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Intellectual thievery in the field of serial murder

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February 7, 2013

11:22 PM MST



Professor Peter Higgins awarded doctorate of science 11-16-12

(Photo by Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images)

Plagiarism is a rarely acknowledged, pervasive problem in the study of serial murder. This problem – and the response to it – is described in the introduction to **Serial Murder: Modern Scientific Perspectives** (Leyton, Ed., 2000), which is part of a series of the International Library of Criminology, Criminal Justice and Penology. Series editors Mars and Nelken (pgs. xv-xvi) begin by distinguishing serial murder research from the “smothering ideological rigidity, factionalization and discourtesy that characterize so much of modern criminology.” They believe the study of serial murder has been saved by the expedient of senior researchers who simply ignore all studies that conflict with their own. (This would include studies that reflect badly on

theirs because they were written by the authors of ideas they are claiming as their own). However,

“ . . . at its worst, the field shares some of the extravagant flaws of criminology, sometimes making absurd claims and shoplifting ideas more or less at will. Among the premiere claims-makers, for example, are . . . both police and academics – who insist that they and they alone were the ‘first’ to recognize the phenomenon or even the first to use the term ‘serial murder.’

Also rampant in the field is the unscholarly and discourteous practice of ‘borrowing’ ideas and redeploying them as one’s own without pausing to acknowledge their sources. [This occurs when] the professional need for publication and the personal need for status sometimes results in claims that an old and well published idea is the author’s unique invention.

Mars and Nelken (2000, pgs. xv-xvi) conclude their indictment of the field without an indictment: They do not take researchers to task. Instead, they put “such dispiriting matters aside,” and find a field “otherwise alive and vigorous that has made great progress since the mid-1980s.”

This reaction is itself problematic. Many would question whether there has been much progress (see, e.g. Lester, 1995, pg. 187, who finds the research surprisingly “poor”). And Mars and Nelken (2000, pgs. xix, xxii) themselves agree with **Egger’s (1998, pgs. 59-60)** conclusion that

studies have provided “no decisive answers” for some of the most important issues, such as the frequency of murders across nations. Another important issue that has *not* been established is whether serial killers have been the victims of childhood abuse. Early writers (e.g. **Leyton, 1986**) found no supporting evidence, while later writers (e.g. **Hickey, 1996**) who insist this is a major factor, have not supplied substantiating evidence.

Others would question whether progress is ever possible in a field where the major ideas have been separated from the relevant research and the validity of the ideas cannot be evaluated. Without knowing even the context of the ideas, how they were derived or how they evolved, there can be no agreement among researchers as to their precise meaning or their characteristics. When researchers are divided on the meaning of ideas, no amount of additional investigation can contribute to advances in a field. New research can only offer support for advocates of given points of view. And, the field of serial murder has more ideologues than social scientists.

Further, the fact that criminologists continue to conduct their research without regard to new and conflicting studies means that the “state of the art” is in a perpetual state of confusion. With senior scholars themselves plagiarizing well-known ideas, they did not learn, nor can they pass on, any appreciation for the accuracy of the state of knowledge or an understanding of science itself.

Indeed, in a definition of science intended to determine whether profiling is a behavioral science, Muller (2000, pg. 246) draws from the definitions he believes are used in psychology, such as Kuhn’s (1962) idea of paradigms. But Kuhn himself did not believe paradigms should be applied to the behavioral sciences because of their responsibilities to the public. Paradigms are the world views of their users (i.e. natural scientists) and survive on untested theories.

Furthermore, paradigms can overturn the fundamental rules of science, which is the only way profiling ever became a candidate for any science. In behavioral sciences “the essence of the scientific method involves observations that can be repeated and verified by others,” (*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association [APA], 2001, pg. 347-348*), which alone excludes all the symbolic and psychodynamic explanations of clinicians and profilers. Instead, psychologists test their theories, make efforts to ensure the accuracy of the state of knowledge and produce research that moves the field forward. Each piece of research is expected to be a contribution - “original, valid and significant.” The APA further describes the nature of a field:

“ Like a wall built one brick at a time . . . a field is built by single contributions that together represent the accumulated knowledge of a field. Each contribution must fill a place that before was empty, and each contribution must be sturdy enough to bear the weight of contributions to come.

In a field plagued with plagiarism and with no guarantee that major works have even been included in the body of works that are being cited, how can there ever be a steady accretion of knowledge? Psychologists follow basic **ethical principles** which are explicitly defined, (including “integrity,” “justice,” “beneficence and nonmaleficence” and “respect for people’s rights and dignity.” There are also “the long-standing ethical principles that underlie all scholarly writing [and] are designed to achieve two goals,: to ensure the accuracy of scientific . . . knowledge, and to protect intellectual property rights” (APA, 2001, pg. 348). Plagiarism is inherently anti-scientific.

The focus on plagiarism as an issue of ethics has a long history. “Jewish law early on prohibited plagiarism, calling it "g'neivat da'at," or **stealing the mind.**” However, a search for the term “ethics” on the website of the **American Society of Criminology** leads to the surprising announcement that criminologists have no formal ethics guidelines. Anyone interested in the “topic” of ethics can pursue it through the links provided to other fields - like psychology.

Perhaps Mars and Nelken’s (2000, pg. xvi) apparent lack of concern over authorship is not so surprising. But they seem to be implying that ideas are not the “unique invention” of specific authors, and that no one was the first to recognize the increase in serial murder. Certainly, anyone can claim to be the unique inventor of a well-known idea, but students and senior researchers need not, indeed, should not, accept a claim that is not backed up with supporting research. It is only when an idea has been written down that it has the protection of law through copyright. And when that copyright is officially registered, there is a **“clear public record”** of it.

In the next article we will begin to examine the origins of a number of ideas about serial murderers and research practices derived from this author’s copyrighted works that have been illegally reproduced and improperly and unethically used.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- What are the causes of serial murder?
- Part 5. What are the causes of serial murder?
- Part 4. What are the causes of serial murder?
- Part 6. What are the causes of serial murder?
- Part 8. What are the causes of serial murder? Major personality characteristics

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