

Serial killer investigations (Part 21)

Barrie J. Ritter, Ph.D. ©2016



Woman beheaded in N. London
Photo by Oli Scarff/Getty Images

There are two topics of interest in this article on the investigation of serial murder: One is that serial killers have long known how to elude police; specific murderers are cited to provide examples of this knowledge. The second is a major finding of the [Ritter \(1988\)](#) study of multiple murderers and their investigation. Namely, it is more often the multiple murderer who dictates the way an investigation proceeds than the police.

These two issues are rarely discussed in research on serial murder investigations. Why would this be the case, since both findings are significant and both are relatively easy to determine from reading nothing more than the true crime literature on serial murderers? Although it is always hazardous to guess why a given group would think in given ways, it seems reasonable to propose that both findings are part of the pervasive tendency among serial murder researchers to downplay, or even disregard, their subjects' abilities relative to the police or the general public.

The door to a serial murderer investigation does not read: "Be careful! Subject knows more than you do. If caught, you will be so skillfully manipulated you will not recognize the number of lies you have bought into."

John Douglas, former FBI Special Agent, profiler and author of [Mind Hunter](#) (1995, pps. 22, 115-117), should

have presumed such a warning. Instead, he chose to use the killer's words and to pursue the truth by that least objective route, by "stepping into the shoes and mind of the . . . killer." Then he failed to verify what he had been told. All this is obvious when Douglas met Charlie Manson, for he came away thinking that what Manson "preached made perfect sense: pollution is destroying the environment, racial prejudice is ugly and destructive, love is right and hate is wrong" (p. 115). Yet Douglas observes, without comment, the fact that Manson still had the swastika symbol tattooed on his forehead. Testimony and depositions show that Manson thought blacks were inferior to whites and that their only role was to serve white man's needs (**Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974**, pp.225-226). He wanted a race war in which "blackie" would win but be incapable of running the nation so Manson and his group would take over. That is what "helter skelter" meant to the Family. Douglas believes Manson thinks hate is wrong. But Manson is far better known for his view that it is not wrong to kill.

Says **Douglas**, "After listening to Manson, I believe that he did not. . .intend the murders of Sharon Tate and her friends; that, in fact, *he lost control* of the situation and his followers," whom Douglas refers to as "inadequate nobodies" (Douglas, 1995, p. 116). Who but Douglas believes Manson knew nothing of the killings beforehand? Who but Douglas does not know that Manson was the former nobody who was surrounded by college kids — football players, former prom queens, most from good middle-class homes (**Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974, Ritter, 1988**)?

Douglas (1995, pp.116-117) believes Manson would have done an excellent job at the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit. [Manson as an FBI agent?] He concludes his assessment of Manson in this way: If Manson were freed, "knowing what I do about him, I wouldn't expect him to be a serious violent threat. . . . I wouldn't expect him to kill. The biggest threat would be from the misguided losers who would gravitate to him and proclaim him their god and leader." Douglas is no less misguided than the "losers" and "inadequate nobodies" he labels Manson's followers.

. . .

The multiple-victim murderer may dictate the nature of the investigation in several ways. For instance, there have been multiple murderers who have known how to keep their crimes completely unknown to the police. They have been able to do so because of two major factors working in conjunction with each other: (1) there were no bodies to be found, as victims had been buried, burned or destroyed in such a way as to eliminate all, or almost all, traces of the victims. Or victims were deposited nude, without anything with which to identify them, and sometimes far from the crime scene; and (2) the murders remained undetected because the killers took advantage of the chaos of war (e.g. the Frenchmen, Henri Landru, during WWI, and Marcel Petiot, WWII), the lack of communication between police jurisdictions (e.g. most of the Ted Bundy case), or the failure of police in certain areas to take action on the majority of missing persons reports (e.g. the Houston case of Dean Corll).

Here are a few of the examples illustrating that some serial killers have known how to elude police:

England's Ian Brady, for instance, decided to switch from children to teenaged victims precisely because the disappearance of very young victims attracted too much attention. He explained to a potential follower that "Teenagers is [sic] a better bet, they get forgotten an' [sic] labeled as missin' [sic] perrsons [sic]" (**Williams, 1968**, p. 246).

In the Houston case of Dean Corll, the same idea about teenagers being a “good bet” for killing and eluding the police, is evident in Corll’s actions. Here both the victims and killers came, for the most part, from the same small area of Houston known as the Heights. Corll knew he was not putting himself in jeopardy, despite his killing of so many boys for whom missing reports were filed. If he did not know from the beginning, he had to have learned eventually that the police were not inclined to investigate the disappearances of teens who were being rationalized and neutralized as mere runaways and passed off to press and parents as the same (Olsen, 1974).

Later, John Gacy would study the Corll case and commit a similar series of crimes in Chicago. Gacy was a most receptive audience when the Houston police had expressed their attitudes toward the victims in the Corll case. The Houston police had said that the kids were nothing more than male whores who knew what they were getting into (Olsen, 1974). Gacy would subsequently claim that he was ridding the world of trash, of homosexual hustlers. In Chicago, there were missing persons reports in two "Police Areas" naming Gacy as someone acquainted with the victims, but there was never any follow-up or link at that point in the Gacy case (Sullivan with Maiken, 1983).

The Ritter (1988) study reported that, in 16 out of 27 cases (or almost 60 percent), the police either did not know that any murders had been committed or were not aware that crimes they considered isolated were actually linked. It was found that local police departments, almost without exception, took the attitude that murders were never part of a series, unless this had somehow been proven to be the case. It was also found that the impetus for investigating the murders as a series was usually the behavior of the murderer: specifically, the murderer increased the frequency and brutality of their crimes so that police (and press) would have to take notice.

This is the first of a two-part article; the second part is also published today and will continue from here.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [Serial killers – The investigation \(Part 20 of Ritter study\)](#)
- [Serial killers – The investigation \(Part 19 of Ritter study\)](#)
- [Serial killers’ methods of operation, Part 18](#)
- [Increasing frequency and brutality in a series of murders](#)
- [The dynamics of sequential progression in serial murders](#)



Barrie Ritter

Crime & Justice Examiner