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### The psychological profile of serial offenders and a redefinition of the misnomer of serial crime

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# The Psychological Profile of Serial Offenders and a Redefinition of the Misnomer of Serial Crime

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This article explores the possibility that a generalised profile of serial offenders may contribute to the conceptualisation of serial crime. The latter has become immersed in a debate over the minimum number of victims that should be set as the defining criterion. There are several conceptual and practical problems in seeking to define serial crime in terms of minimum victim numbers, and the possibility is raised that a serial criminal might be identified as such after only one offence has been committed. In this light the term "serial crime" is seen as a misnomer. A redefinition of the term is pursued by first identifying the psychological mechanisms characteristic of serial offenders; in this context, specific attention is given to the personality characteristics of psychopathy, narcissism, sadism, paraphilic tendencies, fantasy proneness or dissociative tendencies, and compulsiveness. A general definition of serial crime then is proposed, focusing on the psychology of the serial offender regardless of the particular offence mode. As a result of this analysis serial murder, serial rape, and serial arson can be described in terms of specific behaviours evidenced in the crime scene and the style of victimisation; these descriptions may be used to classify serial offenders. Finally, the proposed definition of serial crime is applied to the question, "Can women be serial criminals?"

In recent years the occurrence of serial crime has captured the attention of professional researchers and the general public alike. The interest of the public undoubtedly has been fuelled by diverse media accounts many of which tend toward oversensationalism. At the same time the heightened awareness of serial crime in our community has stemmed more fundamentally from the improvement of linkage between the criminal record systems of different regional police agencies (Egger, 1984). This factor has played a crucial role not only in revealing the incidence of

serial crime but also in facilitating research into the nature of serial crime (Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988). Such research nevertheless has been plagued by inconsistencies of definition. The broad purpose of this paper is to argue that the concept of serial crime subsumes much more than a literal translation of the term would imply, and that indeed, the term is strictly speaking a misnomer.

Research into serial crime has focused largely on serial murder and, to a lesser extent, on serial rape and serial arson. With enhanced identifica-

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tion of the occurrence of such crimes over the last two decades, the associated research effort has been relatively extensive and has entailed substantial contributions from specialists in psychology, criminology, and law enforcement. The objectives of the research into serial crimes have also been diverse and include such issues as the aetiology of these offences, recidivism, rehabilitation, and the construction of criminal psychological profiles for each type of serial crime (O'Reilly-Fleming, 1996).

There is nevertheless a comparative lack of coherence evident in the research literature on serial crime. In the writings on serial murder, for example, there are differences of opinion as to whether serial murder represents an integral offence classification or on the other hand, a generic expression encompassing a variety of distinct types of offence. In the United States the *Crime Classification Manual* of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI; Douglas, Burgess, Burgess, & Ressler, 1992) designates serial murder as a discrete category of sexual homicide. Holmes and Deburger (1988), however, posit four different types of serial murderer, namely, "visionary", "mission-oriented", "hedonistic", and "power/control". More recently, Hickey (1997) has advocated eight supposedly distinct categories of serial murderers which include team killers, female killers, male solo killers of women, male solo killers of children, and male solo killers of the elderly.

Now, it might be argued that the profusion of typologies of serial murder does not necessarily detract from the coherence of an underlying concept. That is, notwithstanding various possible types of serial murder, there may remain some common essence of this class of crime that is immediately understood. The nature of any such "common understanding", and in particular, the differentiation of serial murder from closely related crimes, nevertheless warrant closer scrutiny.

### Victim Numbers and Serial Crime

One facet of a common understanding of the term "serial crime" may relate to the number of victims (or in the case of arson, the number of targets) involved. Indeed, it is fair to say that the criterion of a minimum tally of victims has become entrenched in the conceptualisation of

serial crime. Rather surprisingly, however, a key factor in the evident lack of coherence in the empirical literature on serial crime is the diversity in the minimum victim tally taken to define seriality.

The number of victims used as the criterion for the classification of serial offences has varied across agencies and researchers. For example, in North America the National Institute of Justice defines serial murder as involving two or more victims (Brooks, Devine, Green, Hart, & Moore, 1988). Similarly, in relation to serial rape, the procedural criterion applied in selecting cases for Canter and Larkin's (1993) research project was a minimum of two victims of the same rapist. But in the opinion of other authorities, two offences are not sufficient to signify seriality. The FBI classifies serial crime (be it murder, rape, or arson) as at least *three* such offences by the same person or persons (Douglas et al., 1992; Ressler et al., 1988), while Hickey (1990) has suggested that serial murder should be defined by a minimum of *four* victims. The rationale for any proposed criterial number of offences usually is not made explicit, although in the case of the FBI the criterion presumably is based on investigative experience. In any event, the lack of consistency in this regard does impede comparison and integration of findings across different research programs.

More fundamentally, however, there are substantial conceptual and practical difficulties in seeking to define serial crime purely in terms of a specific tally of victims or offences. Several of these difficulties now will be discussed.

A definition of serial crime solely in relation to offence numbers is insufficient to differentiate such crime from other types of crime entailing multiple offences. Prior to 1980 there was no specific term for serial murders or serial crimes in general. Serial murders, for example, were simply grouped with any murder that involved several victims and referred to as "mass murder". More recently, multiple murders have been differentiated into three categories: mass murders, spree murders, and serial murders (Geberth, 1986b). The killing of three or more victims in a single event is now termed "mass murder" (Fox & Levin, 1994; Hickey, 1997; Levin & Fox, 1985; Leyton, 1986; Norris, 1988), and the killing of three or more victims in different locations but within the context of the one event is referred to

as "spree murder" (Douglas et al., 1992; Geberth, 1986b). According to FBI researchers (Douglas et al., 1992; Ressler et al., 1988), serial murder is distinguished from these other forms of multiple murder in that it entails the murder of three or more victims with an intermission between each murder. A definition of serial crime in terms of offence numbers therefore would require at least supplementation by a temporal criterion in order to distinguish it from some other crimes also marked by multiple victims.

On the other hand, even where there is an intermission between multiple offences there are some crimes that are not usually regarded as serial. The so-called "contract killer", for example, may murder several people in a similar manner over a period of time, yet most criminologists would not regard this offender as a serial murderer (Rappaport, 1988). Similarly, a "hired torch" may be responsible for several incidents of arson but would not usually be deemed a serial arsonist. The rationale for these distinctions will be pursued below, but at this stage the distinctions suffice to suggest that a definition of seriality simply in terms of a criterial number of offences would be overinclusive.

Such a definition might also be underinclusive. A practical limitation of using minimum offence numbers is that for any given offender the number of known offences may be less than the number of offences actually committed by that person. Police investigations frequently relate to additional offences which are believed to have been committed by an arrested person but for which the evidence is insufficient to sustain a conviction; the so-called "Mosman granny killer" John Glover, for example, is reported to be strongly suspected of several murders other than those for which he was convicted (Simpson & Harvey, 1994; Writer, Barrett, & Bouda, 1992). Also, incarcerated offenders themselves often boast of unaccounted victims that have eluded identification by law enforcement agencies; for example, American serial killer Theodore Bundy traded information about his undetected murders for delays in his execution (Rule, 1989). Given there are good reasons for believing that some serial criminals have committed more offences than those for which they are charged, it would be inappropriate to assume that a person found guilty of only a single offence could not be a serial offender. In this respect, the definition of

serial crime in terms of (known) offence numbers could therefore be said to be potentially underinclusive.

For a rather more incisive reason to reject a wholly number-based definition of serial crime, however, we need to turn back to the origins of the term. The term *serial* is derived from the word *series* and thus pertains to "a group or connected succession of similar or related things usually arranged in order" (Wilkes & Krebs, 1992, p. 1412). It was in this sense of describing a succession of similar murders by the same offender(s) that the former FBI agent Robert Ressler popularised the expression, "serial killer" (Ressler & Shachtman, 1992). In their endeavour to operationalise Ressler's concept, however, researchers have become side-tracked by the exercise of nominating a minimum offence tally to define serial crimes. This debate has served only to obscure Ressler's original meaning, namely, that the underlying characteristic of the serial offender is a psychological propensity to re-offend in a similar pattern. It is simply as an observed consequence of these persistent psychodynamics that this type of offender tends to accumulate multiple victims. Therefore, it is not the mere post hoc tally of offences but the basis of the propensity to re-offend, a distinctive internal drive mechanism, that is quintessential to an understanding and to the definition of serial crime.

Cognisance of the "propensity" approach to serial crime helps to illuminate some of the ways in which the term *serial* is applied that otherwise might seem peculiar. It is clear, for example, that in referring to serial crime, writers are not merely seeking to signify the presence of multiple offences; rather, there is often an additional if implicit assumption about the psychological profile of the offender. Thus, the term *serial* is not generally applied to just any sequence of similar offences by the same person(s). A person who commits numerous thefts might commonly be described as a habitual thief but is generally not referred to as a serial thief. Indeed, the only crimes that commentators seem consistently to designate as serial are particular types of multiple offences of murder, rape, or arson. Evidently there is a specific inner drive assumed to be operating in these contexts, one that is thought not to be applicable to sequences of theft, for example. Thus, it is the basis of the psychological

propensity to re-offend that may be deemed to comprise the "common understanding" associated with the use of the expression "serial crime". If serial crime is distinctive by its underlying psychodynamics, it should nevertheless be defined explicitly in these terms rather than by a minimum offence tally.

The conceptualisation of serial crime in terms of specific psychological propensities also clarifies distinctions often drawn between such crimes and similar cases in which there are multiple victims or targets. Thus, the contract killer and the hired torch are not regarded as serial criminals because their propensity to re-offend apparently is rooted in criminal enterprise or profit, and this motive does not accord with the implicit psychological profile of a serial criminal. In a similar fashion, reconsider the matter of multiple murder. It has been proposed that serial murder can be distinguished from mass murder and spree murder in terms of the factor of time or intermittence (Douglas et al., 1992; Ressler et al., 1988). But there is also an assumption of a different psychology operating in each of these types of multiple murder. This is not to say there are no psychological similarities between the three types. It is said, for example, that all are "senseless" in that material gain is not involved, and that none resemble the broad patterns of murder generally observed (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Polk, 1994). Despite these similarities, however, the differentiation of serial murder from other types of mass murder is widely taken to imply the operation of a unique psychological aetiology. That is, mass, spree, and serial murderers are thought to be driven by different psychodynamics. Whereas mass and spree murderers are deemed to be driven by life pressures, rage, and personality problems to a cathartic act of retribution, serial murder is seen as a remorseless pursuit of sexually based gratification, an on-going perverse and sadistic "hobby" (Douglas et al., 1992; Ressler et al., 1988). The psychological basis of a propensity to re-offend therefore is more pivotal than both victim tally and the factor of time in differentiating serial crime from similar offences with multiple victims.

If serial crime is defined in terms of psychological propensities, however, there is a possibility that the term *serial* in this context is strictly a misnomer. That is, if evidence of the defining propensity is available, it might well be possible

to classify an offender as "serial" without any evidence whatsoever that more than one offence has been committed by that person. Some instances in which this could be the case now will be considered.

### Serial Criminals without Serial Offences

The number of victims actually accumulated by an offender will depend in part on factors other than the propensity to re-offend. An offender might possess the intrinsic psychological attributes of a serial offender, but could be prevented from offending more than once by illness or by their apprehension by police, for example. Indeed, Jenkins (1993) has hypothesised that the accumulation of victims is more a factor of the police response to the offences than that of the offender's activities. In a hypothetical example, the victim tally might be relatively small if a serial murderer chose police officers as targets. Given the difficulties of getting the better of a police officer in an aggressive confrontation, as well as the probable vigour of the police response to the murder of one of their own, it seems improbable that such an offender would survive long enough to accumulate more than one victim. On the other hand, a killer who targeted prostitutes would perhaps be more likely to accrue numerous victims before being apprehended. There are circumstances, therefore, which may serve to limit a criminal to a single offence, yet that person could still have the psychological characteristics of seriality, a particular type of propensity to re-offend.

By way of illustration, in Australia there have been several recent instances of a single murder case in which the style of victimisation would be considered characteristic of the serial sexual murderer. Barrie Watts and Valmae Beck exhibited the intrinsic features of serial murderers, yet Sian Kingi was their only victim before they were apprehended. In police statements, Watts openly expressed his earnest intentions to commit further murders. Further, both Beck and Watts were apprehended whilst trawling for their next victim (McGregor, 1990). A similar example is provided by the murder committed by Robin Reid and Paul Luckman (Wilson, 1985).

If there is some evidence of a potential to re-offend it may therefore be possible to identify a serial criminal before any more than one offence

has been committed. By focusing on the basis of the propensity to re-offend rather than on actual victim numbers, we also avoid the absurdity of implying that a serial killer is an intrinsically different sort of offender after multiple offences than after the first offence.

To the extent that a criminal may be categorised as "serial" when only one offence has been committed, the expression "serial crime" can be considered a misnomer. In light of the wide usage of the expression, however, it would seem futile to propose alternative, more appropriate terminology. The most viable solution may be the development of a satisfactory definition of serial crime. In this regard it is argued that the essence of serial crime lies in a particular type of propensity to re-offend. As this paper has shown, a disposition to re-offend might well be evidenced by subsequent offences, but it might also be evidenced by an offender's declaration of intent or by the offender's style of victimisation (even in the initial offence). The last of these possibilities requires further clarification of the psychodynamics of the serial criminal, which in turn will lead to the formulation of an effective definition of serial crime.

### Psychological Factors in Serial Crime

A substantial portion of the empirical research on psychological factors in serial crime has addressed serial murder. The same emphasis necessarily must apply here, although some account of serial rape and serial arson will be attempted. At the same time, the thesis of this section of the paper is that in identifying the peculiar psychological mechanisms inherent in serial murder, this offence not only may be understood but may be incisively defined, and further, through the identification of these mechanisms the generic patterns of serial crime may become apparent irrespective of whether the offence is murder, rape, or arson.

It should also be stressed that this section of the article should not be taken to imply the psychiatric diagnosis of any individual offender. Similarly, there is no suggestion here that criminal behaviour itself can be construed as a formal mental disorder or psychiatric diagnosis in the way that Giannangelo (1996), for example, has sought to do. Rather, the intention is to survey the pattern of constituent psychological charac-

teristics that is commonly presented by serial criminals. It is from identifying the combination of these characteristics that their expression as behaviours at the scene of a crime can be taken to be indicative of a serial offender. In turn, these specific patterns of criminal behaviour can then be proposed as criteria in the definition of serial crime.

### Psychopathy

Although serial offenders are seldom found to be legally insane (Brown, 1991; Palermo & Knudten, 1994), among the various dimensions of personality that have been attributed to the serial criminal are those that underlie the psychiatrically defined personality disorders. The dimension of psychopathy, and the associated psychiatric diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder, have attracted extensive consideration in this context (Blackburn, 1993).

Psychopathy entails persistent violation of the rights of others, a disregard for such rights, a lack of empathy with the feelings of others, a lack of remorse for any offence or injury to others, an inflated self-concept, and superficial charm (Cleckley, 1988). According to analyses of case material (Geberth & Turco, 1997; Ritter, 1988/1989; Stone, 1993) and a few psychometric studies (Blackburn, 1993) some of the behaviours of serial criminals are marked by such characteristics.

In itself an act of murder, rape, or arson clearly constitutes a violation of another person's rights. But the acts of the serial criminal are frequently callous in the extreme, and this is a cardinal feature of psychopathy (Stone, 1993). The serial criminal's victim is not simply killed or sexually penetrated but is used as an object of perverse gratification; various forms of torture are very common, as is post mortem mutilation of the victim's body (Douglas et al., 1992). Also highly characteristic of the serial offender is a lack of shame and remorse for the crimes and an evident immunity to the feelings the victim, although the serial criminal may be so manipulative that a repentant posture may be assumed if it is potentially advantageous. Psychopathic manipulateness also is evident in some serial criminals' use of superficial charm to lure a potential victim away from safety (e.g., Rule, 1989).

Although there certainly is scope for more precise psychometric studies of the associations

between specific features of psychopathy and specific features of serial criminal behaviour, it is fair to conclude there are cogent indications that the personality dimension of psychopathy is an element of the psychological profile of the serial offender.

This conclusion should not be taken as an unqualified endorsement of the popular depiction of the serial criminal as a quintessential psychopath. As Geberth and Turco (1997) note, not all psychopaths will commit violent crimes, and not all serial offenders will meet the diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder. A few behaviours of serial offenders are in fact uncharacteristic of psychopathy.

Whereas psychopaths typically are impulsive and do not plan their activities thoroughly (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), the substantial majority of serial criminals are "organised" and methodical in the commission of their crimes (Ressler et al., 1988). The psychopath's renowned lack of empathy with others' feelings also provides only a simplistic interpretation of serial offenders' unconcern for the impact of their actions on others; after all, if a serial offender aims to terrorise, humiliate, dominate, and inflict extreme suffering on a victim (Geberth & Turco, 1997), some degree of empathy is necessary for the offender's appreciation of the degree of their success. Similarly, the irresponsibility of many psychopaths should not be overgeneralised to serial offenders. Among recent Australian serial murderers, for example, John Glover was a prosperous sales representative (Simpson & Harvey, 1994), and Ivan Milat was regarded as a reliable and conscientious employee (Shears, 1996).

Although psychopathy is a significant element of the serial offender's psychological profile, account must also be taken of other dimensions of personality.

#### *Narcissism*

A personality dimension sometimes found in association with psychopathy is pathological narcissism. In simple terms, narcissism entails a concentration of psychological interest in the self (Wink, 1996). A degree of self-interest of course is essential to healthy functioning, but at pathological levels narcissism presents as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and a lack of empathy (American Psychiatric

Association, 1994). The narcissist's exaggerated self-esteem nevertheless is very fragile, and thus the person must periodically make rather grandiose efforts to buttress the narcissistic defences and the self image.

Relatively little research effort has been devoted to the identification of narcissistic tendencies in serial criminals, perhaps because narcissism does not share the notoriety associated with psychopathy. Nonetheless, specific features used for the differential diagnosis of pathological narcissism (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) can be recognised in the behaviours of individual serial offenders.

Like psychopathy, narcissism entails a lack of empathy for others. But whereas the psychopath simply sees other people as objects for self-gratification, narcissists need to establish a sense of their superiority over others and to demand admiration by others (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). This aspect of narcissism is evident in many serial offenders. Thus, Ritter (1988/1989) reports "episodic" murderers to exhibit egocentrism and feelings of superiority and dominance. In individual case studies, serial offenders often are reported to have expressed both their own perceived superiority over their victims and a demeaning perception of their victims as less than human and deserving the violations perpetrated on them. Similarly, many serial offenders are said to have declared their intellectual superiority over the police pursuing them and to have derided the competence of investigators (Hazelwood, Dietz, & Warren, 1992). Some serial offenders also claim to have "allowed" themselves to be apprehended, or to have "intentionally" left clues at a crime scene so as to ensure that investigative efforts of police continued to be focused on them (Ressler & Shachtman, 1992; Douglas & Oleshaker, 1995).

The precarious self-esteem or ego structure of narcissists also can be found in serial criminals. When circumstances challenge the narcissist's feelings of superiority, action (e.g., flight) is necessary in order to reintegrate or re-establish the sense of superiority. The same pattern of behaviour can be seen in the pre-crime stressors which set off the serial offender to commit crimes. As Hickey (1997) reports, interviews with serial offenders have documented the periodic experience of feeling "low" followed by an outbreak of violent behaviour to rebuild the sense

of dominance and superiority. In the view of Geberth (1986a, p. 47), "A serial killer, despite his outward facade, is a very insecure individual. He is without any power until he has a victim under his control."

Another example of this fallible ego structure may be found in serial offenders' experience of considerable shock and disbelief when they are unexpectedly apprehended. In this disintegrated state they sometimes confess to their offences. Later, when they re-integrate their ego, they may recant their confession, insisting it was a result of duress (Cahill, 1986).

A narcissistic need for admiration may underlie some of the exhibitionistic behaviours of serial offenders. Australian serial murderer John Glover assumed an air of intellectual authority, often boasting of his acumen despite never having pursued any form of tertiary education (Simpson & Harvey, 1994). American serial murderer Edmund Kemper readily co-operated with police investigators in locating incriminating evidence when he was given the impression of being in command of the investigation. According to Ressler and Shachtman (1992), the more praise Kemper received for the ingenuity of his offences, the more information he would reveal.

Characteristics of pathological narcissism therefore can be seen in the behaviour of some serial offenders. It must be stressed, however, that there seem to be very few adequate psychometric studies on this issue. Additionally, aggression and deceit are behaviours that are specifically nominated as uncharacteristic of narcissists (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), yet these clearly are prominent attributes of serial criminals. The psychological profile of the serial offender therefore encompasses elements of both psychopathy and narcissism.

### Sadism

Sadism is characterised by a pervasive pattern of cruel, demeaning, and aggressive behaviour (American Psychiatric Association, 1987). Sadists take pleasure in the psychological or physical suffering of others. At this point sadism will be discussed in contexts other than that of sexual activity; the issue of sexual sadism is addressed in the next section of the paper.

Psychopathy is sometimes associated with sadism, but conceptually and diagnostically these two personality dimensions can be distinguished.

For example, although sadists are aggressive and brutalising, they usually do not act in an illegal or socially unacceptable manner. Also, not all sadists inflict pain through physical violence; emotional abuse and humiliation often is used by the sadist (American Psychiatric Association, 1987).

It may seem facile to suggest that serial offenders tend to be sadistic. In the popular view all perpetrators of violent crime get a perverse sense of enjoyment in committing their offences. Empirical investigation suggests, however, that only a small minority of violent offenders are truly sadistic (Baumeister, 1997), and this minority includes serial offenders. That is, contrary to the popular view sadism is a trait that helps to distinguish serial offenders from many other violent offenders. Almost invariably, the crimes committed by serial murderers and serial rapists are sadistic. Violence is used not merely as a means of subduing the victim but more fundamentally as a source of pleasure for the offender. The serial criminal seeks to terrorise, demean, and humiliate the victim. As noted previously, acts of torture often are involved (Douglas et al., 1992). Similarly, most serial murders are committed in a distinctly personalised manner involving "skin to skin" contact between the victim and the offender (e.g., as in strangulation or stabbing); such "impersonal" methods of murder as gunshot or poisoning are infrequently observed among serial offenders.

The means of disposing of a victim's corpse can also be taken to suggest an offender's intent to humiliate and degrade. Rather than disposing of a corpse in a secretive location to avoid detection, the corpse might purposely be dumped in an open location where it is certain to be seen by many people. Further, a corpse may be "posed" in a degrading or "dramatic" position intended to shock observers and thereby further humiliate the deceased. An example of a similar behaviour in rape is the intentional release of a nude victim (Geberth, 1995).

Sadists are further described as inclined to restrict the autonomy of people with whom they hold a close relationship. This behaviour often is observed in serial offenders who have a spouse. Such domination is reported to have sometimes reached the point where partners have become slaves and assistants to the commission of further crimes (Hazelwood, Warren, & Dietz, 1993).



Retrospective investigation of serial murderers' childhood and adolescence (e.g., Ressler et al., 1988; Ressler & Shachtman, 1992) suggest that these sadistic tendencies develop well before the commission of the serial offences. In childhood, these offenders' sadistic acts appear initially to have been directed at animals, and subsequently at peers. Further, as children these offenders commonly were both victims and observers of violence.

Although the personality dimensions of psychopathy, narcissism, and sadism are diagnostically distinct, they seemingly function in a coherent, interactive fashion in the psychology of the serial offender. Broadly speaking, psychopathy frees the offender from the injunctions of society against narcissistic and sadistic behaviour; narcissism defines the primacy of self-gratification in the offender's lifestyle and fuels the sense of superiority by which the offender self-justifies sadistic and psychopathic behaviour; and sadism serves to give form to the antisocial self-gratification and pursuit of superiority and dominance.

Rather interestingly, Kernberg (1984, 1992) has proposed a concept that integrates these same elements. Kernberg describes "malignant narcissism" as an extreme form of antisocial personality disorder that is manifest in a person who is "pathologically grandiose, lacking in conscience and behavioural regulation with characteristic demonstrations of joyful cruelty and sadism" (Pollock, 1995, p. 261). The potential relevance of malignant narcissism to an understanding of serial crime has been suggested by Pollock (1995), but to date the joint problems of operationalising and measuring malignant narcissism seems to have inhibited any direct empirical investigation of the idea (see Geberth & Turco, 1997). Additionally, the notion of malignant narcissism would seem not to give due acknowledgement to the role of psychosexual factors in serial crime. It is to the latter that we now turn.

#### *Paraphilic Tendencies*

Direct evidence of the role of sexual gratification in serial crime is difficult to identify. The involvement of sexual behaviour in serial rape is obvious, but that the motivation of such behaviour is necessarily more sexual than sadistic or narcissistic, for example, is unclear. Nonetheless, less direct support for the significance of sexual motives to the serial offender's psychological

profile is provided by reports of sexual behaviours performed in conjunction with these crimes and by reports of serial offenders' deviant sexual tendencies more generally.

Paraphilias are enduring patterns of sexual behaviour in which unusual objects, rituals, or situations appear to be necessary for the person's full sexual satisfaction (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Often these paraphilic behaviours have a compulsive quality.

There is a substantial literature documenting the occurrence of paraphilic behaviour during the commission of serial crime (Fras, 1983; Groth & Hobson, 1983; Schlesinger & Revitch, 1983). Sexual sadism, or sexual excitement obtained by inflicting physical or psychological pain on another person, is an extremely common component of serial murder. Putative examples include partially or completely disrobing the victim, the purposeful wounding and mutilation of a victim's breasts or genitalia, evidence of offender masturbation at the scene, or insertion of objects into the victim's anal or vaginal cavity (Ressler et al., 1988).

Fetishism, or the need for specific inanimate objects in sexual gratification, also seems to be involved in some cases of serial murder and serial rape. Thus, a serial offender may target victims who are wearing red high-heeled shoes or who have long dark hair, for example. Similarly, souvenirs of the crime may be taken by the offender not only to assist in reminiscence of the crime but also for use in sexual fantasies (Ressler et al., 1988; Singh, 1993). The psychosexual function of serial offenders' souvenir collections is consistent with the fact that souvenir taking is not common in other forms of crime, presumably because the police's discovery of such a material link to an offence would prove highly incriminating. An example of souvenir collection among Australian serial murderers is Ivan Milat's retention of his victims' camping equipment and items of clothing. The latter he gave to his partner; according to Shears (1996), Milat particularly liked to see his partner wearing these garments.

Other aspects of a serial crime may have a paraphilic function. Stab wounds inflicted on the victim's body might well be inspired in part by sadism, but they could simultaneously be sexually satisfying to the offender, representing a type of "penetration". Indeed, such wounds are often

found to be inflicted near the victim's genitals or breasts (DeRiver, 1956). Picquerism, an intense desire to stab, wound, or cut the flesh of another person, is in fact a recognised (if rare) paraphilia. Paedophilia also is apparent in victim selection in a number of cases, including American serial murderers John Gacy and Albert Fish (Cahill, 1986; Lane & Gregg, 1992). Other paraphilias possibly associated with the commission of a serial crime include flagellation (sexual excitement obtained by beating, whipping, or clubbing another person), necrophilia (a sexual attraction to dead bodies), and anthropophagy (sexual excitement from eating human flesh; Fahy, Wessely, & David, 1988; Kayton, 1972; Prins, 1984, 1985).

The psychosexual element of serial crime is supported also by evidence of the offender's masturbation at the scene of some of these crimes. Although not commonly associated with serial rape, evidence of masturbation is frequently found in serial murders and arsons (Frank, 1966; Fris, 1983; Rule, 1989; Schlesinger & Revitch, 1983). Although autoerotic stimulation in this context may serve several functions (including defilement of the victim) its occurrence is consistent with the view that sexual stimulation or excitation may be derived through the commission of these crimes. Masturbation at the scene of serial arson offences also confirms the view that serial arson might not be simply a property crime; rather, there is an important class of serial arson that is motivated by psychosexual factors (Geller, 1987, 1992a,b).

Paraphilic behaviour outside the context of the crime also is common among serial offenders, suggesting that psychosexual dynamics play a central role in the offender's life as a whole. Serial murderers are reported to show a very high incidence of voyeurism, exhibitionism, fetishism, sadomasochism, frotteurism, coprophilia, bestiality, and pornography use (Prentky, Burgess, Rokous, Lee, Hartman, Ressler, & Douglas, 1989; Ressler, Burgess, Douglas, Hartman, & D'Agostino, 1986).

There are clear indications, therefore, that the form of self-gratification derived from the commission of serial crime is governed not only by sadism but also by psychosexual motives. Again, paraphilic tendencies are proposed to function in an interactive way with psychopathy,

narcissism, and sadism in the psychological profile of the serial offender.

#### *Fantasy Proneness and Dissociative Tendencies*

As noted previously, serial offenders are seldom found to be legally insane (Brown, 1991; Palermo & Knudten, 1994); that is, it usually is held that at the time of the commission of their crimes, serial offenders were in control of what they were doing and knew that what they were doing was an offence. For many people, this fact makes it difficult to comprehend how the serial offender would be able to commit such callous and brutal acts. As we have seen, part of the answer to this conundrum lies in the psychopathic, narcissistic, and sadistic psychology of the serial offender. But there is more to it than this. Legal sanity does not imply that the reality of the crime in the eyes of an objective observer was the reality experienced at the time by the offender. Understanding the serial criminal therefore requires an appreciation of the aberrant subjective reality in which such an offender operates.

In some instances the subjective reality of the serial offender is unequivocally psychotic. That is, while still being in control of their actions, some serial criminals are driven to perceive the world in a deluded way, and this delusion inspires them to criminal action. For example, American serial murderer Richard Trenton Chase killed victims in order to drink their blood, believing this would prevent his own blood from evaporating (Biondi & Hecox, 1992). Edward Gein skinned corpses to construct masks and clothing in the belief that wearing such articles would transform him into another person (Ressler & Shachtman, 1992). Although such cases are relatively uncommon (Bourguignon, 1982; Brown, 1991; Dietz, 1986; Palermo & Knudten, 1994), they do draw attention to a crucial feature of serial crime, namely, that such offences are grounded in the aberrant fantasy world of the serial criminal.

Fantasy proneness is a personality characteristic entailing a persistent pattern of deep involvement in fantasy and imagination (Lynn & Rhue, 1988). The fantasy-prone personality spends much of his or her waking life in fantasy, and the imaginative involvement is so intense that the experience of fantasy is extremely vivid and realistic. Fantasy-prone people tend to have a history

of severe childhood abuse and emotional isolation (Lynn & Rhue, 1988).

Although direct psychometric data are lacking, there are indications that serial offenders may tend to be highly fantasy prone. Sexually violent serial offenders are reported to be preoccupied with sexually sadistic fantasies involving ritualised behaviour (Carlisle, 1993; Hazelwood & Warren, 1995; MacCulloch, Snowden, Wood, & Mills, 1983; Prentky et al., 1989; Ressler, Burgess, Douglas, & Hazelwood, 1985). The repeated, stylised patterns observed in the crime scenes of serial offenders also point to the pivotal role of fantasy in these crimes. Certainly the modus operandi of serial offences may adapt and change as the offender becomes more experienced, but according to Douglas and Munn (1992) the fantasy scenario that drives these behaviours is static and remains constant in each offence. In effect, the underlying fantasy represents the serial offender's "signature". Druktinis (1992) has speculated that the psychological function of this fantasy is to convert memories of childhood trauma into a sense of control and mastery over life.

The posited role of fantasy in serial crime also helps to explain one of the distinctive features of such crime, namely, the choice of strangers as victims. In most conventional murders, rapes, or arsons some form of prior relationship will exist between the victim and offender, and this relationship provides a key motive for the offence (Geberth, 1996). In serial crime, however, the "motive" is the underlying fantasy with which the offender is preoccupied. A prior relationship between the victim and the offender therefore need not, and typically does not, exist. What is important is the "role" that the victim represents in the offender's fantasy.

The serial offender's deep absorption in fantasy signals the significance of a personality dimension closely related to fantasy proneness, namely, that of dissociative tendencies. Dissociation entails a separation between cognitive processes that ordinarily would be linked. In the dissociative state of highway hypnosis, for example, a driver may be deeply engrossed in thought and seemingly oblivious to road conditions, yet the car remains on the road; here the cognitive processes involved in navigating the road are temporarily separated or "dissociated" from the conscious involvement in thought.

Note, incidentally, that the driver still "knows" what he or she is doing with the car; the driver still owns the responsibility for the driving behaviour. An exacerbation of dissociative tendencies has been linked to a history of childhood trauma (Irwin, 1994).

There are at least some anecdotal indications of dissociative processes among serial criminals (Carlisle, 1993; Vetter, 1992). During the commission of the crime a serial offender may perceive the victim as a mere object, something less than human. This process of dehumanisation may be dissociative; the offender "knows" the victim is a sentient being but dissociates this knowledge while treating the victim as an object for use in self-gratification. Conversely, when victims have engaged an offender in personal conversation so as to engender rapport, this seems to impede the offender's ability to dissociate the victim's personhood, with the result that some of these victims escaped with their life (Davis, 1991; Douglas & Olshaker, 1995).

Further, in some instances serial offenders have described their state of mind during the commission of their offences as "dreamlike", akin to the state of highway hypnosis depicted above. Although the sincerity of offenders' accounts can not be viewed uncritically, surviving victims of some serial offenders have described their attacker as in a "trance-like" state, devoid of emotion and glassy eyed (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995); admittedly, in some instances offenders seek to facilitate the process of dissociation by using psychotropic substances such as alcohol (Ressler et al., 1988).

Again, the dissociative quality of offenders' experience of their crimes is consistent with the fact that some of these recollections are described in the third person (Tanay, 1976). Australian serial murderer John Glover, for example, described the commission of his offences by "the bad John Glover" (Simpson & Harvey, 1994). If serial offenders do tend to rely on dissociation, these defences are likely to be used not only during the crime but afterwards, too (Carlisle, 1993). Awareness of the sentient nature of the victim and of the more gory aspects of an assault may have to be dissociated from the offender's other memories of the crime. Further, it is possible that the fantasy driving the serial offender is a dissociated expression of a pathological need for control induced by a history of childhood trauma

(Drukteinis, 1992; Lewis, Yeager, Swica, Pincus, & Lewis, 1997; Ressler et al., 1988; Stone, 1994).

The hypothesis of strong dissociative tendencies in serial offenders accommodates other aspects of the psychological presentation of these people. Thus, violent sexual offenders tend to be alexithymic, that is, unable to identify and describe their emotions (Kroner & Forth, 1995), and this characteristic has been linked to dissociative processes (Irwin & Melbin-Helberg, 1997). Serial criminals' great difficulty in explaining the emotions underlying their violent behaviour and associated fantasies may therefore be a consequence of their dissociative tendencies.

The possibility that serial criminals qualify for the psychiatric diagnosis of a dissociative disorder such as dissociative identity (multiple personality) disorder continues to be a contentious issue, and certainly there have been cases in which such a claim was advocated in a mischievous endeavour to avoid conviction (Behnke, 1997). The proposed dissociative tendencies of serial offenders also await appropriate psychometric investigation (for methodological considerations see Lewis et al., 1997). The incorporation of dissociative tendencies into the serial offender's psychological profile nevertheless does seem to illuminate some aspects of the behaviour of these offenders.

The cognitive processes associated with the psychopathic, narcissistic, sadistic, and paraphilic elements of serial crime therefore are proposed to be strongly marked by fantasy and dissociation. Nonetheless, serial offenders' heavy involvement in fantasy should not be taken to imply that such offenders necessarily are out of all touch with reality. Here, fantasy is imposed upon reality; it is the script which is acted out at the scene of the crime, engaging the victim as an unwilling but leading player. Except perhaps in rare psychotic cases, the "directors" of the dramatic production do appreciate what they are doing.

### Compulsiveness

A seemingly obvious and yet often unacknowledged mechanism in serial offenders is their compulsive drive to re-offend. In contrast to "mass" or "spree" offenders who offend in a single burst, serial offenders are distinguished by their intermittent pattern of offences.

Several researchers have documented a characteristic "cycle" in the behaviour of serial offenders (Burgess, Hartman, Ressler, Douglas, & McCormack, 1986; Ressler et al., 1988). This cycle starts with the offender experiencing a growing sense of tension marked by increasingly intense sadistic and paraphilic fantasies. The tension gradually accumulates until it seemingly compels the commission of an offence, which in turn acts as a release for the tension. Following the crime, there is a "cooling off" period in which the offender experiences a temporary state of relaxation. However, the relaxation soon dissipates, and the cycle resumes with another build-up of tension. The offender seems unable to resist the compulsion of the cycle, and therefore re-offends. The length of the intermissions between offences, however, is not constant either within or between offenders.

This feature of compulsiveness in serial offenders has not received due attention from researchers. Possibly the compulsiveness has a physiological basis. Thus, Simon (1996) has remarked on the similarity of the serial offence cycle to those associated with substance abuse. On these grounds Simon has hypothesised that the aetiology of serial crime entails some form of physiological addiction. It may be noted that the "addiction model" of serial crime is consistent with some physiological and neurochemical data obtained from serial murderers (Norris, 1988).

Although further empirical investigation clearly is warranted, compulsiveness is nominated here as an important facet of the psychological profile of the serial criminal. Specifically, it is proposed that the fantasy underlying the offender's crime pattern is so engrossing to the offender that it is irresistible, driving the offender to commit a interminable succession of offences without ever reaching a state of final satiation.

In summary, a review of the predominant psychological characteristics of serial criminals provides a coherent account of the psychodynamics of their crimes. The following psychological profile of the serial offender is proposed, irrespective of the particular modality of the offence. The serial offender is marked by a distinctive complex of psychopathic, narcissistic, sadistic, paraphilic, and fantasy-prone tendencies. Psychopathy frees the offender from the injunctions of society against narcissistic and sadistic behaviour. Narcissism defines the primacy of self-gratifica-

tion in the offender's lifestyle and fuels the sense of superiority by which the offender self-justifies sadistic and psychopathic behaviour. Both sadism and paraphilic tendencies serve to give form to the antisocial self-gratification and pursuit of superiority and dominance. The psychopathic, narcissistic, sadistic, and paraphilic dynamics are integrated into a compulsive fantasy which governs the offender's style of victimisation and also allows the offender to dissociate from aspects of the criminal act which would detract from the enactment of the fantasy. The offender's impelling fantasy has a virtually addictive quality, cycling through a progressively increasing compulsion to enact the fantasy, the achievement of temporary satiety through commission of the offence, and a period of respite before the fantasy begins to take hold once more.

### A Redefinition of Serial Crime

The thesis of this article is that the term "serial crime" signifies not so much a series of similar offences but rather, a psychological propensity to continue to commit a series of similar offences. Analysis of the psychological characteristics of serial offenders does indeed suggest there is a coherent psychological profile associated with serial crime. The psychological profile as outlined

here serves to delineate the serial criminal's psychological propensity to re-offend in a consistent fashion.

Serial crime therefore is defined as an offence in which the style of victimisation is consistent with the serial psychological profile, that is, one marked by a compulsive criminal fantasy with psychopathic, narcissistic, sadistic, and paraphilic elements. The serial style of victimisation may become evident through (a) scene of crime data and witness reports for a single offence, (b) piecing together scene of crime data and witness reports over a series of offences, or (c) less frequently, offenders' confessions.

Table 1 presents distinctive characteristics of the serial style of victimisation that may be observed in cases of serial murder, serial rape, and serial arson. These characteristics are identified as direct behavioural expressions of the psychopathic, narcissistic, sadistic, and paraphilic tendencies inherent in the criminal fantasy of the serial offender. Note that in each instance the behaviours constitute activity far in excess of what would be required simply to kill a victim, to sexually penetrate a victim, or to ignite an object.

Further, the behaviours listed in Table 1 are a first approximation to the serial style of victimisation.

Table 1

Indicators of a Serial Style of Victimisation

#### MURDER

Post-mortem mutilation of corpse (e.g., evisceration, dismemberment, cannibalism)  
Intentionally stylised and/or "dramatic" positioning of corpse  
Sexual assault (e.g., rape) of victim  
Necrophilic activity with corpse or body parts  
Injuries in excess of those required to effect victim's death  
Pre-mortem torture  
Souvenir collection (e.g., victim's garments, body parts)

#### RAPE

Stylised vocal scripts demanded from victim  
Sadistic/violent treatment of victim (e.g., disrobing, torture, biting, beating)  
Other paraphilic activities with victim (e.g., digital manipulation, sodomy, urologalia, coprologalia)  
Offender's failure or inability to penetrate victim or to climax  
Souvenir collection (e.g., victim's garments or personal effects)

#### ARSON

Destruction of property in addition to fire damage  
Sexual activity at crime scene (e.g., masturbation)  
Offender "signature" intentionally left at crime scene (e.g., graffiti, fecal matter or urine, token object)  
Intentional stylised activity either in fire initiation or in other activities at the crime scene

tion and are by no means exhaustive of the behaviours that may be observed.

Two points arising from the current approach warrant brief emphasis. First, the approach takes no account of the number of offenders. It is assumed that a serial crime with multiple offenders will entail either the collaboration of individuals who possess the defining psychological profile, or the domination of a subservient partner by a person who has the proposed profile. Although some offender taxonomies distinguish serial crimes perpetrated by an individual from those perpetrated by multiple offenders (Hickey, 1997), there seems no advantage in incorporating such a distinction here.

Second, although the present approach focuses on the proneness of an offender to continue offending even if only a single offence has been committed, the behaviours listed in Table 1 are not intended as a measure for the prediction of recidivism in correctional settings or judicial matters. Although our approach might be developed towards such an end, further empirical research is necessary to assess the viability of this type of extrapolation.

#### *The Gender of Serial Offenders*

By way of an application of the proposed definition of serial crime, we would like to pose the question: Can women be serial offenders?

The existence of female serial criminals has been a contentious issue. Several commentators (e.g., Hickey, 1997; Keeney & Heide, 1994, 1995; Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998) contend that such offenders do exist and can be identified in past cases, although male and female serial offenders may be held to demonstrate some differences in behaviour (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Mann, 1996). Critical scrutiny of the relevant literature nevertheless suggests that the choice of a criterion for defining seriality is pivotal to the validity of these claims.

If serial crime is taken to mean nothing more than the intermittent commission of multiple offences, then there certainly have been instances of female offenders who fulfilled this requirement. The question remains, however, whether such offenders conform to the psychological profile usually implied by seriality and made explicit in this paper. The legitimacy of this question is enhanced by the fact that in the

noncriminal population, the incidence of psychopathy, narcissism, sadism, and paraphilias is much greater in men than in women (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Let us examine three cases frequently cited as examples of female serial offenders (Hickey, 1997; Keeney & Heide, 1994, 1995). The first case involves Dorothea Puentes who was charged with the murders of nine of her tenants in a Californian boarding house (Lane & Gregg, 1992). All murders were by poisoning and occurred over a four-year period. All victims were elderly pensioners under Puentes' care; they received social security cheques that were paid to Puentes. In this case a direct link existed between Puentes and her victims; that is, she did not murder strangers (as a serial murderer would) but rather, her victims were people who lived with her and under her care. Puentes' victims were murdered so that she would not have to maintain her care of the pensioners but would still fraudulently receive the income from the social security payments. No predatory behaviour was involved in the selection of her victims, and there were no ritualistic behaviours or mutilations perpetrated on her victims. Puentes' murders were not an expression of a sadistic or paraphilic fantasy. In short, Puentes did not exhibit the psychological profile characteristic of a serial offender. Rather, under the *Crime Classification Manual* (Douglas et al., 1992) her crimes would be categorised as criminal enterprise homicides, within the subcategory of insurance/inheritance homicide (Ressler, 1995).

Aileen Wuornos is another multiple murderer whose case is often cited as exemplifying a female serial offender. Wuornos was a prostitute who murdered seven of her clients (Wilson & Wilson, 1995). Like Puentes, Wuornos had direct links with her victims in that she murdered only her clients. Again, Wuornos' murders did not involve any sadistic or paraphilic ritualism. Her victims were dispatched impersonally by gunshot wound to the torso. Wuornos is reported to have had two motives in committing her murders: to steal the valuables of her clients, and to express a deep hatred of men stemming from her radical lesbian beliefs (Wilson & Wilson, 1995). Kelleher and Kelleher (1998, pp. 75-76) concede that Wuornos was "not motivated by a drive for bizarre sexual satisfaction, as is often the case with male serial killers",

but they still classify her as a serial murderer on the ground that in adopting the role of a prostitute Wuornos used sex as a lure to her potential victims. The latter factor nevertheless testifies more to the victims' sexual motivation than to that of Wuornos. In terms of the *Crime Classification Manual* (Douglas et al., 1992) Wuornos's offences appear to represent a combination of two categories. Her hatred of men and radical lesbianism signify a "personal cause" homicide within the "political extremist" subcategory (Ressler, 1995). Additionally, the purposeful robbery of her victims meets the criteria for "criminal enterprise" homicide (Ressler, 1995). Clearly, however, Wuornos' offences do not conform to the profile of serial murder.

A third case frequently cited as indicative of a female serial offender is that of Genene Jones (Elkind, 1983). Jones murdered over a dozen patients who were under her care in a hospital. Thus, Jones held a direct relationship to all of her victims; she did not target complete strangers. Her method of killing also was relatively impersonal: she administered an injection of a muscle relaxant in order to bring on a cardiac arrest (Nash, 1992). Jones's murders are an example of a "hero homicide" (Douglas et al., 1992) in which the offender creates a life threatening condition for the victim, then unsuccessfully attempts to "rescue" the victim so as to appear valorous. Although these actions are callous, the act of killing does not provide any sense of sadistic pleasure as is the case in serial offences. Rather, in trying to be seen as the attempted rescuer of the victim, the "hero murderer" has the primary motive of histrionic attention-seeking (Elkind, 1983).

These cases of a female multiple murderer therefore are not persuasive that some serial offenders have been women. Consideration nevertheless should be given also to the occurrence of "killing couples" or serial crimes committed by a female offender as an accomplice of a male offender. These cases might provide better examples of a woman with the psychological profile of a serial offender. Cases of such individuals include Rosemary West in the "House of Horrors" murders (Benfield, 1969) and Myra Hindley in the "Moors Murders" (Robins, 1993). In this type of case, however, it is very difficult to ascertain the extent to which the woman was driven by her own sadistic or

paraphilic fantasy as opposed to acting as a submissive accomplice of a dominant predatory male. Hazelwood et al. (1993) have documented how some sexual sadists recruit compliant accomplices who may be both abused and involved in inflicting abuse on others. Cases of "killing couples" therefore provide equivocal evidence for the existence of female serial offenders.

This is not to imply that serial crime is an exclusively male phenomenon but rather, that a case of a female offender with the psychological profile of the serial offender has yet to be documented. At present, the most appropriate option is to assume there is no gender differentiation in serial crime, while conceding that evidence of serial crime in women is still inconclusive. The view advocated here is that this issue must nevertheless be considered in relation to the serial criminal profile and not simply in terms of a "victim tally" criterion for serial crime.

By way of conclusion, it is argued that the notion of a minimum victim tally is tangential to the definition of serial crime. Past preoccupation with that approach has distracted attention from the pivotal issue of a serial psychological profile. This article has sought to make explicit the serial psychological profile and to suggest indicators for the identification of serial criminals.

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