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Introduction to this Issue: Serial and Mass Homicide

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The functional difference between mass and serial homicide is, at a glance, quite obvious. Mass homicide is typically defined as the intentional killing of multiple individuals, usually at least three, during the course of one criminal event. If two or more locations are involved, the killing is continuous. Serial homicide, on the other hand, is defined by the intentional killing of individuals in a series, with a latency, or "cooling off" period, in between the killings. The number of killings necessary to define a serial homicide varies among researchers and law enforcement personnel, but logically one would assume that a series represents at least two separate events that delineates a pattern of activity.

Such descriptive differences between mass and serial homicide would suggest to some that the perpetrators of such acts would also be quite different. Others might pause and wonder whether such is the case. In this special issue of *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, we assemble a collection of articles that advance contemporary understanding of both serial and mass homicide, and begin to discern the common threads, and striking differences among those who engage in these high intensity but very low frequency forms of homicide.

What are the commonalities among serial and mass murderers? Research suggests that the victim pools of both groups are overrepresented by strangers, even though the victims of most homicides are friends, acquaintances, or family members of the perpetrators. The violence is also *predatory*—planned, purposeful, and not impulsive—in striking contrast to the *affective* mode of most homicides, which are typically characterized by a highly emotionally charged reaction to a perceived threat. Although there will always be great variation in the psychopathology and personality of individuals who carry out serial and mass homicides, there do appear to be some shared characteristics: both groups have the entitlement, callousness, and instinctual aggressiveness to commit such crimes. Entitlement, which may be an aspect of pathological narcissism, gives them the right to kill. Callousness, which may be an aspect of psychopathy, gives them the detachment to kill. And instinctual aggressiveness, which may be constitutional and/or primed by the emotional hurts and wounds of their life experiences, gives them the desire and energy to kill.

Differences between serial and mass murders, however, abound. Most serial murderers will kill in a very personal manner, utilizing instruments that suggest a taste for physical intimacy with the dying victim. Most mass murderers use a firearm, which increases both their emotional distance and killing efficiency. The victims of serial murderers are most often female, and sexual arousal, often suggestive of sexual sadism, is usually present during the act. Mass murder is not

explicitly sexual, although one could infer the presence of sadism in the pleasure of omnipotence as the perpetrator dominates his victims while he kills. Severe mental disorders are also more evident among mass rather than serial murderers, with a psychotic disorder at the time of the crime more likely than not in the former group. Serial murderers are distinguished by the general absence of a severe mental disorder and the presence of higher degrees of psychopathy. The conscious fantasy of both groups appears to motivate their behavior, and there is even some anecdotal evidence that both mass and serial murdering fantasies may be contemplated by individuals in both groups before their killing begins (A. Hempel, personal communication, March, 2004). Although no research as yet has identified *specific or sensitive* structural or functional anomalies in the brains of either serial or mass murderers, this avenue of exploration may eventually prove fruitful. Functional neuroimaging, such as fMRI or PET, may hold the most promise for the testing of biological hypotheses, but with a cautionary note: The biology of human behavior is always mediated by social and psychological variables. For example, the biological impulsivity of an individual serial murderer, strongly inferred by damage to his prefrontal cortex, would not explain his choice of victim pool or the object specificity of his chosen target.

The articles in this special issue, in addition to their range of content, also exemplify in a measured and keenly analytic way the path and evolution of scientific investigation. Initially, observations are made in the natural environment concerning something of interest to a scientist, and the singular phenomenon or case is documented. Other scientists are intrigued by the observed anomaly in nature, or in our case an abnormal human behavior, and additional individual case studies are published. Then clusters of cases are published with an attempt to describe similarities among individuals, a shift from idiographic to nomothetic design. Samples of nonrandomly gathered cases are then subsequently compared with other samples of cases—such as serial homicide and homicide in general—to measure the presence or absence of differences. Finally, quasi-experimental and experimental designs are employed to control as many variables as possible in the subjects of interest as scientific attempts are made to test and potentially build upon the construct validity of previous findings. The contemporary study of human behavior needs to continue to recognize the dynamic value of both idiographic and nomothetic research, and the importance of this evolutionary path, as we have attempted to do in our selection of articles for this special issue.

Although the frequencies of serial and mass homicide have historically waxed and waned over the past centuries, their overdetermined, complex, and often inexplicable nature remains a source of steady fascination and fear for the public. We hope that this collection of scholarly articles will further contribute to the scientific understanding of these violent aberrations of human behavior. •

