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Captured! The apprehension of a serial killer (Part 23)

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Woman thought to be beheaded yesterday, September 5, 2014, London
Photo by Oli Scarff/Getty Images

Let's say you are a college student, and I am your teacher. How would you respond to the following question: "What is the relationship between apprehension and serial killing?" It is unlikely that you would raise your hand in a competitive classroom battle to see who could rattle off more reams of knowledge – you, your peers or friends. On the contrary, (1) too little is known for anyone to brag about, (2) what little is known is apt to be known by most everyone, and (3) in my class, you would learn the latest research; you would be taught to think, and then taught how to progress beyond reciting others' views.

Throughout the review of findings detailed in **Ritter's (2011-2014) previous *Examiner.com* article***s*, the issue of apprehension has usually been considered in terms of the problems it poses for police and prosecutors and what can be done to stop the rate of decline in solutions. Here, however, we examine apprehension in a different light. We are looking at those aspects of investigations that arise naturally from the killer - or their circumstances – and those that enhance the chances for solution. In addition, we are looking for cross cultural and comparative data that demonstrate ways of improving solutions (see next article). The U.S. has higher rates of homicide than most Western industrialized nations, but our solution rates are significantly

lower. We lose more lives but we justify our lack of concern by blaming the victims, not the offenders or the social system.

In 1983, the federal government gave official recognition to the problem of serial murder. Testimony was published the following year in the **U.S. Senate Hearing on Serial Murders (U.S. Congress, 1984)**. Even a cursory reading of this publication shows that no one – not the FBI nor any researcher – had developed new crime analysis methods for these new types of crimes. Consequently, when multiple jurisdictions formed task force investigations, and even when computers were used, each victim was analyzed along the killer-victim avenue, instead of going in a more circular fashion, bringing in new evidence as we go. The result is only one killer being considered at a time – and only one potential victim tied to that killer. Is it any wonder that the major, general finding on apprehension over the past few decades has been the belief that apprehension is accomplished by luck?

This belief was expressed by Rule (1984) in testimony from the U.S. Senate Hearing on Serial Murders **(U.S. Congress, 1984)**. A year later, **Levin and Fox (1985, p. 185)** expressed the same idea when they said that when serial murderers are caught at all, "it is so often by luck." They also quoted an administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice, Robert Heck, as saying that "most serial killers are arrested by chance or happenstance." Although Heck, as program manager, was officially involved in the development of **VICAP**, he expressed some doubt about it: It was essential, he said, that a computer-assisted investigation be "properly managed" because "if the killer is not caught, then still you've done your best" (pg. 185, Levin & Fox). Until that time, almost no research attention had been given to the growing problem of "serial", "multiple" or, as they were usually called, "mass" murders. (In fact, Levin and Fox's 1985 text, was, with the exceptions of Lunde, 1976, and Godwin, 1978, the first modern work on the subject to be published. It was entitled ***Mass Murder: America's Growing Menace.***)

What the Senate Hearing made clear was that there had been no research, let alone any progress, in the methods of analyses for serial murders. With no knowledge of serial murder patterns (e.g. whether M.O.s varied), they were nevertheless depending upon a computerized system called VICAP, the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, to accomplish all solutions. Computers can only be of assistance if those who program them know what to ask. At the Green River Task Force, Robert Keppel (who had worked on the Bundy case and received undeserved credit there, too) kept the task force in such **"tip sheet"** shape, that it was almost impossible for Gary Ridgeway to be "seen" by the task force members even though Ridgeway had repeatedly come to their attention. In the Green River and Bundy cases, both series were left unsolved due to the bad luck stemming from no open lines of communication between the elite inner circle of the task force being separated from the vice cops who had the information but no access. Further bad luck came from Keppel's being in a position to decide that neither Bundy nor Ridgeway fit his notions of the kind of man who would have committed either of these series.

Ritter's 1988 study of apprehension was not concerned here with investigation factors, but, rather, with factors in the circumstances surrounding the murders, and in actions on the part of the murderer, that increase chances for arrest. Arrests were generally found to be more likely when one or more of the following factors were present: (1) the tenacity of a victim's relatives or friends (e.g. **H.D. Landru**; **Kate Bender**) in keeping police interested in the case; (2) a fortuitous circumstance; (3) the loquacity of the murderer (or a co-conspirator) up to and including a confession to police; and (4) the general downfall of the murderer. The

latter two factors are considered here.

The talkativeness of some multiple murderers may be related to the phenomenon of dominance-based partnerships (the pairing of a high-dominance personality with criminal tendencies and a medium-dominance personality, leading to extremes in violence that might not have occurred without the alliance, **Wilson, 1984)**. Subjects who brought others into their schemes obviously talked to them. Further, some subjects talked about their crimes to non-participants, but in both cases, the killer increased the likelihood of his or her own arrest.

There was a rash and foolish quality to murderers such as Ian Brady and Charles Schmid, who wanted others in their plans. They hardly needed the kind of partners they picked, partners who did not want to kill, or would be likely to talk. Further, these two killers, as well as **John Haigh**, heightened the risk of apprehension by ultimately choosing victims who were likely to be missed. Two of the doctor-killers, Thomas Cream and H.H. Holmes, were among those who could not leave their crimes alone and took to talking, or even boasting, about them. In this, they followed the prototypical case of **Herbert Mills**, a man who believed he had committed the "perfect murder." When he received no validation for this perfection, he fell to boasting, and was then apprehended and hanged. An additional finding here was that several other killers studied (such as Ken Bianchi, Ted Bundy and John Collins) liked to joke to their friends that they could be the killer police were then looking for.

Concerning the general downfall of the killer, it was found that at least half the subjects studied began to take too many risks, to call attention to themselves, usually by thinking the police knew more than they did; and this tended to occur right around the time they were caught. Other subjects, however, were found to have entered a stage of decline and disaster, prior to their apprehension. In short, they began to fall apart.

For instance, the once careful and skillful serial killer, Bundy, began to act recklessly in Florida, in contrast to his killings in previous states. Where once he would have known it was risky to kill two girls on the same day, he committed, in a single night, two incidents of mass and attempted mass murder, leaving behind witnesses, trace evidence, and bodies at the crime scenes. John Christie's last days were macabre and pathetic; Dean Corll's were very strained. Both had begun to kill with increasing frequency. For Charles Manson and his "family," the last days were filled with paranoia and plans for escape, as well as preparations for more violence. Everywhere there was decay. Holmes, when imprisoned for murder, saw in his own visage signs of degeneracy he had not had before, and he speculated that this degeneracy was not the cause, but the *result*, of his many murders.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- **Ways to curtail serial murder: Considering normal human beings who kill**
- **No more hoopla for VICAP, the FBI's serial murder tracking system**
- **A behavioral analysis of George Zimmerman's character**
- **Public response to Zimmerman-Martin case**
- **The Bundy letter, 1979: Suggestions for the investigation of serial murder**

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