



Analysing the Similarities and Differences between Serial Killers and Mass Murderers from First-Hand Accounts: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Shyamal Shah*

Department of Phenomenology, BIMM University, Berlin, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate whether there are any similarities or differences between serial and mass murderers. I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyse three manifestos written by mass murderers Dylan Roof, Elliot Rodger and Christopher Mercer and two autobiographies and one analysis of serial killing by Carl Panzram, HH Holmes and Ian Brady, three convicted serial killers. These texts were assumed to focus on their motivations, possible aetiology for the crimes and any other relevant information about the individual. Two similarities-hatred for humanity and motivations and one difference-mental illness were found; each being split into subthemes. The results demonstrated that there are similarities in their beliefs about humanity as well as their motivations for their crimes, but the aetiology needs to be further researched.

Keywords: Mass murderers; Serial killers; Mental illness; Motivations

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to analyse, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), whether any themes relating to the environmental aetiology and motivations of mass and serial murderers can be found by analysing their own words. I analysed two autobiographies and one analysis of serial killing by three convicted serial murderers and three manifestos by mass murderers. This is the first study being conducted on the analysis of first-hand accounts from both serial and mass murderers and aimed to answer whether there are any similarities or differences in their approaches to commit murder [1].

Written words, either books or letters, by serial killers have never been analysed before, with a limited amount conducted on manifestos by mass murderers. Mass murderers typically compose their manifestos shortly before they commit their intended crime; sharing the literature online or to their family and friends. As the serial killers write their autobiographies while they are incarcerated several years after their crime, the validity must be questioned, however this information should still provide valuable insight into the mind of a killer.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Definitions

The definition of mass murder has regularly changed since the 1980s. Dietz defined mass murder as an act of multiple homicide which left at least three dead and five injured. This was then changed by the FBI to the minimum of four deaths with no required number of injuries. Larkin believes a mass murderer is one who attacks multiple people, the majority of them randomly selected and doesn't require the death of a victim, only injury. Since then, many researchers use the FBI definition instead of the government's reduced death toll of three victims. However, for the purpose of this study, I will be using the murder of three or more victims in a single occasion by one or more killers [2].

Correspondence to: Shyamal Shah, Department of Phenomenology, BIMM University, Berlin, United Kingdom; E-mail: shyamal.shah20@gmail.com

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Sample of the murderers

Dylan roof: Dylan Roof was born on 3rd April 1994 in South Carolina, USA. He was a far-right white supremacist who believed black people were endangering America. The key factor was the shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012 in which he believed the media cared more about white-on-black crime and not enough about black-on-white crime.

He was arrested twice in the preceding months of the attack, including an investigation of loitering in a car park where he was found with forearm grip for an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle and six unloaded magazines. However, due to the gun laws in South Carolina, he was within his right. He also confided in his close friends that he was going to commit a shooting, but his claims weren't taken seriously.

He opened fire on an African Methodist church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 killing 9 people and injuring 1. He is the first person to be sentenced to death for a federal hate crime and admitted that he was aiming to start a race war when interrogated by police [3].

Carl Panzram: Carl Panzram was born on 28th June 1891 in Minnesota, USA and was one of six siblings. In 1903, at the age of 11 his parents sent him to a training school in Minnesota after he was caught stealing some cakes, apples and a revolver from a neighbour's house. He was beaten, tortured and raped during his incarceration which sparked this criminal side to him and he responded by committing arson on the place. This was the beginning of his criminal life. He became an alcoholic in his teens and was repeatedly in trouble with the law mainly for burglary and theft.

After escaping from prison in 1918, Panzram began his murder spree in 1920 once he bought a yacht with some money he stole. He enticed sailors away from New York, got them drunk and then raped and killed them. He is assumed to have killed 10 on this yacht. He then caught a ship to Luanda, Portuguese Angola in Africa in 1921 and claims that he raped and murdered a child while there and six rowers from a boat he hired. He later returned to the US, where he raped and murdered two young boys in 1922 [4]. In the following year, he killed a man with a pistol that belonged to the police chief of New Rochelle, New York. He was also imprisoned later that year and was sentenced for five years until July 1928. At the end of 1928, he was arrested in Baltimore, Maryland for a burglary and due to his extensive criminal record was given a 25 year to life sentence. It was during this sentence, he murdered the laundry foreman and was subsequently sentenced to death. While on death row, he befriended a prison guard, Henry Lesser and persuaded Lesser to provide him with a pencil and paper so he could write his life story. He was executed a year later in 1930. Panzram is said to have committed 21 murders, thousands of burglaries, robberies, larcenies, arsons and sodomy on over a thousand males.

This research adopted a qualitative approach by applying IPA to two autobiographies and one analysis of serial killing by three convicted serial killers and three manifestos written by mass murderers. The autobiographies and manifestos provide us with a first-hand insight into possible motivations and emotions for

their crimes and lives. Due to the nature of this research, Brunel ethics committee granted that no ethical approval was needed.

Data sources

The best way to understand the psychological makeup of serial and mass murderers is by analysing first-hand accounts of the perpetrators who committed the crimes. In some cases, these individuals write to provide society with an explanation for their crimes. I will be analysing autobiographies from HH Holmes and Carl Panzram as well as Ian Brady's analysis of serial killing and manifestos from mass murderers Dylan Roof, Elliot Rodger and Christopher Mercer [5].

Data collection

The data for this research has been collected *via* two autobiographies and one analysis-Panzram: A journal of murder by Carl Panzram, The strange case of Dr. HH Holmes by HH Holmes and the gates of Janus: Serial killing and its analysis by Ian Brady. These pieces were written while they were condemned in prison. HH Holmes and Carl Panzram were on death row and Ian Brady was serving his life sentence.

For the mass murderers, I am analysing my twisted World by Elliot Rodger and untitled manifestos by Christopher Mercer and Dylan Roof.

Due to the necessity of analysing first-hand accounts of serial killers and mass murderers, there is a limited amount of autobiographies and manifestos available. Many serial killers do not write about their crimes either due to the lack of opportunity to share their side of the story or they may see no relevance in writing about their lives. In some cases, they are prohibited from publishing their autobiographies due to public outcry [6].

As manifestos are more readily available online compared to autobiographies, the option to analyse more mass murderer manifestos was there, however for the purposes of validity, I decided against it.

In the case of mass murderers, their motivations are often to commit suicide or die *via* suicide by cop at the end of their spree. Therefore, they often document their motivations for committing the crime before it has occurred. Elliot Rodger and Christopher Mercer committed suicide at the end of their killing spree whereas Dylan Roof was apprehended.

RESULTS

The use of IPA enabled a deep understanding of the autobiographies and manifestos concerning the similarities and differences between serial killers and mass murderers. From reading these texts, two similarities; hatred for humanity and motivations and one difference; mental illness was found. These superordinate themes all had sub themes attached to them (Table 1) [7].

Table 1: Superordinate and subthemes identified in analysis.

Similarities		Differences	
Superordinate themes	Sub themes	Superordinate themes	Sub themes
Hatred for humanity	Racism/misogyny versus anti-establishment	Mental illness	Depressed <i>vs.</i> psychopathic
	Nihilism		
Motivations	Power		
	Revenge		

Difference-mental illness

Depressed *vs.* psychopathic: Although both mass and serial murderers typically show evidence of mental illness the pathologies are different with mass murderers normally affected with suicidal depression, psychosis or schizophrenia and serial murderers with psychopathy or Anti-Social Personality Disorder (ASPD) [8].

Individuals with psychopathy are seen as having a severe form of ASPD characterised by persistent antisocial behaviour, impaired empathy and remorse and bold, disinhibited and egotistical traits. Depression is a state of low mood and aversion to activity, which can affect a person’s thoughts, behaviour, tendencies, feelings and their sense of well-being.

The mass murderers apart from Dylan Roof present signs of depression in their manifesto whereas all of the serial killers show their psychopathic tendencies through their words.

Similarity-motivations

Through my analysis, some of the motivations represented include power and revenge. These are present in a unified typology created by Fox and Levin along with loyalty, terror and profit (which aren’t represented); they attempt to incorporate the motivations of mass and serial murderers. The results show that killers represented in the sample fit these motivations. Four of the accounts present power as a motive [9].

DISCUSSION

This research has presented a qualitative IPA analysis with the aims to explore the similarities and differences examined in the first-hand accounts. Three manifestos written by three mass murderers and two autobiographies and one analysis of serial killing by three convicted serial killers were analysed. Two similarity themes were identified-hatred for humanity and motivations and one difference-mental illness; they were all split into subthemes.

The use of IPA as a qualitative research approach was invaluable and enabled the highest possible external validity and reliability possible; this is due to the literature sources being read multiple times coding them throughout.

None of the themes were present in all of the accounts by the killers; however, at least, one serial and mass murderer were represented. Themes that were only represented in one account were discarded; this was to ensure the strengths of the themes. Elliot Rodger, Christopher Mercer and Ian Brady were represented in all of the themes with HH Holmes the least. This can be seen in the table below (Table 2) [10].

Table 2: Murderer/superordinate theme.

Murderer/ Superordinate theme	Hatred for humanity		Mental illness	Motivations	Revenge
Subtheme	Racism/Misogyny	Nihilism	Depressed	Power	
Dylan Roof	Yes	Yes			Yes
Elliot Rodger	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Christopher Mercer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Subtheme	Anti-establishment		Psychopathic		
Carl Panzram	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
Ian Brady	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

HH Holmes

Yes

Yes

Implications and future research

This study confirms much of the previous research conducted on mass and serial murderers. Due to the small-scale study, positive implications are limited and further research into this area should be conducted due to the importance of analysing these written pieces.

The study of serial killers should involve crime scene information, police interviews with the killers (if possible) or transcripts, a thorough background into the childhood of the killer and any other relevant information along with the written words. This presents a more holistic opinion of the murderer which allows for a deeper and thorough analysis of the perpetrators and ensures the information is valid [11].

For the mass murderers, analysing manifestos are incredibly important and have the ability to prevent future crimes. As some manifestos are short, information should also be gathered from family members or close associates who can provide background information about the killer. There is also an opportunity to analyse different types of mass killers, such as pseudo commandos compared to family annihilators and assess whether there are similarities and differences in their psychological makeup using their own words.

Further research on analysing and comparing both mass and serial murderers could have implications in the investigation of these individuals. This may enable law enforcement officials the opportunity to capture or steer their investigation a specific direction [12].

CONCLUSION

This is the first qualitative research that has been conducted on analysing primary data from serial and mass murderers. The results demonstrate that they share a hatred of humanity and a nihilistic philosophical perspective. The mass murderers have these views based on personal experiences whereas the serial killers exhibit an overall hatred of society and establishment. They also share different motivations, namely power and revenge, for committing their crimes; further research will provide more information around other motivations. The only

difference found was the specific mental disorder they were suffering from the serial killers are more psychopathic, being able to murder over a period of time with no remorse or guilt whereas the mass murderers were more depressed who committed their murders as a final act of rebelliousness. There is a definite need to do further analysis on these individuals because understanding them can prevent future loss of life.

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