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The crimes of serial killers: Link between murderers and victims (Part 11)

May 14, 2012

12:49 AM MST

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Murder in Glasgow, Scotland

Getty Images

Throughout history and across nations, **murder** at the hand of a stranger has been both rare and fear--inducing. Through the 1970s, U.S. "stranger-to-stranger homicides," as they are called by criminologists, were usually restricted to so-called "felony murders," murders committed in the course of some other crime, like robbery.

But by 1988, it was clear to FBI profilers and consultants **Ressler, Burgess and Douglas**, that felony murder had remained the same while other aspects of homicide – like the absence of a relationship between murderers and victims or the lack of identifiable motives – had increasingly become part of the changing nature of murder. However, psychological profiling revolves

around the issue of motive and a profiler rarely says that a person was killed by a stranger. The following vignette, written by a profiler, is indicative of this thinking:

“ . . . So you ask, why would someone come into a place of business, seek her out, and do this to her [stab her in the back, then cover her with a blanket]? It appeared that this was an explosive individual who felt the victim had ‘stabbed him in the back.’ When you see a victim who primarily has injury to the back without a rape or robbery, it usually points to a revenge murder. This suspect would have had a prior relationship with her which would have been positive at one point. I said this because the killer showed some remorse by covering her, and there was no [rape] attempt (Schurman-Kauflin, 2011).

There are so many leaps of faith in this one paragraph, one could get dizzy just watching the author soar from the real world into the air above. To equate the killer’s method of killing with metaphorical “back stabbing” is the kind of thinking usually granted only to small children listening to fairy tales.

But science is about keeping feet firmly planted on the ground, so this author first determined that there were three areas in which a victim-offender linkage was possible: (1) the existence of a prior relationship; (2) the existence of an identifiable motive; and (3) the existence of a particular victim-type selected by the killer. Consequently, in conducting research on the individual cases, particular care was taken to specify (1) the exact nature of all the relationships between the victims and the killer(s); (2) to examine the possible motives to determine those that are credible; and (3) to identify those characteristics which either indicated a victim-type or indicated differences among the victims.

Existence of prior relationships. In 10 of the 27 cases (37 percent), the killer was a stranger to each of the victims. In two cases, authorities attempted to link one of the victims to the killers, but the evidence for doing so was poor. This justified the addition of these cases to the percentage of stranger homicides. In two cases, all of the existing relationships were predicated upon the murders, and therefore, since this is one of the definitions of a stranger murder, these cases further raised the percentage of stranger homicides. In two instances, all but one of the victims was a stranger, so these two killers were predominantly involved in stranger homicides. Therefore, cases involving only stranger-victims accounted for 52 percent of the total. When the category was all or almost-all stranger-victims, the percentage rose to 59 percent.

Of the remaining 11 cases, all but 2 involved a combination of stranger-to-stranger murders along with the murders of acquaintances, lovers or family members. (There were only three who murdered family members as well as strangers.) In 2 of the 27 cases (7 percent) the offender apparently did not kill any strangers, although it was possible that **H.H. Holmes** may have developed relationships for the purpose of murder, which, in this study, is defined as a stranger homicide.

In summary, in 25 of the 27 cases (or 93 percent), the multiple murderers of this study did kill people who were strangers, but they did not necessarily kill only strangers. On the other hand, the nature of the relationships in the remaining 2 cases – that of Holmes and **Charles Schmid**, had qualities that made them more similar to the other 25 than different from them. Both subjects just took up killing – to see if they could get away with it or because the killer thought murder was a good way to end unwanted relationships. No one ever called either Holmes or Schmid merciful or patient men. These are rarely the descriptions used for any serial killer in this or any other study.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- **Part 10. Serial killers: The Crimes**
- **Part 9. Serial murderers: Major personality characteristics**
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