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Serial killers – The investigation (Part 19 of Ritter study)

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August 30, 2014

4:59 PM MST



Babylon NY 2011 where human remains are found
Where human remains were found Getty Images Steven Platt

Finally, we return to the **Ritter (1988)** study of a cross-national sample of multiple (or serial) murderers. **In the first articles** on the findings we covered each category of the life history of the 27 persons studied, and did so using multiple sources to obtain verifiable biographical facts. Then we evaluated the facts obtained for each category in terms of relevant theories. For clarity, consider one example: “Birth,” the first category, was described in basic, verifiable terms – date and place of birth, whether born in a hospital, weight, and mention of any prenatal, delivery or postnatal complications or any other observations noted by staff. Though the sample included a 100-year period preceding 1983, hospital births were the norm. Hospital records were good sources of evidence, as the few cases that included even a slight problem (e.g. a low birth weight of six pounds) *were* reported. When combined with subsequent medical and school records, photographs and neighbor, family and/or peer observations, there is a great deal of evidence with which to evaluate, for instance, the theory of parental substance abuse during conception and prenatal periods. Such abuse, if sufficiently problematic, would produce verifiable results that would be reported by the hospital: specifically, withdrawal in infancy. Since no such results were ever reported and none of the mothers were reported to be

either pre- or postnatal substance abusers, the likelihood that serial murderers suffered from an hypothesized condition of congenital drug dependency is highly unlikely.

Examples of genetic damage also cited by **Norris (1988)** for his theory that “serial murder is a disease” was readily discounted with the available evidence. Examples included webbed skin between fingers, bulbous fingertips, hair whorls, tongues with deep ridges (or speckled with smooth or rough spots), and a fifth finger with a marked curve if not “a slight claw-like inner curve toward other fingers” (p. 247). If only serial killers actually bore such monster-like traits, police investigations would be far less difficult.

After the life histories we described the major personality characteristics, noting particularly the traits of dominance and psychopathy. Lastly, we began covering the crimes, ending with “**Serial killers’ methods of operation, Part 18.**” With this article, we begin one of the most important aspects in the study of serial murder: What can or have we learned from research that can be translated into improved police practices?

Since the last article on the serial killers’ M.O. was published on October 25, 2012, a review of the literature on the intersection of the killers’ M.O.s and police investigations is in order. As noted in the **last article on the Ritter (1988) study**, one of the most serious omissions in the research on serial killers has been the absence of studies, and hence, knowledge, about how serial killers commit their crimes. In **1995 Robert Keppel**, a former Seattle detective who played a pivotal role in investigating both the cases of Ted Bundy and the so-called “Green River Killer,” admitted that “no one has ever studied, empirically and objectively, the methods by which police investigators catch killers” (1995, p. 372). And, **Petee and Jarvis (2000)**, criminologist and FBI profiler, respectively, admitted in a summary of the state-of-the-art that no one has researched “what kind of patterns exist in regard to serial offending” or whether “knowledge of these patterns can be used to aid law enforcement in their investigation of serial crime” (2000, p. 215). This is a shocking admission yet it was received with little shock or comment.

Little seemed to have been accomplished since the **1983 Senate Hearings on Serial Killers**, in which funding was sought for **VICAP, (the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program)**, housed at the FBI. Those who testified included members of the FBI and Pierce Brooks, retired “detective captain of LAPD’s Homicide Unit,” and the purported originator of the VICAP idea (**Keppel, 1995, p. 136**). All were asked what police would need in the way of research assistance beyond VICAP. After all, the need for a “system to track and analyze serial murders” stemmed from the concerns of local law enforcement agencies across the nation that serial murder was increasing and that no procedures had been developed to assist them in solving such crimes (1984, p.4). Yet the “experts” claimed that no further research was needed since it was “known” that MOs never change.

The national computerized program, **VICAP**, was to collect and store all aspects of the investigation of similar “pattern murders” nationwide, and to notify (or link up) local law enforcement agencies presently unaware of similar crimes occurring in other jurisdictions. Trust in such an untried system was largely based upon two beliefs about serial murderers: One, that they always cross multiple jurisdictions and often states and, two, “invariably work with the same M.O. – but they move on before the pattern becomes apparent. With VICAP the M.O. pattern would literally leap out of the computer,” true crime author Ann Rule testified (U.S. Congress, 1984, p. 24).

Obviously, MOs do not leap out of computers, and ultimately Keppel (1995) and former FBI agents such as

Douglas (1995) finally acknowledged that MOs do change over time. But all was not lost: With the use of the term “calling cards” or “signatures” these supercops could still offer a service: they could read that portion of the crimes that never changes. That is purportedly the signature – the psychological core of the killer – an idea so vague that few know how to use it. The vagueness is primarily due to a lack of research. It’s an idea attributed to Sherlock Holmes. It would all be funny if such readings were not used in *death penalty cases* where there is no other evidence.

Stay tuned: Serial murderers investigations will be continued in the next article.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- **Part 10. Serial killers: The Crimes**
- **The crimes of serial killers: Link between murderers and victims (Part 11)**
- **The crimes of serial killers: Motives (Part 12)**
- **The crimes of serial killers: Are there victim-types? (Part 14)**
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