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## **A Family-systems analysis of serial murder in South Africa**

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## **A FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING SERIAL MURDER IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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This paper explores the phenomenon of serial murder from a systems theory perspective. Its purpose is to develop an understanding of serial murder in a South African context from a family systems approach. Utilizing a family systems theoretical framework and the genogram method, information about the family systems of individuals who committed serial murder was analyzed via a content analysis. The investigation focused mainly on emotional processes, multigenerational and relationship patterns in family systems.

Information was gathered from numerous sources and included interviews conducted inter alia with individuals currently incarcerated for serial murder and their family members, and with professionals involved with such individuals; as well as information obtained from clinical observations and archival data. The results of the content analysis demonstrated

considerable similarities but also differences in the organization and functioning of the family systems of individuals who committed serial murder. Importantly, the analysis shed novel theoretical light on the role of serial murder within family systems and challenged established dominant theoretical perspectives on serial murder that have emphasized linear, causal and/or individual-focused explanations.

This paper opens up considerable opportunities for further exploration of the phenomenon from a systemic perspective, specifically with the focus on the meaning of serial murder in relatively smaller (e.g., parent-child or peer relationships) or larger (e.g., political, cultural and societal) systems. It also provides opportunities for alternative vistas from which the phenomenon of serial murder can be viewed in terms of theoretical, definitional, typological, investigative and correctional approaches.

There was little attention to serial murder in South Africa prior to the early 1990's. This changed after cases of serial murder started to occur with increasing frequency from approximately the mid-nineties (Hodgskiss, 2003; Labuschagne, 2001; Pistorius, 1996).

The sudden increase in noted serial murder cases in South Africa post-1994 has been explained by Labuschagne (2001) and Gorby (2000) on account of the less extensive infrastructure, less robust economy, and rapid urbanization and crowding, that characterize developing societies and which makes them more vulnerable to serial murder. Additionally, improved policing strategies with regards to linking crimes, better communication between different police agencies, improved technology and less distraction by political agendas related to Apartheid, made identification of serial murder cases in South Africa easier (Labuschagne, 2003)

The question remains : Why is there a crime such as serial murder? And why has South Africa shown such a proliferation of cases in the last 15 years?

Theoretically, this question has been argued from various points of view in terms of the causes of serial murder in terms of psychodynamic theory, for example (Jenkins, 1994; Meloy, 1988; Norris, 1988); geographical profiling techniques (Canter, 1994, 2000; Rossmo, 1995, 1997); and typologies (Holmes, 1990; Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Ressler, 1985; Ressler, Burgess & Douglas, 1988).

None have attempted to understand serial murder from a systemic perspective, specifically with respect to the family system of each individual.

Family plays a central role in most of South Africa's diverse cultures (Amoateng, 1997). Across the majority of cultures that make up South Africa's ethnic demographic, the family system is an important source of support (financial, emotional or practical) for individual members. The family system also provides an important source for cultural and ethnic identity (Moller, 1998).

The 'dysfunctional' family type has served as a means of attributing responsibility for the serial murder behaviour to experiences of abuse (sexual, physical or emotional) in the family settings of the individuals concerned. No prior study has attempted to directly interview members of the families of individuals who commit serial murder to elicit their interpretation of this behaviour and in order to see the role of serial murder within such a system.

Within a systemic framework, the family may also be defined as consisting of a number of interrelated members, whose behaviour (together with emotions, actions, thoughts, and beliefs) mutually influences each member in a way that is unique to that system.

The current study focused on a systemic theoretical paradigm, focusing specifically on family systems theory in order to investigate serial murder.

- Systemic theory provides an alternative to established linear ways of conceptualizing pathology by proposing a more circular approach to causality,
- It avoids a narrow focus on symptomatic or problem behaviour (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2005).
- Problems are viewed as interactional and situational.
- It has not always been productive to blame specific family members (such as parents) for the occurrence of serial murder behaviour in another member.

In order to achieve the above ends of the study, the following research questions were addressed, namely:

- ‘How does the family system of a person who commits serial murder operate?’  
That is, what is the family structure, who are the people in the family system and how do they preserve the family system.
- ‘What are the patterns or processes across the family systems of persons who commit serial murder and are these similar in various cases of families of persons who committed serial murder?’ and
- ‘Are there any differences in the patterns or processes across the family systems of persons who commit serial murder?’

The following definition of serial murder was adopted for the current study, namely as multiple murders committed over a period of time by one or more individuals.

A family in this study was defined as:

- the group of individuals or individual, biologically related or otherwise, with whom one is involved in intimate, interactional relationship/s over time; and
- whom one subjectively recognizes as playing a significant role in this regard.

The systemic factors of focus in the study were:

- emotional processes (Bowen, 1978);
- multigenerational patterns of structure and function (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974); and
- patterns of relationship (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974; Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967).

### Methodology

This study adopted an ecosystemic cybernetic epistemological viewpoint (Bateson, 1979). The research design was exploratory and qualitative in nature.

### Sampling

The sampling strategy for this study involved a non-probability purposive sampling strategy.

The sample used for the current study consisted of five individuals who met the criteria for having committed serial murder and are currently incarcerated in prisons in South Africa. All individuals other than Mr W gave permission for their family members to be interviewed as well.

Table 8.1

*Sample description*

	Mr V	Mr W	Mr X	Mr Y	Mr Z
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Racial/ethnic background	Black	Black	White	White	White
Age (at time of research)	Late thirties	Early forties	Early forties	Early forties	Early forties
Occupational history	Unemployed	Miner	Policeman	Security officer, bouncer	Credit controller
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	Heterosexual	Heterosexual	Homosexual	Homosexual
Sentence	Life imprisonment	Life imprisonment	Death penalty (converted to life imprisonment)	Death penalty (converted to life imprisonment)	Life imprisonment
Victims	Black females – all ages	Black females in their twenties	Females – various ages and all races	White males, predominantly homosexual	Males – all races, predominantly homosexual
Nature of crimes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Worked alone</li> <li>Rape and murder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Worked alone</li> <li>Rape and murder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Worked alone</li> <li>Rape and murder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Worked with partner</li> <li>Murder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Worked with partner</li> <li>Murder</li> </ul>
Education	Did not complete high school	Did not complete high school	Completed high school	Completed high school	Completed high school
Family characteristics					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple caregivers in extended family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple caregivers within nuclear family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Traditionally nuclear</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Single parent household; later with step-father</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Traditionally nuclear</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Primary relationship type</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Triadic around various caregivers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fused dyadic with maternal aunt (detached from nuclear members)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Triadic, with mother and father</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fused, dyadic with mother</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Triadic, with mother, older brother and father</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sibling position</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Second born</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Second born</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Only child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two older</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youngest child</li> </ul>

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half siblings

but

functional

only child

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One case will be the focus of today's presentation with links and comparisons made across the sample used.

- Mr X is a White, Afrikaans-speaking South African male. He was convicted for the murder of five women as well as the seven counts of rape. His victims were of mixed racial background and ages. His crimes took place over a two year period.
- For Mr X data collected included clinical observations of Mr X, his mother and father; a series of five interviews of approximately two hours each, conducted with Mr X at his place of imprisonment; one interview of two and a half hours with Mr X's family at their place of residence; a genogram; archival data in the form of one interview of approximately one hour with the prison psychologist at Mr X's place of imprisonment; and one interview of approximately 45 minutes with the psychiatrist responsible for the original forensic assessment of Mr X at the time of his trial at her place of work.

## Results

- **Themes relating to emotional processes.**

- o **Low levels of differentiation in the nuclear family system (Theme one).**

The X nuclear family system demonstrates a considerably low level of differentiation, which means that members were quite enmeshed and struggled to individuate from one another.

Low levels of differentiation generally imply an avoidance of conflict due to the individuation that such interactions may bring about. A consequence of the avoidance of open conflict is a build up of anxiety/tension in the system.

- o **Fears of loss of identity due to extremely fused relationships (Theme two).**

Heightened enmeshment between members of the system is accompanied by an increase in fears of annihilation in individual members as opportunities for self-expression are foreclosed by an emphasis on fusion.

The intense fusion that operated within the system meant that the members would have been considerably isolated from individuals outside. This can be seen in Mr X's emotional distance from persons outside of the family system. Mother X stated that

he [Mr X] didn't have one specific friend, he was an introvert...like his father...he was very quiet, didn't talk much...he read and he loved animals a lot...he didn't have any specific hobbies that I can remember...like the movies.

Mr X may have staged attempts, at various points in his life, to differentiate himself from the family system, and thereby prove that his self had not been completely annihilated through fusion with his mother or the family system.

However, it was via his criminal behaviour (such as the petty theft and housebreaking of his early youth and later, the murders and rapes) that he appears to have gained the greatest self-confirmation as well as outlet for the high levels of anxiety/tension he would have experienced due to low levels of differentiation.

Mr X stated that

“I started stealing when I was in about standard five [grade 7], because I felt that the circumstances at home were too strict and I wanted to escape from the strictness, and the only way was to escape from the house for a bit longer...I used the money that I stole to play pinball and *pacman* at the corner *kafee* [convenience store] when they sent me to buy bread – that way I could stay away from the house.”

Another example, Mr Y

“in all my relationships, I don’t expect that much from the partner...except the honesty and loyalty...and when I choose to, I can let him go...like with one of my relationships in prison, after I allowed him to leave me, I felt terrible afterwards, for two days I couldn’t eat...they were worried about me in the section there...they came at night, made sure I was alive, I didn’t hang myself...”

- o **Emotional schisms (theme three).**

Emotional schisms between family members occurred as:

- a result of isolation of members excluded from fused relationships between other members; and
- as a conflict and anxiety management strategy.

The emotional intensity inherent in fused relationships within the system, together with generally high levels of anxiety in the system, meant that little emotional resources remained for interactions with individuals outside of the system. As a result, members could and had to detach emotionally from individuals outside of the system in order to conserve emotional resources for negotiating relationships within the system. However, this is paradoxical and self-defeating in that such a strategy, whilst preserving homeostasis within the system, forecloses avenues via which some of the emotional intensity within the system can be dissipated constructively.

As discussed previously, this may have impacted upon Mr X's attitude towards women and his criminal behaviour. As much as he was a target for projection of surplus anxiety in the nuclear family system, he lacked external relationships in which he could work through some of this anxiety, or a level of differentiation which would have enabled him to work through this anxiety, due to his emotional isolation from the outside world and fusion with the nuclear family system. Consequently, the women that he selected as victims may have functioned as a means by which to release this anxiety/tension. In this way, this pattern may have served as a concrete way of maintaining the system by replacing missing role players eg. Friendships, peers, intimate relationships.

Mr X stated that “I didn’t feel physically different on the days that I committed the murders...I just felt an urge to go out, maybe it was for the adrenalin rush...and the sense of accomplishment you felt afterwards.”

Another example, Mr Y – “I’m used to being a loner...that’s why I can concentrate only all my energies and emotions on one person...I can’t share it among several people – I find that extremely difficult, for the simple fact that it’s difficult to actually- say you’ve got four people, four friends, how are you going to split up the amount of time that you have to spend with them? How are you going to be fair about who gets what? You know, dishing out your friendship to four people...”

Mr Z – “it was lovely, there was no- it was great, it felt like, you know, the feeling of actually having someone that needs you, you understand...being alone is I think- because you actually become blasé about having these feelings so you cut your own feelings down so now you meet someone that you actually fall in love with that person and then all those feelings that have always been packed away surface...and then...they are much more powerful...I think that’s my biggest problem...controlling emotions.”

- o **High anxiety amongst members involved in fused relationships (theme four).**

As discussed previously, high levels of anxiety/tension manifest in fused relationships within the system due to a lack of outlets through which this can be expressed or released out of the system. This is exacerbated when the nuclear family system is overburdened by inherited unmodified anxiety through multigenerational tiers.

Mr X's antisocial and criminal behavior represented an extreme manner in which an overburdened nuclear family system attempted to manage extremely high levels of anxiety in the system, and thereby maintain homeostasis.

Due to the effectiveness of this strategy, the system would have been invested in maintaining Mr X's 'symptom'. For example, when Mr X was caught housebreaking when he was in Standard five [grade seven], he received a hiding and the incident was forgotten. Additionally, this event resulted in further positive feedback in the sense that his mother became less punitive towards him afterwards. Mr X stated that

“in the beginning, you're a bit scared that you'll be caught- I was caught once [housebreaking when he was in standard five] but it just made me more careful...when I was caught, I got the hiding of my life but it didn't solve what I was doing...the hiding...or threats to take me to the police...it didn't help to solve the problem, it just made me more careful because they didn't focus on the problem or try to get me help...”

Mr X stated that

“it was a while after that [getting a hiding] that I started stealing again...I knew what I was doing was wrong but it felt as if I could do nothing about it, or didn't want to do anything to stop it because I benefited from it...I could get money and spend it on what I wanted...and I kept on doing it until it got bigger and bigger...my mind got corrupt and you do bigger crime...”

- **Themes relating to multigenerational patterns.**

- o **Weak generational boundaries and poorly defined subsystems (theme five).**

The X family system appears to have been characterized by poorly defined parental, and grandparental boundaries. Despite the diffuse nature of boundaries of subsystems within the X family system, the system itself appears to have had very rigid boundaries with regard to external systems or subsystems.

The family systems of all five individuals interviewed also tend to demonstrate a trend of violence and poor ability to manage violence across generations. For example, with Mr Y, his biological father bludgeoned his employer to death when he could not resolve a pay dispute with him.

Mr Y stated that “it [father Y’s crime] was in a fit of anger. He had this argument with the employer- the guy owed him money for his pay and they had words and my father apparently became angry and hit the guy with a tyre iron, killed him...” Following the brutal stabbing of a hiker during which time he cut off his victim’s ear and ate it, Mr Y stated:

“I became extremely aggressive, you know, because I was angry with myself...I thought to myself, this is completely unnecessary...it’s messy, it’s overkill.”

The implications of this are that when these family systems are faced with perceived threats to fused dyadic relationships, fears of loss or change are defended against with anger and aggression or violence as a means to maintain the system. For both Mr X and Mr Y, conflict or anger was avoided within the nuclear system and relationships with individuals outside of the system used as outlets for rising levels of aggression.

All subjects had a precipitating systemic crisis or loss that preceded the onset of the murders. For example, Mr X's maternal grandfather, who was a significant member of the extended family system, passed away a year before Mr X committed his first murder. Mr Y's mother passed away 18 months before he committed his first murder.

- **Themes relating to relationship patterns.**

Given the imminent threats of total fusion and isolation posed by the above processes that were present in the family system, triangulation is a necessary means to prevent system collapse. In order to maintain stability, Mr X frequently took the role of identified patient or 'scapegoat' in the nuclear family system in order to cement the relationship between father X and mother X (thereby preventing the collapse of the system and transgression of family rules that strongly prohibited divorce).

Triangulation serves the additional purpose of validating Mr X's membership within the system. The quotes below demonstrate how he exonerates mother X and his family from any blame for his actions, and positions this indirectly on himself. Mr X stated that "...my mother changed and the strictness wasn't there any more. She allowed me to decide how to study and do my schoolwork and if I needed help I could go to her...so it wasn't necessary for me to steal anymore but it became a habit." This also indicates that his criminal behavior became a necessary aspect of the family system due to its contribution towards maintaining homeostasis. Similarly, Mr Z stated that "[my family]

knew nothing about it [the crimes] and they took it very badly...and to allow your parents to go through that process is not nice.”

For Mr X, this intermediary role as scapegoat continued after his imprisonment, enabling his father and mother to continue avoiding conflict within their own relationship by focusing on Mr X. Mother X stated that

“I don’t get a chance to speak to him [Mr X] in private when we visit him [in the prison] and I don’t handle that very well I have a good husband though who takes me for coffee after we’ve finished visiting him [Mr X] because it really upsets one- you don’t understand why he did it.”

- o **Power and interactional patterns (theme seven).**

Mr X occupied a submissive position in all of his relationships within the family system.. Given that he had no close relationships with anyone outside of the family system, he may have struggled to find legitimate alternative avenues through which to achieve some sense of independent self, and allay the anxiety surrounding self-annihilation. When he discovered that his antisocial behaviour provided a suitable vehicle with which to achieve a sense of independence it allowed him to be in a dominant or superior position without endangering his family system.

“you could say that I led two lives, what people saw was a very sweet little boy and what came out was the monster and I take it as part of the ugly person and it

doesn't bother me because it's in the past now...and it wasn't just my parents who were surprised [at finding out about the 'second Mr X'], there were many other people who were shocked, who knew me..."

Similarly with the other individuals involved, their serial murder behavior served a similar purpose, namely to provide an opportunity for self assertion. Mr Y described the circumstances surrounding the third murder – "I decided to go to the toilet, I go to the toilet, come back, there this guy's got my co-accused there, now he's nice and pissed, you see and he's slobbering all over my co-accused and that makes me explode...and I attacked the guy, I immediately decided now I'm going to rob him and the whole trip."

Mr Z describes how during his military service he found other ways in which he could reassert himself in a dominant position and feel superior or powerful in some way.

"18 months on the border- now there actually I should've known that something was wrong because something unusual started happening there...there was a bushman training camp...one sergeant said that if you see any dogs chasing horses...I must shoot the dog, because the horses are very important...and this somehow stuck in my head and every dog that I saw from then on, I shot..."

Interestingly, with Mr W, this need to establish dominance was not only apparent in his sadistic murder but also extended to his relationship with the researcher where permission to contact family members was denied.

### Conclusion

The systemic theoretical viewpoint raises the question of whether serial murder should be viewed as an outcome of a certain personality type, or intrapsychic, individual characteristics of the perpetrators concerned.

To date, serial murder continues to evade comprehension and comprehensive explanation. It may be the case that these traditional theoretical approaches have focused on the wrong aspects of the phenomenon, or attempted to locate causality too narrowly.

This study allows further insight in the systemic dynamics and quality of interactions within a family that may contribute towards serial murder.

A systemic analysis allows for the elucidation of the family system's management of role definition, boundaries, expulsion of anxiety and independence as well as facilitation of emotional processes such as anger, aggression and violence.

In a country such as South Africa, that has undergone considerable changes in the societal supra-system over the last 15 years, and where the emergence of serial murder appears to be related to such changes, future research could examine the possible impact of the societal system on family systems and the interaction between the two systems.

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