

Part 10. Serial killers: The Crimes

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Police in New York Suffolk Cty find 8 bodies

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Most of the articles written about the crimes of serial killers have been either straight descriptions of **individual cases** or speculative analyses, based on the **small number of cases** with which the author was familiar, whether through reading or his own interviews. What is needed is a definitive study of the *patterns* of the crimes, drawn from a *sample* of cases. Today, such a sample would be very large, but in 1983, when the current study began, a sample of 27 cases was sufficient to represent the history, cultures, and diversity of crime types that made up multiple (or serial) **murder** at the time.*

Within the community of so-called experts on serial murder, there is a major ongoing debate over how “serial murder” should be defined. Any such definition should have (at least) two

components: the number of victims killed and the time spans between the killings. The only legitimate way to parameterize a phenomenon like this one is to begin by reading all the available sources on existing cases. Such examples provide a researcher with the “universe” of possibilities, and a real life reason to establish the *minimum number* of victims, e.g. two, three, or four. The **FBI’s multi-disciplinary Symposium on serial murder (2005)** decided to set the limit low for *law enforcement* purposes and put it at two or more murders. The FBI’s own notion of a “cooling off period” between the killings was excluded from the definition. The author’s definition, for *research purposes*, was a minimum of three or more murders in at least two separate events (**Ritter, 1988**). This definition is not unlike that recommended by the Symposium.

Some authors have defined serial murders as occurring, for instance, a week to 30 days apart. These are pure guesses about what the average serial murderer does. The time spans between killings should *not* be specified, because they vary too greatly. One finding of this author is that serial murderers often commit their first few killings a year or more apart then greatly decrease the time periods between the killings as they progress. This progression of increasing frequency is often accompanied by increasing brutality as well as increasingly closer proximity. The reasons for this are unknown, but it is likely that killing becomes more exciting for the killer once the series has been recognized as such by the media and community. The recognition that there is a serial killer at work creates far more concern, publicity and fear than do isolated murders.

The objective of this section on the crimes was not to provide the gruesome details of each and every murder, but, rather, to describe the *patterns*. After much consideration, it was determined that all serial murders consist of five components. These components generated research questions (and relevant subquestions), which could be answered by a full reading of all the available published material on each of the 27 killers. (The cases selected had been amply documented; the best documented cases ensure that sufficient information is available, given the research methodology just described.)

The first component generated these questions: What, if any, link was found between the killer and the victims? Three subquestions were asked: (1) did the killer know any of the victims? Was there any relationship prior to – and not predicated upon – the killing? (2) Pertaining to motivation, did the victim provoke (e.g. anger) the killer? Did the death provide some advantage? Was there an identifiable motive? And (3), was there a victim *type* selected by the killer? Were there striking similarities among all, or most, of the victims, and, if so, what were they? What differentiated the victims?

The second component in the pattern of the crimes involves method of operation (M.O). Its first

question: Was there any commonality in the method/manner the killer used to obtain victims? Two further subquestions were asked: (1) can the method be classified as seduction (i.e. voluntary, no use of force), abduction, or sudden attack? And, (2) did the method of obtaining victims change over time, or remain constant? The second issue (or subquestion) was, is there a pattern in the method of killing and/or disposal of the bodies? If there is a pattern, what is it? Does it ever vary?

The third question was: what is the nature of the series' investigation? Subquestions here included, are multiple jurisdictions involved? And, is the investigation impeded by *conceptions*, such as, belief among law enforcement that the M.O. never varies, or that the killer selects only one type of victim?

The fourth component of the research generated this question: how was the killer apprehended? The fifth and final component was: what was the disposition of the case? Disposition includes whether there was a trial. Was an insanity defense used? Was there a conviction and what was the sentence? Where is the killer now?

Subsequent articles will provide the answers to these questions. Stay tuned.

*That study (Ritter, 1988) is **available here**.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [Part 9. Personality characteristics: Bundy and Collins](#)
- [Part 8. Personality characteristics: Superman Philosophy and ordinary Greed](#)
- [Part 7. Personality characteristics: Egoism, Ambition and Grandiosity](#)
- [Part 6. Personality characteristics: Dissimulation and Egocentrism](#)
- [Part 5. Personality characteristics: Psychopathy and Dominance](#)



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