

Serial killers' methods of operation, Part 18

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Police cease active search for Moors victims of Ian Brady
Greater Manchester Police via Getty Images

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. Researchers, including profilers at the **FBI**, tend to think they know intuitively what such killers do, and they use case histories as anecdotal evidence of that which they do not know. **VICAP, the FBI's Violent Criminal Apprehension Program**, was funded with the belief that no further research need be done since it was "known" that MOs never change.

Why is this important to you? Suppose someone you knew became the victim of a serial killer. Would you rather the police tried solving the case with nothing but the psychoanalytic (Freudian) interpretations of "motivation" and "meaning" used by FBI profilers or that the police used objective research on the actual methods of serial killers without some expert's interpretations? In the former instance, police rely on outside experts who come in after there are so many cases it is obvious there is a serial killer. In the latter instance, police themselves have a familiarity with **patterns** and can investigate potential series before there are so many cases. The purpose of the present and earlier research was to provide police with knowledge of patterns and tools to use in linking cases. (We will return to the issues of analyzing MOs and "calling cards" in a subsequent article.)

In this study (**Ritter, 1988**), a research instrument was developed on the crimes that included these questions on methods: was there a pattern in the method of killing and/or disposal of bodies? If there was a pattern, what was it? Did it ever vary? These questions were answered for each of the 27 individual subjects, in case narratives, and in a summary table on methods and disposal patterns for all of the cases. Unfortunately it is impossible to reproduce any table in this publication and limitations of space preclude reporting findings on all of the cases. Consequently, this summary will have to suffice.

The great majority of multiple murderers exhibited some patterns in their methods of killing and of disposal, along with some variation in that pattern. That is, both consistency and change were commonly found. There were a few cases on either end of the spectrum in which the pattern did not vary – or there were so many variations that variation was the only pattern. Among those who varied least, a whole sequence of events still took place before, during and after the murders. For example, even for such presumably straightforward cases as the so-called “machete murders” of **Juan Corona**, the machete was generally used twice on the victims, before and after the victims were killed with a knife. Thus, this case demonstrates complexity in the sequence of events as well as in there being more than one weapon commonly used, including one victim who had been shot.

The findings on the *intracase* methods, then, were that multiple murders were highly individualistic, involving a complex sequence of events and often two or more methods of killing and one or more methods of disposal. The evidence also indicates that the latter were often a major source of concern to the killer, who frequently planned in advance and took particular care in this area. Further, the method of disposal formed a pattern, and while there were usually variations, they were less pronounced than for the methods of killing. The methods of disposal have occasionally been the most distinctive feature of a murder series. In the “Hillside Strangler” murders, the disposal **MO** was a key item in determining that the murders were linked.

On the other hand, it was found that often the actual cause of death was neither a critical nor a helpful factor in determining the existence of a pattern or a linkage among the cases. In the **John Collins** case, for instance, the seven Michigan victims died by four different methods: gunshot, strangulation, stabbing and skull fractures. Leaving aside any commonalities among the victims, the only two indications of a pattern were (1) the multiple and diverse types of injuries inflicted beyond those that caused the deaths, and (2) the way the bodies were moved after death, where they were found and the placement of the wearing apparel nearby.

While intracase patterns were discerned for the majority of subjects despite the complex nature of the methods involved, there was little in the way of specific *intercase* patterns that could be said to reflect a so-called “typical” serial killer. Looking at the cases in alphabetical order, the first six – **Bender, Berkowitz, Bianchi, Brady, Bundy** and **Christie** – the following methods of killing were used: strangulation, battering (with a blunt instrument), cuttings and stabbings, use of a sharp, heavy instrument (e.g. hatchet), shooting, poisoning and suffocation. Diversity is indicated in the case of female serial killer Kate Bender: skulls smashed in from behind, throats cut, one suffocation and one mutilation (after death).

Rappaport (“‘Night Stalker’ not a typical serial killer, psychologists say,” 1985, 8B) said that, “Knives, strangulation and other forms of torture are frequently used. . . .” This statement implies that knives and strangulation are forms of torture *per se*, an implication which is not necessarily true. Often the terms “torture” and “sadism” are used interchangeably. This has made the issue of torture into an issue of personality rather than one of methods. Even as an issue of methods, torture is often a matter of interpretation. The only way to

make it more objective is to narrowly define torture as the purposeful infliction of physical and mental pain over an extended period.

Using this definition, torture was found to be infrequent. It is possible, if not probable, that torture has increased with the increase in serial killer movies that portray such killers as sexual perverts. However, the majority of multiple murderers from 1873—1983 differed both quantitatively and qualitatively from such infamous cases of sadistic torture-murders as those committed by Carl Folk or Donald Fearn (Hall, 1974).

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [The serial killers' crimes: Assumptions about Modus Operandi \(Part 17\)](#)
- [The serial killers' crimes: How they obtain their victims, continued \(Part 16\)](#)
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