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Is there an unidentified accomplice hiding in plain sight? Theoretical insights from leisure science on serial homicide research

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Is There an Unidentified Accomplice Hiding in Plain Sight?

Theoretical Insights from Leisure Science on Serial Homicide Research

Abstract

Although it is commonly known among forensic scholars and practitioners that many serial homicide offenders kill for enjoyment and pleasure, theoretical explorations of such widespread observations are virtually absent in the scholarly literature. This article draws from the distinct field of leisure science to examine how common constructs such as “enjoyment,” “pleasure,” “fun,” “excitement,” and so on, may operate theoretically within the complex process of serial homicide. It is concluded that robust, empirically-driven theories within leisure science provide important insights that may add to the current knowledge on serial homicide research.

Key Words: constraints theory, flow, intrinsic motivation, leisure, multiple murder, recreation, serial homicide

“I like killing people because it is so much fun.”

—“Zodiac” serial murderer

In their introduction to a special issue on serial and mass homicide, Meloy and Felthous (2004) noted that, consistent with the study of human behavior more generally, the scholarly study of serial homicide is likely to be most fruitful by incorporating diverse types of both nomothetic and idiographic research methods. Indeed, while the study of serial homicide has commonly applied traditional positivist and postpositivist methods, scholars have also investigated their topic from qualitative approaches, such as social constructionism, feminism, and phenomenology (i.e., Bartels & Parsons, 2009; Cluff, Hunter, & Hinch, 1997; Skrapec, 2001a; Warwick, 2006). Regarding disciplinary perspectives, the study of serial homicide has been approached from a range of fields representing the natural sciences, social and behavioral sciences, and the humanities. However, conspicuously absent to the scholarly literature on serial homicide has been the field of leisure science (often called leisure “studies” outside of North America). Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore how empirically-based, robust theories within leisure science may contribute new insights on the complex, multidimensional topic of serial homicide.

Leisure as a Distinct Field of Study and Serial Murder-as-Leisure

The field of leisure science grew from sociology and social psychology and focuses on what people do for fun, enjoyment, pleasure, and recreation, along with closely related questions pertaining to who, how, where, and why. Leisure scholars, then, commonly explore lifestyle patterns, how people spend their free time, and what types of experiences are intrinsically motivated and thus personally meaningful and enjoyable. The field of leisure has been richly nourished by knowledge from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, biology,

economics, psychology, and cultural studies (Walker, Scott, & Stodolska, 2016). Respected leisure academic journals include *Leisure Sciences*, *Leisure Studies*, *Journal of Leisure Research*, *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, and *World Leisure Journal*. As a foundational concept, leisure has resisted a precise definition and may be conceptualized as activity (behavior), time, setting, or mental state (Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011). However, scholars agree that whatever form (in terms of activity, time, setting, or mental state) it occurs, leisure experience must be freely chosen and intrinsically motivated. Leisure properties commonly include pleasure or enjoyment, positive emotions, adventure or relaxation (depending on the particular leisure experience), stress release, and self-expression.

It is well-known that serial homicide offenders often kill for the pleasure and enjoyment it gives them, consistent with the German concept of *lustmord* (Leyton, 2005; Skrapec, 2001b). Serial killing frequently is intrinsically motivated (Skrapec, 2001b), and the fact that many offenders spend extensive time planning and rehearsing murders suggests that such killings are also freely chosen. Thus, most forms of serial homicide meet the two essential criteria for leisure. Numerous offenders, of course, have explicitly stated that they greatly enjoyed killing, including Jack the Ripper, Keith Jespersen, Dennis Nilsen, Carl Panzram, Manuel Pardo, Dennis Rader, and Lawrence Bittaker.

Interestingly, three out of four major types of serial murder in the widely cited classification system initially developed by Holmes and DeBurger (1988) involve leisure directly. According to Holmes and DeBurger, serial murder is committed for the sense of thrill and adventure for Hedonistic-type serial offenders; whereas others (Power and Control-type) are motivated primarily by exerting dominance and extreme control over victims. Mission-Oriented serial murderers seem to have a chronic focus on removing people from particular demographic

groups, such as prostitutes, elderly people, or specific racial/ethnic minorities; which reflects a particular form of *serious leisure* (to be discussed shortly). Of the four major types of serial homicide offenders identified by Holmes and DeBurger, only the Visionary-type does not seem to be directly relevant to leisure because psychosis significantly compromises the leisure criterion of being freely chosen. However, it should be noted that recent empirical research has failed to support commonly used serial homicide typologies, including that of Holmes and DeBurger (see Bennell, Bloomfield, Emeno, & Musolino, 2013; Canter, Alison, Alison, & Wentnik, 2004; Canter & Wentnik, 2004; Farrell, Keppel, & Titterington, 2013; Taylor, Lambeth, Green, Bone, & Cahillane, 2012), thus it seems that serial homicide, including murder-as-leisure, specifically, is more multifaceted and complex than previously realized.

Serial Homicide and Leisure Theory

Besides difficulties in accurately classifying serial homicide, forensic scholars and practitioners have disagreed in simply defining it (for reviews, see Adjorlolo & Chan, 2014; Skrapec, 2001b). Thus, serial homicide and leisure have something in common right from the starting point. As noted earlier, while leisure experience is freely chosen and intrinsically motivated, the construct, similar to historical approaches to serial homicide, has resisted a precise definition by scholars and may be approached as activity (behavior), time, setting, or mental state (Kleiber, et al., 2011). These leisure dimensions are relevant for generating insights into understanding mobility differences among serial homicide offenders as described by Hickey (2016); specifically, (a) those who travel to kill; (b) those who kill locally; and (c) place-specific offenders who murder in their homes or in their employment settings.

For example, serial murders with jobs that require frequent travel, such as long haul truck driving, have opportunities to kill given the nature of their employment, yet they engage in

murder as a form of leisure experience (providing pleasure and perhaps releasing stress), which then complements their occupational logistics. Conversely, serial murderers who kill locally seem to do so in a manner consistent with common forms of everyday outdoor recreation; such as hunting, fishing, swimming, or skiing; outlined by Clawson and Knetsch (1966), where recreationalists: (a) look forward to an upcoming leisure experience (anticipation), (b) travel to the nearby recreation site, engage in the recreation activity onsite, (c) travel back home, and (d) afterward reflect on the enjoyment that the recreational activity produced. In summarizing the literature on place attachments, Kyle (2016) noted that place attractiveness (or aversion) for leisure has multiple interpretive dimensions, including cultural meanings and symbolism, collective histories, and most importantly, personal and subjective meanings. These characteristics of place attachments may help explain, in addition to logistical matters, why some serial murderers prefer to kill repeatedly in the same specific settings. Thus innovative research on leisure as activity, time, setting, and mental state in relation to distinctions of geographic mobility preferences of serial homicide offenders could provide rich, new insights helpful to both scholars and practitioners.

Casual to Serious and Project-Based Leisure: Application to Multiple Homicide

For the past 40 years, Robert Stebbins has worked to describe and classify the many diverse forms of leisure experience. His prolific work suggests that specific forms of leisure can be understood as falling somewhere on a continuum with *casual* leisure at one end and *serious* leisure at the other. Casual leisure is described as being immediate, primarily hedonic, intrinsically rewarding, short-lived pleasurable activity that requires little or no training (Stebbins, 1997, 2001a). Casual leisure is often spontaneous and playful, and its benefits are largely associated with stress-reduction, relaxation, and restfulness associated with restoring life

balance (Stebbins, 2001a, 2001b). On the other hand, serious leisure is so interesting to participants that it becomes career-like and requires ongoing effort and perseverance, special skills, has a unique ethos, produces durable benefits and rewards, and leads to formulation of a specific identity around it (Stebbins, 1982, 2001b). Serious leisure participants include amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers, and benefits associated with participation include cherished experiences, gaining new knowledge and skills, self-expression, self-image, and self-gratification (Stebbins, 2001b). Leisure scholars building on Stebbins' research have emphasized that serious leisure pursuits are diverse, sociopolitical, and thus influence and are influenced by, the broader social and cultural environment (Gallant, Arai, & Smale, 2013). Stebbins (2005) also described a third major form of leisure, *project-based leisure*, which is "a short-term, moderately complicated, one-shot or occasional though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time" (p. 1). Although only a one-shot or occasional undertaking, project-based leisure has properties of both casual and serious leisure, shares benefits with serious leisure, but often has additional social rewards depending on the type of leisure project (Stebbins, 2005).

The relevance of classifying leisure according to the typology developed by Stebbins appears to be useful in better understanding not only cases of serial homicide, but also other forms of multiple murder (specifically, mass murder and spree murder) that are expressive and intrinsically motivated. Indeed, some episodes of mass and spree murder also appear to function as leisure for those offenders who enjoy the anticipation and actual experience of killing. For example, the Columbine High School shooters clearly enjoyed planning and executing mass murder, and one of the Washington DC snipers, Lee Boyd Malvo, seems to have echoed the "Zodiac" killer by reportedly saying, "I like killing people because it is so much fun" (Leyton, 2005, p. 12).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, Douglas, Burgess, Burgess, & Ressler, 1992, p. 20-21) has made important quantitative and qualitative distinctions between mass murder (“one person operating at one location at one period of time”), spree murder (“a single event with two or more locations with no cooling off period between murders”), and serial murder (“three or more separate events in three or more separate locations with an emotional cooling off period between homicides”). Despite the cooling off period being a distinguisher in defining multiple homicide, particularly in differentiating between serial and spree murders, Osborne and Salfati (2015) noted the absence of empirical research and theoretical exploration into what factors contribute to the varied lengths of cooling off periods. Osborne and Salfati also pointed out, given the lack of scholarly attention to cooling off, that the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) has removed the cooling off period from its definition of serial homicide.

In cases of multiple murder that seem to function as leisure for the offender(s), it appears that a consideration of the casual to serious leisure continuum, along with project-based leisure, is valuable in assessing potential factors that may contribute to differences in time lengths between killings. For example, school shootings (mass murder) likely function as a mephitic form of project-based leisure, in that such events are pleasurable for perpetrators as, to use Stebbins definition cited previously, a “short term, moderately complicated, one-shot or occasional though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time.” As (leisure) projects, mass murders are carefully planned (often for weeks or months), require extensive preparation, and most frequently are motivated by revenge and power (Fox & Levin, 1998; Fox & DeLateur, 2014). Interestingly, one of the personal benefits of participation in typical project-based leisure experiences; such as dramatic plays, elaborate parties, or pageants; is to be

recognized as a creator/participant in the project (Stebbins, 2005), which, in cases of murder-as-leisure, would help satisfy offenders' intense cravings for revenge and power. Cases of spree murder engaged in for pleasure also may reflect project-based leisure, if sprees are carefully planned and prepared, or perhaps murder sprees may lie somewhere on the casual side of the casual to serious leisure continuum if the murder series is somewhat more spontaneous, involves less planning and preparation, and requires little knowledge or skill to execute.

A few scholars have suggested that serial homicide is a rare form of deviant leisure (Gunn & Caissie, 2006; Rojek, 1999; Williams & Walker, 2006). Williams and Walker (2006) classified serial murder as a violent form of serious leisure, specifically. Although many serial cases of murder-as-leisure (especially sexual serial murder) seem to reflect salient properties of serious leisure, other cases seem to better fit project-based leisure, or even several key attributes of casual leisure. For example, Dennis Rader organized his murders as "projects," which, consistent with project-based leisure, were structured in a particular fashion and reflected elements of both serious and casual leisure (Identifying Author reference). Donald Henry Gaskins Jr. described his killings as either "coastal," which were quite random, targeted strangers as victims, and occurred relatively frequently with little planning or preparation (akin to casual leisure); or "serious murders" (Newton, 2006), which were considerably more goal-oriented; targeted known-persons or acquaintances; could involve accomplices; required more planning, preparation and skill; and occurred less frequently (serious leisure). Because casual and serious leisure are at opposite sides of a continuum rather than being understood as completely dichotomous constructs, there is considerable flexibility in assessing and classifying specific cases of multiple murder, including serial homicide, as particular types of leisure. Furthermore, leisure theory would predict that most offenders would display a somewhat limited range,

regarding the casual to serious leisure continuum or project-based leisure, of their specific type of operationalization of murder-as-leisure. Such a theoretical prediction is compatible with emerging research that focuses on identifying consistent behavioral themes or patterns, as opposed to expecting the same behaviors across murder series committed by particular serial offenders (Bateman & Salfati, 2007; Sorochinski & Salfati, 2010; Trojan & Salfati, 2011).

Flow Theory: Serial Murder as Optimal Experience

Flow, or the psychology of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997), occurs when there is a close balance between the skill level of the participant and the challenge level of an activity. Flow has been examined across a range of leisure experiences, and is thus a salient and robust theory within the field of leisure. For a given activity, if the skill level is too low compared to the challenge, then the participant becomes bored; conversely, if the inherent challenge exceeds skill level, then the participant experiences anxiety or frustration (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; 1997). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1993), flow experience occurs when there is: (a) a balance between challenge and skill; (b) a clear goal; (c) a sense of control; (d) a merging of action and awareness; (e) concentration; (f) absorption in the activity; (g) time seems to be altered; and (h) the experience is autotelic.

A diverse array of leisure activities, from casual to serious leisure types to project-based leisure, are capable of producing flow experiences. Only recently has flow theory been seriously considered with respect to serial homicide, yet initial exploration into this possibility provides initial evidence that the properties of flow, in fact, do apply to serial murder-as-leisure (Identifying Author reference). Several serial offenders reportedly have expressed the intense pleasure and enjoyment that killing people sometimes gives them. However, consistent with flow theory, many serial offenders seem to have experienced frustration after committing their first

homicides, due to their initial lack of experience (activity challenge exceeds skill level) and inability to control important aspects of the murder in comparison to high expectations dictated by their detailed fantasies. As offenders gain more homicidal experience and thus more skill, aspects of the homicidal challenge must also be increased somewhat proportionally in order to attain optimal satisfaction derived from the murder-as-leisure experience. Thus, while it is well-known that many serial homicide offenders are ultimately caught in large part due to high narcissism; from a leisure flow perspective, increased risks (thus creating a higher degree of challenge) must also be taken, perhaps largely subconsciously, by the offender over time in order to continue enjoying the serial murder-as-leisure (Identifying Author reference).

Leisure Constraints and Negotiation Theories

In understanding how people come to participate in specific leisure activities, leisure scholars have developed a small cluster of theories focusing on leisure constraints and how people negotiate specific constraints in order to engage in their preferred leisure experiences. Thus, leisure constraints and negotiation scholarship is comprised of a family of competing theoretical approaches (all very similar), including the *hierarchical model of constraints* (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991), *constraints effects mitigation model* (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001), *dual channel constraints model* (Son, Mowen, & Kerstetter, 2008), and integrated models (for reviews, see Godbey, Crawford, & Shen, 2010; Jackson, 2005; Schneider, 2016).

At the core of leisure constraints and negotiation theories are issues involving leisure preferences and motivations, levels and types of constraints (barriers to participation), and negotiation strategies that ultimately lead to participation in the desired leisure experience. Of course, if specific constraints are not successfully negotiated, then motivation tends to decline

and individuals may pursue a different leisure activity. However, constraints are often negotiated due to enablers or facilitators, which function to promote leisure participation.

Regardless of the specific theory, leisure constraints are grouped into three types: intrapersonal constraints, interpersonal constraints, and structural constraints. Intrapersonal constraints are micro level factors that include personal characteristics and psychological features (i.e., stress, anxiety, depression, religiosity, perceived skill level, subjective evaluation of appropriateness of activity, etc.); interpersonal constraints focus on relationships and interactions with others (i.e., lack of sufficient support, difficulty arranging schedules to engage in leisure); while macro-level structural constraints address barriers arising from institutions and the broader natural and social environments (Crawford, et al., 1991; Godbey, et al., 2010). Early empirical research suggested that intrapersonal constraints were most powerful and must be successfully negotiated first, followed by the negotiation of interpersonal, and finally, structural constraints (Crawford, et al., 1991). However, a thorough review by Godbey and colleagues (2010) found that individuals' situations, and thus the restrictive power of different forms of constraints, often vary; thus depending on the leisure preference and associated contextual variables, constraint negotiation may begin at any level and proceed in any order.

Leisure Constraints/Negotiation and Serial Murder-as-Leisure

According to Jackson (2005), a major contribution of leisure constraints research is to understand leisure choices and behavior. While leisure scholars commonly apply constraints/negotiation theories to a wide variety of legitimate leisure experiences, these theories heretofore have not been considered with respect to criminal activity as leisure experience. However, constraints/negotiation theories provide a valuable new lens for considering the leisure choices and behavior of serial homicide offenders. Obviously, the prevention of serial homicide

is largely dependent on strengthening various constraints so that its likelihood of occurring is significantly diminished. Specific types of constraints are likely to shape how a given offender plans and carries out specific murders. In other words, while recent empirical research suggests that behavioral themes are likely to be consistent across serial homicides for a given offender (see Bateman & Salfati, 2007; Sorochinski & Salfati, 2010; Trojan & Salfati, 2011), variations in specific behaviors, for a given offender may be a function of specific leisure constraint and negotiation issues surrounding each attempted homicide.

Although empirical research is needed, it is highly likely that both intrapersonal and structural constraints are more important than interpersonal constraints with respect to serial homicide as a unique form of leisure. Regarding intrapersonal constraints, there seems to be a critical psychological juncture at which many serial offenders progress from homicidal fantasy and rehearsal to deciding to commit their first murders. For example, Jeffrey Dahmer admitted that he deliberated for some time about committing homicide, but once he had talked himself into carrying out his first murder, then future kills became much easier. Indeed, classic neutralization techniques (Sykes & Matza, 1957) appear to be common strategies of serial offenders for negotiating psychologically-based intrapersonal constraints (see Coston, 2014).

The immediate social networks of serial homicide offenders may function as typical interpersonal constraints to murder-as-leisure; however, social networks may, even sometimes simultaneously, serve as strategic forces for successfully navigating various constraints. For example, according to court records, Dennis Rader reported that he could not engage in his preferred murder-as-leisure activities as much as he would have liked because of obligations to his wife, family, and work, thus these social ties functioned as interpersonal constraints. This example is consistent with findings from a recent study by Osborne and Salfati (2015), which

reported that greater offender social involvement was associated with longer cooling off periods. While Rader found ways to negotiate interpersonal constraints, many of these same interpersonal constraints, like those of numerous other serial offenders, simultaneously acted as leisure enablers, following the commission of murders, by allowing him to blend in without being suspected. In cases of healthcare serial murders, offenders utilize professional positions of status and trust as strategies to navigate interpersonal constraints to their murder as leisure, while serial neonaticide mothers may employ common gender role stereotypes as leisure constraint negotiation strategies (see Soares-Barros, Goulart-Rosa, de Borba Telles, & Vernet Taborda, 2016).

Structural constraints to serial murder-as-leisure are varied and depend on specific fantasies, motivations, and modus operandi. Specific serial homicides vary greatly in terms of time, money, and resources needed to carry them out, and structural constraints often vary depending on the geographic mobility of offenders (i.e., traveling, local, or place-specific offenders). Clearly, the presence and types of structural constraints have an impact on numbers of victims of particular serial offenders. The obvious structural constraint, of course, is incarceration. Historically, several serial homicide offenders have been detained in prisons or psychiatric facilities later to be released, only to resume their homicidal behavior. As a classic example of successfully negotiating murder-as-leisure structural constraints, Edmund Kemper was a model patient and talked his way out of the Atascadero State Psychiatric Hospital, only to resume his killing. Other issues involving structural constraints pertain to cultural and socio-political environments. For example, Hickey (2016) reported that the ways that serial murder is expressed are rooted in culture, while Newton (2006) pointed out that prolific serial murderers in

Russia and China remained undetected for many years based on political structures and restricted information disseminated to the public within those nations.

Leisure constraint/negotiation theories illustrate that people are likely to engage in their preferred leisure experiences when there are fewer cumulative restraints and when existing constraints are able to be successfully negotiated. Examination of historical cases of individuals who killed very high numbers victims for their personal pleasure and enjoyment, such as Erzebet Bathory and Gilles de Rais, reveal that there were very few intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints that prevented such homicide. Leisure constraints/negotiation research has been vibrant for well over two decades, and although much research is needed, these theories provide additional valuable insights concerning freely chosen, intrinsically motivated serial homicide.

Conclusion

Although it is commonly acknowledged by forensic scholars and practitioners that numerous serial homicide offenders kill for the pleasure and enjoyment it gives them, such observations have lacked theoretical exploration. This paper, then, contributes to the forensic science literature by applying robust leisure science theory to serial homicide research. Indeed, leisure scholars address a myriad of questions and issues pertaining to diverse forms of pleasure and fun, such as: why people choose particular leisure and recreational experiences, how various forms of leisure are classified, the significance of place and setting for leisure experiences, types and functions of leisure constraints, and potential benefits and costs of leisure. These questions and issues are of substantial significance in learning to understand how and why serial homicide seems to be so enjoyable for those rare individuals who engage in it.

Applying leisure theory to homicide research in no way discounts or replaces existing forensics approaches to understanding and addressing serial homicide research. Rather, leisure theory complements valuable existing knowledge, provides interesting new insights, and generates important new research questions. For example, empirical research shows that a very high percentage of serial homicide offenders have suffered head injuries or severe childhood psychological trauma or neglect when attachments to caregivers is critical, which then may contribute to a chronic, intense craving to exert power and control (see Hickey, 2016). Ultimately, perhaps serial murder, specifically as recreational leisure, may be something of a counterfeit or dysfunctional way of restoring psychological balance. At its essence, healthy leisure is about learning (the Greek word for leisure is *schole*) and life balance (Latin *recreatio*, meaning “to restore”). In other words, for serial homicide offenders, murder-as-leisure seems to be a maladaptive way of psychologically restoring, temporarily, psychological power and control that was once, whether real or perceived, taken away during childhood.

It is, of course, extremely difficult to imagine that multiple murder could be experienced as leisure for most people. Nevertheless, this phenomenon is evident. Although incidences of serial homicide are statistically very rare, leisure appears to play a significant role in many such cases. Leisure science, in conjunction with other disciplines, can provide additional knowledge to help better understand the motivations, behavioral processes, and subjective experiences of serial homicide offenders; and such knowledge can aid in preventing and addressing extreme violence. While the application of leisure theory to serial homicide research as discussed herein in an important start, it signals the need for collaboration and much more empirical research. At present, there are still far more questions than answers.

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