

Phenomenology and Serial Murder

Asking Different Questions

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This article discusses the study of motives of serial murderers using the method of empirical phenomenology. Departing from a traditional clinical approach in terms of diagnostic categorizations of serial killers and from a conventional descriptive study in which generic aspects of serial murder such as modus operandi are described and interpreted, a qualitative approach is presented as essential to a more comprehensive understanding of the perpetrators of serial murder. Specifically, learning about murderers' personal constructions of meaning in their own lives positions us to be able to identify the motivations underlying their repeated acts of killing. Results obtained using this approach raise concerns regarding the validity of conclusions drawn from studies that rely upon more traditional methods of inquiry into motive. Researchers who apply conventional methods are cautioned regarding implied meanings of their data.

After a little while I just couldn't tell whether she was stabbed or I was ripping her coat. I wasn't going to rape her or take her money. I was only going to kill her. That's all."

—"Son of Sam" killer, David Berkowitz¹

This is from the man who went on to kill six people and wound seven others with his .44 caliber Bulldog handgun.

Your friend got smart with me. . . . But I never hit her. I killed her but I didn't hit her.

—the "Co-Ed Killer," Edmund Emil Kemper III²

Edmund Kemper—intellectually brilliant, articulate, and lucid—shot his grandparents when he was 15 years old and then killed and mutilated eight women in California between May 7, 1972, and April 21, 1973. One of these victims was his mother. Some were cannibalized. With most, he performed sex acts with



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various parts of the corpses. What are we to make of this if, indeed, it can be understood at all? How might we understand the fact that one human being kills another not as an act of apparent necessity but as a crime? There are a variety of circumstances that tend to make murder an “understandable” act with its motive comprehensible—most commonly, rage, greed, or passion. With serial murder, however, where a number of people are killed over time, the outwardly unprovoked attacks—often accompanied by torture and/or mutilation of victims before, during, and after the actual killing—renders them senseless. This may be because such atrocities seem incomprehensible to those who do not engage in them. But are they?

There are, undoubtedly, would-be serial killers that become aroused at the thought of killing others in particular and perhaps elaborate ways. But for these individuals there is a line, however thin, that they take care not to cross. They experience the urge but guard against releasing it. There are others for whom the margin of safety is more tenuous. Others allow themselves to test the waters to varying degrees—to engage in the fantasy of murder and even act out selected scenes with unknowing partners. Their partners rarely hold the entire script but remain safe because of the self-imposed constraints of the actor. Perhaps most unsettling is the thought that many of us have harbored undisclosed or subconscious leanings toward murder. Is it essentially a matter of degree that separates us from those who kill? From those who repeatedly kill? Is there something about the serial killer that makes him³ categorically different from us?

The literature on serial murder is largely the product of broad-based descriptive study of large numbers of cases of serial killers or the result of individual case studies. We have learned much useful information from, for example, the accounts of law enforcement agents (in the form of memoirs, e.g., Douglas & Olshaker, 1999; Ressler & Shachtman, 1997; Vorpapel, 1998), forensic psychiatrists and psychologists (in terms of their case experiences, e.g., Kirwin, 1997; Lewis, 1998), and other social scientists (e.g., Jenkins, 1994; Leyton, 2000). Specific details about how information is collected, assessments of reliability of sources, and the like are, however, frequently lacking in published sources. It is the purpose of this article to draw attention to the need for more systematic rigor in our approach to the study of

serial killers. The low base rate of the phenomenon of serial murder renders this a difficult demand but, at the same time, because of it, a demand that is all the more compelling.

To understand serial murder, we must go beyond mere description of the offenders, their crimes, and their victims. Certainly, we need to acquaint ourselves with observable parameters of serial murder: who the perpetrators are (e.g., by gender, race, age, social class) as well as how and who they kill. Knowledge of these variables delimits the phenomenon. These observations do not in themselves, however, translate to an understanding of serial murder. In fact, in terms of some critical aspects of the phenomenon, they may mislead.

Immediately following his conviction for the series of eight murders, Edmund Kemper granted an exclusive interview with a veteran crime reporter. In the midst of her questions about his crimes and his childhood, he challenged her for not asking the questions he had thought would be asked of him: "What is it like to have sex with a dead body? . . . What does it feel like to sit on your living room couch and look over and see two decapitated girls' heads on the arms of the couch?" Not waiting for a response from her, he answers his own question: "The first time, it makes you sick to your stomach."⁴ Kemper is telling us that we are not asking all of the right questions. And he is right.

STUDYING SERIAL MURDER: THE NEED FOR ANOTHER APPROACH

How we look at the problem of serial murder will determine what we find. The conscience of humanity demands that the taking of one human life by another be explained. Human beings are distinguished from other life forms in terms of their ability to develop culture. Implicit in this notion is our sociability. Human beings have, at once, the capacity to behave in prosocial and anti-social ways—two dimensions that are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it may be the result of protective or humanitarian motives that prompt one individual to kill another. The act of taking another's life may thus be understandable—and acceptable—in terms of its apparent utility.

Killing does not always involve criminal, violent, aggressive, or intentional acts. Killing someone in self-defense or in the context of war are examples of comprehensible killing. There are, however, other kinds of killing for which no such understanding and acceptance can be ascribed. Serial murder stands as a notable example in this regard. From whence the motivation to repeatedly kill?

Are serial murderers—those who kill a number of people over time, first and foremost for personal gratification⁵—ordinary people committing extraordinary deeds? Is there something intrinsically aberrant about them that leads them to kill repeatedly? In either case, the series of murders they perpetrate are testimony of their ingenuity, cruelty, and self-indulgence, each a facet of the human condition. As I interview men who have killed, I am impressed by many things: the kind of intellect and personality each of them possesses, their sense of humor, their apparent ordinariness. They eat breakfast like the rest of us. But at once is the reality of their reprehensible crimes.

The point needs to be made that serial killers have the same kinds of appetites as others: They hunger for food and have urges for sexual release. Where they differ appears to be at the level of idiosyncratic tastes. Just as one person prefers vanilla and another chocolate, for most serial sexual murderers, sexual gratification is scripted in the perpetration of violence rather than through the mutual experience of intimacy. And it is one's individuated tastes that determine how appetites are to be satisfied. Therein lies a window to motivation.

How is it that some people become serial murderers? Is it a matter of transformation—essentially good people gone bad—from human being to human anathema? Or is it more a matter of progression, implying the serial murderer began as bad seed, germinating into destructive agent? The ideas of transformation and progression require that we examine the interaction of the individual with specific elements of his external world. As a matter of ontological development, we are required to become patient observers, remaining vigilant and open to incorporating all manner of personal variables into the serial murderer equation.

A traditional psychological approach would involve the application of conventional psychometric instruments and procedures

as a way of measuring the individual's psyche in terms of pre-established categories of disorder. The administration of such tests proceeds in accordance with preconceived ways of organizing our understanding of behavior. Although diagnostic approaches are useful in identifying the degree and kinds of psychopathology present in serial murderers, this article argues for a departure from customary ways of investigating psychological makeup. Instead of applying conventionally held categories of mental disorder to individual serial murderers in an effort to see what fits, this alternate approach strives to provide the means for individuals to reveal themselves in as unobtrusive a manner as possible.

The task is to examine systematically the serial murderer through the portrait he paints of himself and his world, being careful not to provide him with a palette but rather to allow him to choose his own. His choices—among colors, tonal grays, or in stark polarities of black and white—reveal much about who he is and how he constructs his world. Furthermore, if we can loosen ourselves from the grasp of focusing on the content of his words—be they true or mendacious—and instead strive to understand the process by which he arrives at those words and the emotional valence he attaches to them, we may be better situated to elucidate his motivations. It is not only important to observe how he talks about his killings but also to identify patterns that pervade his descriptions of the other aspects of his life and how these are linked to the murders.

Valle and Halling (1989) assert that "the very essence of being human is the capacity for subjectivity" (p. ix). Yet, serial murder tends to be analyzed as an objective event, not as a subjective experience. On occasion, we hear from serial murderers themselves through media sound bites that are attributed to them as they are processed through the criminal justice system. But these utterances are devoid of the context needed to interpret their meaning.

There are many studies of individual serial killers that describe and seek to understand their behavior under the terms of an established paradigm. Psychologists and psychiatrists, for example, apply their clinical acumen and psychometric batteries to apprehended serial murderers as their primary means of inquiry. Sociologists and anthropologists frame their examinations in

terms of demographic variables, social processes, and other social constructions. Biogenic research is examining the biological underpinnings of the homicidally aggressive behaviors of serial murderers.

What is being learned from these studies furthers our knowledge about the phenomenon of serial homicide. But conventional approaches tend to neglect a critical aspect of the phenomenon. They take us no closer to the internal experience of the murders for the murderer himself. What drives the series of killings can only be truly understood in the context of the serial murderer's experience of his life. What has largely been neglected by researchers is the first-person, lived-meaning of killing a number of people over time. The critical assertion here is that understanding a serial murderer can be achieved only to the extent that we know his subjective experience of the world and not merely the objective realities of his life or the evaluations we make of those objective realities.

The modus operandi of an offender includes behaviors that have specific emotional meanings for him that he attaches to the events and circumstances of his life as he has experienced them. Does his choice of a series of female victims connote a decided disdain for women? Those people who represent that which renders him impotent in the world? Can motivation be deduced from his choice of victims? Whereas an observable pattern in terms of victim selection does suggest that victims hold particular meaning for the killer, underlying motive is less readily accessible. When we broaden our focus to include actual behaviors at the scenes of his crimes, we may uncover, for example, elements of sexual sadism. Although it may thus appear that in such cases, the offender's primary or exclusive means of sexual gratification is through extreme sexual abuse—to the point where the act of killing itself may be eroticized—can it be assumed that therein lies the primary motivation for his murders? There is a need for caution in interpreting the sexual violation of victims as primarily sexual in nature. It may be quite secondary to the empowerment he experiences in demeaning or hurting his victims or to the violence itself.⁶

Objectively observed circumstances and behaviors may obscure what are more significant realities for the perpetrator. Behavior is the product of one's own sense of reality regardless of

the degree to which that reality matches the objective facts of that person's life. The child who experiences his parents as unloving and abusive—regardless of the objective realities of their love and care—will behave in accordance with his, albeit distorted, perception of their rejection of him.

Probing the serial murderer's subjective reality requires unobtrusive solicitation of a narrative that goes beyond the facts of his killings or the facts of his life. To this end, another method of inquiry is called for.

EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD: ASKING DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

Although many would consider this hyperbole and some would argue it is simply wrong, the process of grouping individuals into categories does result in the loss of important information about those individuals and about the phenomenon under investigation. This is no less true of the typologies of serial killers that are offered in the literature according to categories of, for example, mobility (e.g., Hickey, 1997), personality traits (e.g., Ressler et al., 1985), and motive (e.g., Holmes & DeBurger, 1988). In addition to the persistent problem of overlapping categories within a given typology, there is also the troubling matter of how categories are meaningfully operationalized, leading to questions regarding the validity and reliability of the typology itself.

The situation is further complicated by Kluckhohn and Murray's (1953) dictum: "Every man is in certain respects (a) like all other men, (b) like some other men, [and] (c) like no other man" (p. 53). In light of this conundrum, how do we proceed to understand serial murderers?

Proper address of this question, regardless of the paradigm one adopts, requires that we examine motivation because serial murder is essentially distinguished by the nature of the motives of the killer. If we assume a definition of serial murder that goes beyond the technical requirement of killing a number of people over a period of time so as to delineate a population of offenders who essentially kill for personal gratification (thus excluding political and military murders), we require an understanding of serial murder that explains the repetition of the murders and identifies

motive. In coming to understand what gives energy and direction to the series of murders, we are moved closer to the meaning the murders hold for the killer.

Empirical Phenomenology as a Method of Inquiry

The level of analysis prescribes the method of inquiry. The task of elucidating the motive forces underlying serial murder in such a manner that evinces its meaning cannot rely on traditional clinical and psychometric approaches. The argument here is that an alternative, phenomenological approach is called for,⁷ one which examines the experiential aspects of self-process as they relate to the repeated acts of murder. This article asserts the importance of this method in the study of serial murder in the service of learning how serial killers experience their murders. Researchers employing empirical phenomenology⁸ as a method of inquiry would strive to elucidate what the repeated acts of killing mean to the killer and, in so doing, reveal the motive forces that drive the behavior.

Phenomenology was introduced by Edmund Husserl in 1900 as a rigorous philosophy seeking to describe the life of consciousness in its primordial experience with the world. The term *phenomenon* has its origins in the Greek term *phaenesthai*, meaning to show itself or to appear. According to Heidegger (1994), it essentially means bringing to light the totality of all that lies before us, hence the maxim of phenomenology: To the things themselves.

Methodologically, empirical phenomenology affords the serial murderer the opportunity to speak to us about himself and his view of the world. As Moustakas (1994) notes, empirical phenomenology "involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience" (p. 13). Phenomenology requires faithful attention to the data—a subject's words and expressions of emotion. The task is then to identify the principles that organize his thinking and thus determine his perceptions and feelings and, ultimately, his behavior. Such analysis requires intensive, systematic review of the data that are his narrative.

The strength of qualitative methods is in the process of induction whereby a generalized theme or principle is inferred from

particular instances. The data emerge to provide theory in contrast with the more traditional logico-deductive approach in which a hypothesized general premise is used to infer particular instances. Inductive reasoning provides a different perspective—another window—on phenomena we seek to understand. It asks different questions.

Lifton (1993) conceives of the self as “one’s inclusive sense (or symbolization) of one’s own being” (p. 2). This definition recognizes a crucial aspect of our understanding of the self—that our experience of it is essentially subjective. Freeman (1992) defines the self as an ongoing narrative or interpretive creation of an individual about himself. He is thus concerned with the broader phenomenological and experiential issues around defining and elucidating the self. Freeman, like Lifton (1993), denies an orderly development of the self in favor of a view of the self as the rather protean product of the flux of life experiences.

According to Freeman (1992), narratives are considered “a part of the very fabric of the self” (p. 25) even if there are mythologized and fictive renditions. He concludes that “on some level we are the stories we tell about ourselves” (p. 25). Even if self-reported histories are outright lies, they are, as Rosenberg (1988) contends, nonetheless useful. Personal narratives reveal the meanings that organize an individual’s life—whether they are derived from actual lived experiences or whether the individual fabricates experiences and incorporates them into his narrative—ostensibly because they are meaningful to him, perhaps even by virtue of his belief that they are important to the interviewer. Although the argument may be presented that to rely on the serial murderer himself is folly, it is asserted here that, indeed, this is a main strength of the approach. Because the phenomenological researcher’s interests are beyond mere description of the killer and his murders, how a subject misrepresents himself or his crimes is not so important as the fact that he does so—that he intends to do so—in elaborating some details but not others. Although the fact of his mendacity is not without importance, he is speaking a form of truth—his own truth—constructed according to what is meaningful to him.

Empirical phenomenology focuses on an individual’s experience to gather comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a structural analysis that represents the essence of his

experience. Put another way, the underlying structures of an experience are determined by interpreting an individual's narrative about the situations in which the experience occurs. Is there an inner narrative that drives the serial murderer to kill and kill again? The aim is to determine what the experience of repeatedly killing means for individuals who have had that experience. The task requires examining each act of murder in terms of what it means to the murderer, being mindful to identify common themes across the series of murders and, importantly, linking them to themes that pervade his life.

Using Empirical Phenomenology in the Study of Serial Killing

In the case of serial killing, empirical phenomenology can be used to explore the constituent meanings of the experience of killing a number of people over a period of time. Moustakas (1994) explains that "the conscious description of experience and the underlying dynamics or structures that account for that experience provides a central meaning and unity that enables one to understand the substance and essence of the experience" (p. 9). An empirical phenomenological psychology strives to obtain descriptions by individual serial murderers of their experiences of killing and then rigorously analyze these descriptions to arrive at the structure of their experience. It does not presume any understanding of the experiences of serial killers but rather relies on the killers themselves to articulate a personal narrative that is systematically analyzed by the researcher.

Although the interviews may follow a semistructured protocol, subjects essentially have complete control over what they talk about. The purpose of the protocol is to prompt discussion in broad content areas that the subject can take in any direction he feels reflects meaningful experiences for him in those areas. Needless to say, tangents—or outright detours—relative to the protocol are frequent but always significant by virtue of the fact they are meaningful to the subject.

All interview sessions should be at least audiotaped to satisfy two purposes: (a) to preserve the words and "voice" (e.g., tone of voice, laughter, pauses, and the like) of each subject and (b) to enable the researcher to stay with each subject in the moment and

keep up with the flow of the exchange, not being hindered by attempting to take verbatim notes. Each night of an interview, the researcher reviews that day's audiotapes, making notes of specific questions to raise the following day by way of clarifying or furthering a particular matter as discussed by that subject. Ultimately, the audiotaped interviews are transcribed, although the tapes should be repeatedly reviewed even as the transcribed hard copies of the interviews are available. This is done to minimize the loss of information related to changes in voice inflection, pauses, and the like—to continue to keep subjects' voices more literally in the researcher's own head as he or she proceeds to analyze the data.

Information obtained during interviews must be supplemented by other sources wherever possible. Information about subjects may be provided by correctional personnel who are familiar with the particular inmate. Personnel sources include prison administrators, correctional officers, case management personnel, and prison psychologists. In addition, the researcher should seek access to inmate files, which may include copies of original police and coroners' reports, summaries of court decisions, case progress reports, psychological evaluations, and parole application documents. If information from other sources conflicts with what a subject presents in an interview session, he can be asked to clarify or speak to any such discrepancies. It is important to remember that the essential inquiry is not necessarily concerned with the veracity of details related by the subject. It is the potency of their meaning to the subject himself that renders them significant. This point is worth particular notation in studies of psychiatric and criminal populations.

Collection and analysis of the data can follow the outline as provided by von Eckartsberg (1986) for empirical phenomenological research. Accordingly, the research steps consisted of (a) formulating the research question in a manner that is understandable to others, (b) gathering a descriptive narrative from each subject based on an interview dialogue in which the subject is considered as coresearcher, and (c) reviewing and scrutinizing the data "so as to reveal their structure, meaning, configuration, coherence, and the circumstances of their occurrence and clustering" (von Eckartsberg, 1986, p. 27), emphasizing the "configuration of meaning [and] involving both the structure of meaning and how

it is created" (p. 27). The essential task is to attend to what each subject says about himself and his experiences as well as to read between his lines—and to establish with him if that reading is accurate and valid.

This method is about staying close to the data, enabling them to speak for themselves. The rigor of the process involves the dual task of continually monitoring and confirming the substance of the narrative while identifying and refining the categories of meaning inherent in those data. The exercise involves poring over each subject's narrative, identifying what for him are his motives and searching for the meaning he attaches to his killings. Results are interpreted in terms of dominant themes that emerge from the data, each representing an axis of meaning that defines the killing experience for the subjects.

FINDING DIFFERENT ANSWERS

How the self of a person is probed will determine what is learned—or not—about that individual. Results from a study of serial killers using empirical phenomenology (Skrapec, 1997) suggest that data from more traditional methods of inquiry may have serious limitations in terms of their elucidation of motivation.

The literature on serial murder includes discussion of the relationships between the killers and their victims. Fox and Levin (1994) present the "typical serial killer [as] a white male in his late 20s or 30s who targets strangers at or near his place of residence or work" (p. 16). Studying victim choice may offer critical insights into the underlying motivation for a series of murders, especially because most serial killers tend to prefer to kill a particular kind of person in terms of such variables as gender, age, and/or lifestyle. Researchers using traditional descriptive methods have reported on the degree to which serial killers knew their victims before they killed them. Although Hickey (1997) does not operationalize the term *strangers* in his study of serial killers, he distinguishes them as a category separate from acquaintances and family members and reports that stranger-to-stranger killings constitute the largest proportion of serial homicide cases. Although this can be a useful observation for investigative purposes (i.e., that most serial

killers have no prior relationship with their victims), it may obscure a more potent reality for the offender himself. Hickey (1997) suggests that "offenders can much more easily view strangers as objects and thereby dehumanize their victims" (p. 83). Although this observation has intuitive appeal, it is also problematic—at least to the extent that so many, if not most, serial killers have been alleged to be psychopaths (e.g., in the sense of the term as used by Hare, 1993). One of the hallmark traits of this psychopathological condition is a lack of emotional empathy and conscience. It is thus debatable whether the psychopathic serial killer would have a psychological need to dehumanize his victims.

Beyond this argument is another possibility: that the serial murderer chooses his victims *because* they hold profound meaning for him in the terms of his life experiences. A phenomenological approach allows for the uncovering of this very different motivational dynamic. It may also explain incidents of overkill—extreme and/or prolonged violence perpetrated against victims beyond what is necessary to cause their deaths. These cases evidence tremendous rage directed at the chosen victims, suggestive of a dynamic in which the violence is displaced onto victims who represent something or someone of importance in the killer's experience.

Using the empirical phenomenological method, Skrapec (1997) found in her hundreds of hours of interviews with incarcerated serial murderer subjects that they spoke of their victims using terms that implied intimate knowledge of them—even when they had never met them before the crime. Indeed, most serial murderers target people who manifest certain characteristics representing something or someone they disdain. Only rarely is it the case that a series of murders is truly random. It may be argued that the killer selects victims precisely because he knows them so well. For example, the killer may identify his victims as "sluts," women about whom he feels he has an intimate knowledge. The objective fact that the victims share no personal history with him is irrelevant; that they are technically strangers is not a factor. He chooses them for who they are to him, the place they occupy in his personal construction of the world. This may be particularly true in cases where serial killers stalk their victims. Although this may not be outwardly useful information in a police investigation, it

would appear to be a critical factor for those who wish to better understand why a serial killer kills.

In a parallel vein, the application of standardized psychometric tests to serial murderers may result in data of questionable validity. Language works as a currency of exchange between people because it is based on the fact that they generally hold certain meanings in common. It is also true, however, that mere application of a term of language does not imply shared associations and, thus, shared understanding.

From Ryle (1975), "Our common language can conceal the degree to which our individual histories have left us with different assumptions and expectations" (p. 2). The representations that two different people have of the world—their cognitive maps—may make use of the notion of interpersonal distances (e.g., the extent to which people they know are like or unlike each other in certain respects), yet each person may use a difference in scale that would obliterate any meaningful comparisons between the two people based on such distances. For example, the term *intimacy* may imply an intense emotional bond for one person but mere physical contact or physical proximity for the other.

For this reason, having a person respond to a prepared inventory of attributes or traits on, say, a Likert type scale may obscure rather than clarify how he or she actually views him- or herself and experiences the events of his or her life. The interpreter of the results of such surveys assumes that the items in the inventory mean essentially the same thing to the respondent as they do to him or her and that the respondent is "trying on" items from an inventory of common stock (i.e., with a universally understood meaning) to see if they fit.

Traditional instruments/surveys rely on implicitly shared meanings. This assumption may not be warranted in a study of serial murderers given, for example, the apparent lack of empathy observed in psychopathic individuals. It would be an exercise of questionable validity to present serial murderers—who have been frequently labeled psychopathic—with an inventory-style instrument for the purpose of deriving a meaningful representation of their worldview (including their own self-perception). Skrapec (1997) presents examples of the use of specific words by serial murderer subjects that further elaboration revealed did not

reflect the actual connotation of the word for the subject. In discussing his murders, one subject referred to his need to "dominate" his female victims. As he continued to talk about the killings, however, it became clear that what he presented as a need to dominate was in actuality a need to abominate, using words such as "destroy" and "mutilate" to describe his actions. Idiosyncratic associations can obscure the meaning of a term that enjoys common usage. Psychometric tests cannot control for this kind of variance.

Skrapec (1997) reports that her subjects used words that suggested common experiences but upon further probing were found to have substantially different meanings to them than is generally connoted by those particular words. It is as if these subjects used "emotional homonyms"—words that sound the same but have different emotional meanings for them. Recalling another subject, the word *angry* was used by one subject to describe his actual experience of "being empty." This observation points to the particular value of the phenomenological method. Aimed as it is at revealing an individual's lived meaning of the world, it does not assume an understanding but rather works at developing it, using the terms of meaning constructed by the subject.

Beyond issues of language are concerns regarding the interpretation of actual behavior. There appear to be a number of different modus operandi that distinguish various serial murderers—suggestive, perhaps, of differing motivational dynamics. One series of killings may always include robbery of the victims and, another, sadistic acts perpetrated against them. A third series may include both. Problems arise in attempting to identify primary motives. This is true even of sexual homicides. For this reason, when a series of murders involves sexual violation of the victims, Skrapec (1996) has called for a distinction between serial sexual murder and sexual serial murder. As she states, "for some serial killers the acts of killing are primary and sexualized; for other serial killers the killings are secondary to sexual gratification. Sexual motivation is implicated in each case but on a different level" (p. 164). Knowing what an offender does at the scenes of his crimes is a necessary but not sufficient condition toward establishing motive. The task of understanding the behavior of a serial

murderer requires a level of analysis that incorporates his subjective experiences.

Traditional methods of study of serial murderers tend to focus on variables that distinguish them from others. Empirical phenomenology enables us to see the ways serial murderers are both different from and similar to the rest of us. Results of phenomenological study would suggest that traditional methods of inquiry may serve to mask more substantive, underlying similarities between us. We are not, it seems, distinguished by the nature of our being but rather by the meanings we create from our respective lived experiences. This approach to the study of serial murderers suggests they are linked to us by virtue of their very humanness, not detached from us by their inhumanity. The kinds of experiences that define us as human—that make us feel vulnerable—generate powerful motive forces in these subjects, as they do in the rest of us. Where we differ appears to be a function of emotional meanings that become linked to the events and circumstances of our respective lives, suggesting directions for future research, for example, to explore the mechanisms by which emotional meanings become attached to personal experiences.

Egger (1990), in the subtitle of his book, has described serial murder as an “elusive phenomenon.” Perhaps most of all, serial murder is difficult to comprehend because we believe that its perpetrators inhabit some kind of otherness to which we cannot relate. On the contrary, if we formulate our questions differently—as empirical phenomenology allows—we may find different answers and, in so doing, learn more about the potential of the human condition.

NOTES

1. This was related to psychiatrist David Abrahamsen by David Berkowitz, who had been retained by the prosecution to examine the accused serial murderer. The results of 50 hours of interviews and 400 pages of personal correspondence with Berkowitz are documented and analyzed in Abrahamsen (1985, p. 89).

2. Convicted serial murderer Edmund Kemper appeared as one of several individuals interviewed for a television documentary produced and directed by Imre Horvath (1984) on the motive of multiple murderers.

3. The masculine pronoun *he* and its derivatives are used throughout this study in place of "he/she." This is not because all perpetrators of serial murder are male, for indeed they are not, but rather to facilitate the flow of the document.

4. The results of this journalistic interview are reported by von Beroldingen (1974).

5. This definition neglects the important debate in the literature regarding what constitutes serial murder (e.g., see Egger, 1998; Keeney, 1995). The definition used here stipulates a series of murders perpetrated for personal gratification. This captures the essence of serial murder as behavior that is, at its core, self-reinforcing and not the product of external loyalties or ideology.

6. See Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas (1988) and Skrapec (1996) as examples of discussions of these distinctions.

7. For an extensive discussion of phenomenological psychology in terms of its history, scientific foundations, techniques, and applications, see Valle and Halling (1989).

8. For examples, see Moustakas (1994) and Van Kaam (1959, 1966).

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