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The study of murder to help police: Expanded MO analysis

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Aurora CO-July 29. People continue to visit roadside memorial.

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This research began several years before anyone was interested in serial murder. Further, the interest here was not so much serial murderers *per se*— who they are, or what the “causes” are, as it was *any* type of murder that caused police problems. More murders were going unsolved — and that diminished justice.

But what could one individual do, particularly if one has never studied police work, murder, or any type of crime? As it turns out, much can be done, when one reviews the possibilities from outside a field like criminology with its mix of ready interventions into the lives of citizens (Morris, 1976), and beliefs like “murder in general is not susceptible to control” (Egger, 1984, p.4) or

punishing stranger homicides only draws “resources away from promising alternatives” which are unnamed (Riedel, 1998, p.216). Criminologists rarely express concern when police and correctional resources are spent on gang members or petty drug offenders, so why the concern over those who commit stranger homicides?

Even a modest contribution to serial homicide solutions requires our knowing what the problem is and where our research may be useful. Like most homicide researchers, the author’s aim was to discover a way to reduce the loss of life by murder. We bring to this endeavor diverse fields, training and the worldviews that vary with the times and places where we live and move. The concerns of great professors may set a path and stimulate us. Because academic fields and geographic regions do change, researchers also need an education that is broad and sufficient to give rise to burning questions about the human condition. Is aggression an instinct, a drive caused by frustration, or is it learned? Is it inevitable? Is it directed up or directed down? Does murder occur at a constant rate or does it vary in form and rates across cultures and over time?

During the 1970s, before Southern California became associated with serial murder, it was a region hard hit by new and unusual types of violence. While there was no research *per se* on multiple-victim homicides, what could be studied were the unexplained cases. These included multiple murders by juveniles, e.g. teenage girls (sniper **Brenda Spencer**), boys who killed their families, and youth who set hotels or sleeping men on fire for kicks. There was the pointless brutality of **Lawrence Singleton** (a rapist who cut the forearms off a teenaged Mary Vincent) and other sex offenders who, when “treated” and released, went on to kill repeatedly. This was the period when **Jim Jones** killed with Cool Aid, **Dan White** used the “Twinkie Defense,” Charles Manson follower **Leslie Van Houten** was being retried for the third time, and the **Hillside Strangler** was an ongoing crime. These were cases that made all murders seem both real and pointless tragedies. They were among the crimes that needed to be monitored to understand why, eventually, there would be a decline in the clearance rates for murder. This endeavor was begun and continued for the next 40 years.

This research also looked at ongoing (and recently solved) serial murders to see what could be determined about the killer(s)’ actions. I put aside all preconceptions about the type of person who commits these crimes or the type of victim or situation in which the crime occurs other than in relation to the particular pattern or progression, motive or Modus Operandi (MO) that emerges through a systematic analysis of all data available concerning the physical circumstances surrounding each murder in relation to other unsolved crimes. The standard approach emphasizes who the victims are – age, hair color, etc. My approach emphasizes the physical conditions surrounding the murder itself – the position of the body, where it is placed, and any other detail that may be considered an addendum to the killer’s calling card. Press reports about the crimes supplied an adequate and sometimes only source of information with which to link

crimes earlier in the series.

This crime scene analysis lends itself to a simple 3–column format which can contain all the important information. These were labeled, for instance, Victims, MO and Conditions. The benefits of such an analysis show up quickly in a case such as the so–called **Boston Stranglings**. The elite psychiatric–medical committee set up to assist the police became bogged down because they presumed the differences between the older and younger victims had some major significance. However, the Strangler tried different apartments; he could not even have known the ages of those who would let him in. Consequently, there was nothing symbolically significant in his choice of victims. What was far more important was the way the killer left his victims, the “conditions.” Many of the victims were left with scarves and/or stockings tied around their necks in bows. In addition, they were left exposed, in a gynecological condition. This is so striking it is a wonder that more was not made of it.

This is the calling card or so–called signature that police can use to determine the likelihood that crimes are linked. But there is no assurance that a killer will leave a calling card or that, in the event one *is* left, that each crime can necessarily be linked to any single offender. Rather than ever use calling cards at trial, the presence of some unusual feature, “overkill” and crime with no motive and no known relationship should be seen as something on the order of a warning sign: are there any more out there like this?

One further thing that was learned by this researcher and that can be detected with a thorough MO analysis is *escalation* of a series. Crimes often begin one or more years apart, but, over time, grow increasingly more frequent and sometimes, closer is proximity and greater in brutality. This was determined on the basis of the dates on which the victims were captured or killed. It is not a theory. It is this researcher's belief that this occurs because a serial killer draws gratification from police and press attention. Sometimes this attention must be forced upon these organizations by increasing the frequency of the murders to make the connections more obvious. The important thing is to detect a linkage, insofar as this is ever possible, early in a series, in order to preclude the increase in murders.

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- [The serial killers' crimes: Assumptions about Modus Operandi \(Part 17\)](#)
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