates in some instances) a great degree of flexibility, interpretation, ambiguity and paradox in the understandings that result. Investigative or legal approaches, on the other hand, tend to attempt to delimit the behaviour in question for purposes of apprehension and sentencing, management and containment of the phenomenon in question. Ambiguity and paradox are consequently less acceptable within such an approach which seems to require more concrete, definite parameters for serial murder.

A large area of concern with respect to serial murder is the considerable blurring of boundaries that occurs with regards to professional disciplines that concern themselves with serial murder. This in turn would appear to have impacted on the lack of clarity that appears to characterize many of the studies reviewed currently in terms of their definition of serial murder; use of different terms to refer to serial murder, such as serial homicide, serial sexual homicide, and serial killing; and intended applications of research findings (or objectives) (see Table 2).



Table 2

Definitions Used in Research Studies on Serial Murder in South Africa

Researcher	Definition	Term used	Objectives
Pistorius (1996)	Several victims; victims are strangers; different times; same or different locations; cooling-off period; motive intrinsic/intrapsychic	'serial killer'	Develop causal theory of serial homicide
Labuschagne (1998)	three or more consecutive murders, over a period of time and definable space; with cooling off periods in between; not motivated by financial or material gains or the elimination of a witness	'serial murder'	Examine serial murder as interaction
Labuschagne (2001)	Person motivated to kill; 3 or more murder, at different times, no ostensible connection; motive is not primarily for revenge, material gain or removal of a witness	'serial murder'	Develop understanding of serial murder
Du Plessis (1998)	As above, with additional criterion that the murders are not part of terrorism, cultism, racism or gang activity	'serial murder'	Theory building by integrating different thematic views or matrices around serial murder
Hodgskiss (2001)	three or more consecutive murders, over a period of time and definable space; with cooling off periods in between; not motivated by financial or material gains or the elimination of a witness	'serial murderer'	Develop model of offender and offence characteristics in South African serial murder



Hook (2003)	No definition	'serial killer'	Illuminate narratives that influence and constitute understandings of serial murder
De Wet (2005)	Several victims; victims are strangers; same or different location; cooling-off period between; motive intrinsic and excludes revenge or material gain; triggering event motivates murders based on fantasies of the individual; reflect personality	'serial murderer'	Develop understanding of serial murder Assist with offender profiles
Barkhuizen (2006)	Several victims; victims are strangers; same or different location; cooling-off period between; possible torture and sadistic elements to murder as well as necrophilia and cannibalism; fantasy; reflect personal need of individual	'serial killer', 'serial homicide'	Develop understanding of serial murder
Del Fabbro (2006)	Multiple murders committed, over a period of time by one or more individuals	'serial murderer'	Develop understanding of serial murder Assist with apprehension and management of individuals who commit serial murder

Definitions of serial murder often include concepts and statements that are not always empirically and veridically accessible, largely due to their psychological and sometimes intrapsychic nature. Examples of such concepts include “emotional cooling off period” (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Du Plessis, 1998; Labuschagne, 1998; Pistorius, 1996), motives that are intrinsic (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Pistorius, 1996) and statements



such as “motive is intrinsic; an irresistible compulsion, fuelled by fantasy...” (Pistorius, 1996, p.6). Such psychologically-based concepts do not always fit well with the investigative context in which definitions of serial murder are applied, frequently adding to tension between the domains and confusion surrounding what constitutes serial murder.

Additionally, comparisons across studies show inconsistencies in the way that serial murder is defined. This can be seen in terms of research focus and the *definiendum* – for example, this varies between serial murder (Del Fabbro, 2006; Du Plessis, 1998; Hurst, 2003a, 2003b; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001; Snyman, 1992), serial murderer (De Wet, 2005; Hodgskiss, 2001), and serial killer (Barkhuizen, 2006; Hook, 2003; Pistorius, 1996). Additionally, certain definitions include a sexual component (Barkhuizen, 2006; Pistorius, 1996); victim number is either specified (Du Plessis, 1998; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001) or generalized (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Del Fabbro, 2006; Pistorius, 1996); and certain definitions include a “cooling-off” period (Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005; Labuschagne, 1998). These are a sample of a number of differences that can be elicited in the literature.

Labuschagne (personal communication, 2006) elaborates on the above and states that one of the most confounding problems with serial murder definitions is the creators’ habit of mixing a criterion with a characteristic. If one looks at a parallel, the DSM diagnostic system (American Psychological Association, 1994) has a few set criteria that are necessary to make a diagnosis. The DSM then goes on to discuss the characteristics of the disorder (prevalence, prognosis, course, associated features and differential diagnosis). In relation to serial murder, it can be said that to murder two or more separate victims over a period of time is a criterion; the fact that they are often prostitutes or vagrants is a characteristic. If a characteristic is elevated to a criterion, then it becomes limiting, for example, if the victims are middle-class, working people, can the crime not be classified as serial murder? For this reason, Del Fabbro

(2006) limited her definition to a generic description, namely “multiple murders committed over a period of time by one or more individuals” (p. 40).

A similar concern could be raised in relation to other characteristics or criteria such as the sexual element (such as featured in Barkhuizen (2006) and Pistorius (1996)). In these cases, it may be a characteristic that the crimes are sexual in nature but if it is elevated to a criterion then a number of murders where the suspect strangled women without any sexual act involved could not be classified as serial murder. Labuschagne (personal communication, 2006) further feels that this is in part due to the problem of some definitions defining the concept (serial murder) and some defining the person (serial murderer). Defining the concept might be more useful for investigators; defining the person might be more useful for the criminal justice system, researchers and psychologists.

One solution may lie in a distinction being drawn between definitional criteria and common characteristics of serial murder, with the former relating more to law enforcement and investigative purposes, and the latter related more to psychological understandings of serial murder. To elaborate, definitional criteria might include factors such as number of murders, and timing between murder instances, while characteristics would be more explicitly related to personality and psychological traits, allowing for individual variations within classifications based on the afore-mentioned criteria. These might include factors such as the nature of motive, and predominant victim type – for example, often sexual, often in same area and often female victims. Until these aspects are distinguished more clearly, definitions of serial murder run the risk of inconsistency with respect to the manner in which cases of serial murder are classified.

The reification of serial murder. The reification of “serial murder” is another problematic issue encountered in the studies evaluated. Emphasis on a specific type of personality



(Barkhuizen, 2006; De Wet, 2005); specific types of intrapsychic fixations such as pre-Oedipal (Barkhuizen, 2006) or in general (Pistorius, 1996); typological clusters such as disorganised and organised personality (Barkhuizen, 2006; Pistorius, 1996), appear to “create” a specific type of person who commits these crimes – the serial murderer. Individuals who commit serial murder are reduced to specific aspects of the range of behaviours that they exhibit in relation to serial murder and known only in this regard. As a result, when such an individual appears in court or is encountered in other contexts as a person or other human being, there appears to be reluctance to acknowledge him as more than a person who had committed serial murder.

Consequently there is a tension between the person who is seen and his label. It is the opinion of the author that such tension and ambivalence could be reduced if the focus shifts from ascribing a label to the individual who commits serial murder and rather to the act or behaviour itself. In this way, there is a more humanistic liberation of the individual concerned and a less negative prognosis in the sense that this behaviour is part of a larger dysfunctional personality and behaviour. It may be the case that a certain combination of factors elicits this behavioural response and that it becomes more salient to investigate what these factors may comprise of in any given instance of serial murder. This may also explain why individuals who commit serial murder are able to function adequately (at usual levels) once incarcerated and why they do not behave aggressively within a prison.

If theories emphasizing personality or intrapsychic factors are to be sustained, then they will need to withstand such challenges. At present, it would appear that the studies that have focused on interactional and systemic aspects (Del Fabbro, 2006; Du Plessis, 1998; Labuschagne, 1998, 2001) are more advantageous in answering such challenges. Another consequence of the different research foci of the studies reviewed is that it is unclear whether the researcher sets out to study serial murder, a serial murderer, or a person who

happens to fulfill the criteria for serial murder. It is important to distinguish between these different understandings and foci when evaluating and consulting the available studies. For example, findings about serial murder as a type of behaviour may not be applicable to all individuals who exhibit this behaviour.

Lack of cohesiveness of the available research. The studies reviewed appear to have integrated a common approach to format in terms of discussion of definitions; available literature on the topic at an international level; typological classification schemes; history of serial murder internationally and locally; and challenges and gaps characterising research on the topic. However, there appears to be a lack of mutual acknowledgement and attempt to build on findings of previous research studies on serial murder in South Africa. There is a consistent discussion of recommendations for future work in the field, but across studies, it would appear that none have included these recommendations or addressed them in any way. In this way, it would appear that local research studies are very divergent. This is advantageous in terms of producing novel and different findings. However, lack of interaction and acknowledgement between studies result in the body of literature on serial murder in South Africa not appearing as an entirely coherent, integrated whole. This may be on account of political aspects around individuality and creativity relating to research conducted or it may reflect a certain characteristic of the phenomenon of serial murder that evokes a possibility of novel theory development and explanation in the researcher drawn to such a topic. However, it would appear that in this instance greater communication and co-operation between research studies would be advantageous.

Vague foundations. Existing studies also appear to commence at a level of assumptions about serial murder in this country that still need to be confirmed and researched. We have



yet to develop our own definition of serial murder, as well as a robust database of valid figures relating to serial murder cases in South Africa. Hodgskiss (2001) began detailing statistics for South African serial murder but this is far from complete and requires further development. Due to the predominant influence of international findings in this area and the lack of the above information, it would appear that as much as the studies reviewed strive to develop a local understanding of serial murder, the current status reflects a hybrid between local and existing international data.



5. Recommendations for Future Research

It is important to mention that many of the above critiques could also be applied to the international literature available on serial murder. Some are more specific to the South African context and the comparative novelty of serial murder in this country. The following recommendations are made based on preceding discussion, some of which may be applied equally to future international research endeavors.

Firstly, it is necessary for future research to improve upon and build more extensively and comprehensively on work that has already been done on serial murder in South Africa. This may consist of elaborating on previous findings; improving previous work or replicating prior research in a more valid or accurate way; or exploring new areas revealed in previous work. There also needs to be greater communication and interaction with the various disciplines involved in understanding and managing the phenomenon of serial murder in order to assess what the current needs or demands are regarding information on the topic. In this way, research on serial murder can be meaningful and practical. For example, an area to be expanded upon is Hodgskiss' research (2001) with regards to South African offence characteristics for profiling purposes. Conducted in consultation with investigating officers and psychologists involved in such investigations (such as with Dr Gerard Labuschagne of the Investigative Psychology Unit at the South African Police Services), the research could be focused on areas or variables with practical utility.

Secondly, Beyers (personal communication, 2006) points out that there is a possibility, if not a probability, that the same person (for example, white males) who committed serial murder have been used in different independent research projects. The reason is that only a small number of incarcerated persons who committed serial murder are available for research purposes. Overexposure of almost similar methodologies, methods and techniques between

researchers could have contaminated some of the studies. It is recommended that a follow-up study research this matter, integrate the findings, and hopefully draw a more complete picture of a person and behaviour of serial murder.

As mentioned previously, it would be interesting to examine how, and if, exploration of the topic of serial murder varies with the cultural perspective of the researcher. To this end, research studies conducted by individuals of other cultures would be advantageous. A large project comparing cultural differences and similarities and their effects on serial murder, in terms of variations in components such as victim choice, location, number of victims, and modus operandi for example is necessary to establish the importance of this variable in a country that has such a diverse cultural milieu.

Research on serial murder in South Africa could also be strengthened considerably by consolidation and validation of the factual history of serial murder in South Africa and details concerning the nature of the various instances documented. To this end, a study that attempted to detail each instance as much as possible and to consolidate factual information from various sources (police docket and case files, court transcripts and records, prison data) for each case of serial murder, would assist greatly with regards to creating a rudimentary history of serial murder and a database from which future studies on this topic could draw their information. This may then contribute to greater validity, reliability and comparability of research studies.

Given Hook's findings (2003) concerning the influence of popular culture and perceptions of serial murder on interpretation of the phenomenon on an academic level, a study examining serial murder from a narrative perspective with regards to popular representations in the media is necessary. These narratives could then be compared to research findings such as those outlined in this article and similarities and differences investigated together with an examination of how these interact and influence one another.



More research examining the relationship between psychopathology and serial murder is also necessary, especially with regards to paraphilias such as sexual sadism and necrophilia. Research could also address the frequency with which sexually deviant behaviour accompanies, and at times characterizes serial murder. A possibility may be a study that investigates the relationship between sexual behaviour, violence, sexual sadism and serial murder. Another possibility may be to examine how serial murder and serial rape are related, especially given the graduation hypothesis (Wright & Hensley, 2003) which postulates that serial murder is sometimes the outcome of an escalation of violent behaviour that includes rape. Other aspects of psychopathology should also be examined, such as the relationship between serial murder and clinical conditions such as described on Axes I and II of the DSM classification system. For example, research could examine the proportion of individuals who commit serial murder in South Africa, and who meet diagnostic criteria for the above.

Given the importance bestowed on the concept of a “cooling off” period in definitions and understandings of serial murder, a research study could examine if such a concept exists and the nature of this period by interviewing individuals who have committed serial murder with regards to their subjective experiences of the “cooling off” period. These could then be compared and contrasted along both qualitative and quantitative dimensions such as length of time of this period, and analyzed for changes in quality and duration across the overall period in which serial murders are committed.

Gender may be another aspect of serial murder in South Africa that should be investigated. This could be from the perspective of victim choice, with regards to explaining reasons for the overrepresentation of females as victims, or it could be from the perspective of perpetrators, namely investigating reasons for the dominance of males as perpetrators. Research could investigate the role of gender and perceptions of gender in the way that



parental figures of individuals who commit serial murder, specifically the maternal figure, are conceptualized and viewed.

Although studies abroad (Money, 1990; Sears, 1991) have investigated possible neurological problems or genetic factors (Stephenson, 1992) problems associated with serial murder, no such studies have been conducted in South Africa. It is possible that political, financial and practical implications of such investigations limit the execution of such endeavors.

Research should also examine the impact of serial murder on the survivors of attempted attacks or on the families of victims of serial murder. This could be approached from a systemic perspective, similarly to Del Fabbro's study (2006) with regards to family systems and individuals who commit serial murder. The findings could then be compared between the two studies for similarities and differences. Del Fabbro's work (2006) and Labuschagne's work (1998, 2001) with regards to the systemic understanding of serial murder could be extended in future research to incorporate larger or diverse systems, such as the communities in which instances of serial murder have occurred. A study could also examine whether the role of serial murder as interaction has changed over time, with respect to varying historical and political contexts in this country.

With regards to investigative applications, areas such as crime linkage, identification of cases of serial murder (as opposed to ritual murder for example) and geographical profiling are some aspects that can still be explored and contribute greatly to illuminating the field further. Snyman (1992) illustrated the importance of these aspects in his article. As discussed previously, these endeavors would be assisted greatly by a large scale quantitative study on serial murder in South Africa that expanded on the quantitative aspects of Hodgskiss' study (2001).



Another possibility is a comparative study of research findings in cases where the same individuals have been used as part of different studies. In this way, it could be established whether different approaches yield similar or diverse findings for the same individual. This approach could then be replicated on other individuals and then the results compared across these individuals to see whether common traits or aspects emerge. In this way, a profile of serial murder in South Africa could become a possibility.



6. Conclusion

The author has reviewed the existing psychological research on serial murder in South Africa. Strengths and weaknesses of the research were illuminated and recommendations were made for future research. It is evident that the field of research on serial murder in this country has immense potential for growth and creativity and can contribute greatly to other domains and applications that are dedicated to the apprehension, management and understanding of individual who commit serial murder.

In conclusion, Beyers (personal communication, 2006), who acted as supervisor for the Masters degrees of both Labuschagne (1998) and Du Plessis (1998), as well as promoter for two doctoral theses (Del Fabbro, 2006; Labuschagne, 2001), all on serial murder, is of the opinion that it is clear that

- a) a variation of “factors” are involved in the development and maintenance of behaviour such as serial murder;
- b) these “factors” have interactional properties and should be seen as such. A “factor” or characteristic, for example, can never operate on its own. It is always interactionally and reciprocally connected. For example, family environment and relationships, peer influences, and the development of intimacy and sexuality are some of the “factors” which play an important role in a person’s development towards adulthood. It would be interesting to examine the manner in which these might interact in the development of an individual who commits serial murder. This could be researched via a content analysis, for example, where these “factors” were evaluated with regards to their predominance in how individuals who have committed serial murder speak of their development into adults;



- c) studies which disown this quality of “interactions between”, follow a rigid research path and try to simplify behaviour. Serial murder, in fact like all behaviour, is fraught with complexity and should be researched as such.



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