

LIFE / SOCIETY & CULTURE / SOCIAL ISSUES

The study of murder to help police

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Police continue their investigation of murder in Bristol, England 1/7/11

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Of all crimes, (single-victim) murder has always had the highest solution (or “clearance”) rate. In 1960, the FBI reported (*Uniform Crime Reports*) that murder had a 92.3 percent clearance rate. Eighty percent of all 1960 murders were characterized as “crimes of passion” by the FBI. Between 70 and 80 percent of murder victims that year were killed by relatives, friends or acquaintances. In 1966, police could identify motives for all but 6 percent of the murders committed. Murders were usually solved within a day or two after the crime. The killer often came forward, waited at the scene or was found by police canvassing the neighborhood or interviewing people who knew the victim.

As **John Douglas**, an early FBI profiler, wrote in 1996, “One of the reasons our work is even necessary has to do with the changing nature of violent crime itself” (pg. 17). He is not including drug-related murders and gun crimes for these generally involve people who are known to each other. In an increasing number of cases, murders involve people who are strangers. In 2008, the largest category of murderer-victim relationships was “unknown;” the largest motive category was, similarly, “unknown.” In 2008, only 64% of all homicides were cleared, a drop of almost 30 percent in the past 30 years (**Cooper and Smith**, November 2011).

What this really means is that the police have no idea how to solve that substantial portion of homicides that

have changed. In 1995 **Robert Keppel**, a former Seattle detective whose investigations include both the Bundy and “Green River Killer” murders, admitted that “no one has ever studied, empirically and objectively, the methods by which police investigators catch killers” (1995, p. 372). And, as reported in a **previous article**, Petee and Jarvis, the latter an FBI profiler, similarly admitted that no one has researched “what kind of patterns exist in regard to serial offending” and whether “knowledge of these patterns can be used to aid law enforcement in their investigation of serial crime” (2000, p. 215). Yet **the last article** demonstrates that serial murder patterns *can* be (and *have* been) studied.

The present research (Ritter, 1988) further demonstrates that (1) MOs are complex and varied, as well as changing and (2) there is no “typical” serial murder pattern across cases. Among the conclusions reported in the Ritter study are the following: Serial killers’ backgrounds are not related in any specific ways to the manner in which their crimes are committed. This conclusion conflicts with a basic premise of profiling, that crime scenes will reflect the type of background of the perpetrator. This premise, in turn, rests on the idea that the crimes are like symptoms of a psychopathology. To the contrary, for as Ritter reported, multiple murder is a chosen career and not a sign of mental illness. Most researchers, including those at the FBI, now regard the vast majority of serial or multiple murderers as sane. To repeat a point made previously, psychopathy (sociopathy or antisocial personality) is not a psychosis. It is a personality disorder or type and one of its features is the absence of indications of neurosis or psychosis.

It should be noted that some time in the 1990s, FBI profilers became aware that MOs do change. Perhaps in order to maintain an area of esoteric expertise, Douglas (with Olshaker, 1996; 1997) and Keppel (with Birnes, 1997) along with a few other former agents and detectives, began to add on to MOs the idea of “calling cards” or “signatures.” Citing absolutely no research as his basis, Douglas sets forth the following distinction as if it were law:

Modus Operandi – MO – is learned behavior. It’s what the perpetrator does to commit the crime. It is dynamic – that is, it can change. Signature, a term I coined to distinguish it from MO, is what the perpetrator has to do to fulfill himself. It is static; it does not change (Douglas & Olshaker, 1996, p.252, italics in the original).

In fact, Douglas offered this view as testimony in a death penalty case. Signature analysis has been the basis for convictions in several serial murder and death penalty cases. In some cases where there is insufficient evidence to convict on any murder, prosecutors seek signature analysis to tie all the murders to a single offender. In these cases, an idea – without any research cited as its basis – is used to tie murders to individuals in lieu of any other type of evidence – circumstantial, direct/physical, eyewitness accounts or

confessions.

Evidence pertaining to calling cards was presented in research this author submitted in 1979 to the Unsolicited Research Program of the Department of Justice for a grant proposal entitled, "Perspectives and procedures for serial murders." That proposal and the supporting material attached recommended the use of an expanded MO analysis which includes indications of calling cards. The term refers to similarities among cases that police can use in determining the possibility of a series linkage. The calling card is hardly an offender's psychic core; it may be nothing more symbolic than a common burial on hillsides or the atypical use of an uncommon weapon (as with [David Berkowitz's](#) repeated use of a .44 caliber gun held in an unusual "Wild West" fashion). The important point is that this idea was intended for use during an investigation; it was never intended for use in a trial.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [Serial killers' methods of operation, Part 18](#)
- [The serial killers' crimes: Assumptions about Modus Operandi \(Part 17\)](#)
- [The serial killers' crimes: How they obtain their victims, continued \(Part 16\)](#)
- [The serial killers' crimes: How they obtain their victims \(Part 15\)](#)
- [The crimes of serial killers: Are there victim-types? \(Part 14\)](#)



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