Serial Killers: Organization or Disorganization Changes Over Time

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Abstract

Serial killers are people who killed more than three people during three or more instances. Recent studies of serial killers categories have explored the classifications of organized and disorganized crime scenes based on the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) classifications. We hypothesize that over time serial killers would change their crime scene characteristics during their killing spree. The crime scenes of twenty-two serial killers were examined based on their organization in them. These data were imputed to give a mean score of 1.97 for the serial killers who become more organized and -0.71 for the ones who became more disorganized. It is concluded that there was a change in the organizational characteristics over the killing sprees.

*Keywords:* serial killers, crime, murder
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The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) adopted a dichotomous classification of serial killers into the categories of either organized non-social or disorganized asocial (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005). There are, however, different views concerning what defines a serial killer. Canter and Wentink (2004) have defined a serial killer as an individual who has murdered three or more people over a period of more than a month with a ‘cooling off’ period between murders. For the FBI (2005) the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s) in separate events works. The FBI offender profiling strategy is simple; it is based on the inclusion of a series of different crime scene, victim and personal traits of the offender that help to build a comprehensive profile of the murderer. Particular crime scene, victim and personal traits according to the FBI, appear to co-exist together, under either the organized or disorganized categories. For instance, organized serial killers plan the offense meticulously to the extent where the crime scene appears to be controlled so that there is very little if any incriminating evidence that police can use to capture them. The opposite is true of disorganized serial killers where the crime is spontaneous and the crime scene appears chaotic and filled with incriminating evidence.

There is continuing debate over criminal profiling and if there are different types of serial killers. To test this Canter and Wentick (2004) looked at the exclusivity of crime scene behaviors that were classified as organized or disorganized. They were particularly interested in finding empirical evidence of crime scene behaviors conclusively falling into the typology Holmes and Holmes had come up with. This was done by testing the co-occurrence of specific characteristics across multiple serial killers. Canter and Wentick (2004) used a visual representation of the patterns of co-occurrence by using a multidimensional scale (MDS). The researchers used
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information on crime scenes from 100 United States serial killings. The results found there was high frequency of the characteristics from the power/control type of Holmes and Holmes’ typology.

Canter and Wenink (2004) found the mission killing type proved extremely difficult to relate to specific characteristics at the crime scenes except the weapon used to kill the victim. It was also found that it was difficult to distinguish this type of killing from the visionary type of killing. The three other types of killing visionary, lust and thrill were found to have limited support from the MDS analysis. The lack of support was assumed to be from the nature of the interactions with the victims instead of the interpretations of the motivations of the killers. The visionary killing is best distinguished in terms of the ransacking of the victim’s residence and the scattering of the victim’s clothing. The lust killings features formed a distinct region in the smallest space analysis (SSA) were dominated by mutilations to the victim’s body. For the thrill killings it was the restraints under which the victim was put that formed a distinct region.

Taylor, Lambeth, Green, Bone, and Chillane (2012) added to the research by examining the FBI’s organized and disorganized typologies of serial killers. The researchers looked at serial killers crime scenes and created a table documenting which criterion was found at each crime scene. In the study it was found that the groups were not entirely consistent with the criteria for organized and disorganized typologies the FBI used. Although there were many sets of criteria that fit within specific clusters of the typologies there were many outlying items found. This could be related to the fact that the researchers found both organized elements and disorganized elements in each of the crime scenes they studied for the research.

Taylor et at. (2012) concluded that most serial killings have an organized element for a murder to be successfully executed. This offers an explanation for the presence of organized
crime scene criteria among disorganized crime scene criteria. They found that it could be possible that different serial murders could be classified according to disorganized crime scene criteria that commonly group together.

The FBI (2005) held a multidisciplinary symposium to have a common understanding of what makes a serial killer and the different types. They discovered that it is impossible to completely categorize and understand the motives of serial killers. The FBI defined three categories of killers based on the way they carry out each murder. The first category is the medical killer, this is the rarest. This type of killer feels they have the perfect cover because it is very common for people in a hospital or other medical facility to pass away. They are usually highly intelligent and understand how to take a life without it looking like a murder. As long as it appears that a victim died a natural death, there will be no reason for anyone to suspect foul play and search for the guilty party.

The next two categories discovered were the main focus of the FBI (2005) symposium. The first is the organized killer who is the most difficult to identify and arrest. They are usually highly intelligent and well organized to the point of being meticulous. Every detail of the crime is planned out well in advance, and the killer takes every precaution to make sure they leave no evidence behind to link them to a murder. It is not uncommon for this type of serial killer to watch potential victims for several days in order to find someone they consider to be a good target. Once they choose the person, the killer will pick them up, often through some sort of trick that is designed to gain their sympathy, and take them to another location to commit the crime. Once the person has been killed, the perpetrator will usually take precautions to ensure the body is not found. A criminal like this usually takes great pride in what they consider to be their "work" and have a tendency to pay close attention to news stories about their crimes. One of
Their motivating factors may be just to attempt to stump the law enforcement officers who are trying to solve their crime.

The final category the FBI (2005) discovered was the disorganized killer who rarely plans out their kills. Most often, the people they kill just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. This type of serial killer appears to strike at random whenever an opportunity arises. They take no steps to cover up any signs of their crime, and tend to move to different towns or even states regularly to avoid being captured. Disorganized killers usually have low IQ's and are extremely antisocial. They rarely have close friends or family, and do not like to stay in one place for too long. These killers are prone to have no recollection of their criminal behavior, or to confessing that they were motivated by voices in their heads or some other imaginary source.

The research all revolves around the organized and disorganized crimes scenes and the different typologies for serial killers. Previous research examines if there is a way to categorize the killers into specific categories that describe the type of killing they carry out. It was discovered that there are some connections between the way the killings are committed and the categories already studied. However, there are many places in the typologies where there is no strong connection between crime scenes and typologies. Currently, there is a lack of research regarding how serial killers change over time and if their style of killing changes. The hypothesis for this study is that over time serial killers will change their characteristics throughout their killing spree.
Method

Participants

The participants were twenty-two serial killers who had been arrested and convicted of three or more homicides committed on different days. The seventeenth serial killer was eliminated from the data because there was a lack of crime scenes compared to the rest of the serial killers.

Materials

The information about the crime scenes came from a variety of sources (i.e. books, news reports, and court documents). This information came from two books, *Serial Killers* (Innes, 2006) and *The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers* (Newton, 2006), and the Serial Killer Database created by Florida Gulf Coast University.

Procedure

The crimes of each serial killer were broken down based on each crime scene. This was done by looking through above materials and creating a table based on organizational traits of each crime scene.

Data preparation

We used event sampling, examining each individual crime scene. Each crime scene was coded based on eighteen criteria of organizational traits, *restraints used, victim known, physical evidence, weapon planned, removal of body parts, torture, trophy taken, ritual aspect, sexualized body position, murder indoors, arson killer mobile/transit, body transported, staging, body disposal, process focused, poisoned, victim survived*. The crime scenes of each serial killer were
score based on disorganization characteristics, 1 if the characteristic is present, 0 if the characteristic is not present. This was done for all twenty-two serial killers and each of their crime scenes. The eighteen organizational crime scene characteristics were put into an excel chart.

After coding all of the variables mentioned above, we then prepared these data for analysis. Of the eighteen variables two were reverse coded, physical evidence and victim survived.

Results

All of the composite scores of every crime scene from each serial killer were converted into a z-score by using the mean and standard deviation composite scores as the population parameter. The standardized scores were used to find the difference of organization from the first crime scene to determine the mean change scores. The mean change scores showed a change in the organization of crime scenes over the killing spree for each serial killer. The mean for the serial killers who became more organized was $M=1.97$ (SD=1.83). For the group of serial killers who became more disorganized throughout their killing spree the mean was $M=-0.71$ (SD=0.29). Each of these showed a change in organization over the time of the killing spree for each serial killer, although the latter changed much less. The serial killer who showed the more organization change over time is shown in figure 1. In figure 2 the serial killer who became the most disorganized is shown.

Discussion

This study examined if there was a change in organization/disorganization in serial killers’ crime sprees. The researcher predicted that there was a noticeable change in either the
more organized or more disorganized direction for each serial killer. The results indicated that there was a change in direction for each of the serial killers. The killers who became more organized throughout their killing spree seemed to change by a factor of two. This means that they changed the way they killed by two of the characteristics toward the more organized end of the spectrum. The killers who had characteristics of being more disorganized as their killing spree continued changed by a factor of one. Throughout their killing spree they tended to only change one of their organizational characteristic toward the disorganization end of the spectrum.

There are several limitations in this research. This study was primarily limited by its small sample size. The sample size could have been expanded by including a larger number of serial killers across the world and being limited to the United States. Another limitation for this study was the lack of information publically available about each crime scene and case for the serial killers. There were very few cases where the court transcripts are available or the serial killer details the events of each case.

The information gather from this study can help homicide investigators to determine what kind of serial killer they are tracking. For instance, serial killers who are more organized tend to be more meticulously at their crime scenes and leave very little incriminating evidence for police to use when tracking them. On the other hand, serial killers who are more disorganized kill more spontaneously and tend to leave the crime scene with incriminating evidence.

Examining if there was a change in organization over the killing spree is only the starting point for research on this topic. Future research on the topic could look at what causes the changes. This could include examining which serial killers tended to become more organized throughout their killing spree and what was happening around them during this time. Another
possible future research topic could be to examine how the mobility of the serial killer affected the organization of their killing sprees.
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Figure 1: Serial killer who showed the most change towards organization over the killing spree.
Figure 2: Serial killer who showed the most change towards disorganization over the killing spree.