

Arnon Edelstein

Mass Murder and Serial Murder

An Integrative Look

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To my father, Professor Eliezer Edelstein,
God rest his soul;
To my wife and best friend, Yael;
to my children Roi, Shirly, and Gali;
may they live long!

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Preface

About two years ago, my book *Criminal Career and Serial Criminality* was published by Ben-Gurion University Press in Beer Sheva. The book dealt with a renewed definition of the concept of the criminal career, as well as with the concept of serial criminality. In reference to serial criminality, a number of chapters were dedicated to serial murders. During the two years since then, I have given a course which dealt with the subject of the book and was amazed by the interest students showed in serial murders. As a result, my own interest has increased, and I have read recent articles and books on the matter. Through this research, I was exposed to different explanations on serial murders as a subcategory of multiple-victims murder. This exposure greater aroused my interest on this issue, and the discovery that theoretical and researched literature that deals with mass murders is inconclusive. I have also received important and enlightening reviews of the chapters in my previous book which dealt with serial murders. The reports on mass murders in schools and universities in the USA, led me to recognize that there is a lack of knowledge on mass murders, although numerous myths are expressed in the general media, by the public, and among students, as well. These facts convinced me that there is a need to present this issue in a structural way to the reader in order to clarify the overall picture. In my attempt to arrange the theoretical aspects of the phenomena, I will suggest new aspects for understanding them, some of which are multidisciplinary.

Introduction

The attempt to categorize criminals and crimes is not new to criminology. Since Lombroso up to now, some criminologists have attempted to establish distinctions among different kinds of crimes and criminals. This book chooses to deal with the most severe crime—taking the lives of others. As opposed to a “regular” murder in which one person murders another in a spontaneous and unplanned way, much more frightening is the phenomenon of multiple-victims murder, either by taking the lives of several people at the same time, or the life of one person at a time in a pattern that repeats itself.¹

Toward the end of writing this book there was a news item which read: “A police officer murdered his wife and two children, and committed suicide” (23.10.08). A few months earlier, a murder of nine pupils in a school in Australia had taken place. In 2007, a mass murder was committed by a student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, USA. There were students and lecturers killed in the incident, including a native Israeli lecturer who heroically defended his students.

Another event, which took place in Israel in the mid-nineties, refers to an emigrant from the former USSR, Nikolai Bonner, who murdered four homeless people one at a time in Haifa, and was sentenced to 120 years of imprisonment by the District Court in Haifa. These events are nothing new, and they accompany us through the years emphasized by the consistently developing mass media presently available in every home. Various scientists in the fields of psychology and criminology include these phenomena under the definition of multiple murders, extreme killing, and other definitions (Fox and Levin, 2005).

A hearing conducted by the American Senate Committee in 1983 regarding “patterns of murders which have been executed by one person with large numbers and no motive or reason,” established quite a new taxonomy of violence. Multiple murder was recategorized according to the question of whether the actions of murder

happened more or less at the same time and place, or stretched over a long period of months or years. The first type of a multiple crime, such as a massacre at a school, was called a “multiple murder,” whereas crimes executed over a long period of time and in various locations were categorized as a “serial murder” (Jenkins, 2002).

The issue of multiple murder (a relatively small number of criminals causing the death of many, and fear in many others), has attracted the attention of criminological research and theory in the last three decades. The concept of “multiple murder” has risen also as part of the debate on the different definitions of a murder that is not of a single victim as in mass murder, serial murder, and so on. Until recent years, there had not been a criminological reference to a multiple murder as a separate category. The tendency was to refer to it as a special kind of murder, and as such, examine it according to traditional criminal theories. Alternatively, some regarded it as a case of a severe mental disorder (psychosis) and left the explanation to psychopathological theories. In other cases, it ended up with the claim that this was an arbitrary and rare category which does not justify a separate reference except for the determination that multiple murder only be considered as such if it is a case of at least four victims (Fox & Levin, 1998).² DeLisi and Scherer (2006) define multiple murderers as MHOs (Multiple Homicide Offenders), stating that they are: “Criminal defendants who murdered more than one person during a criminal episode” (Ibid., p. 367).³ The main reference in defining the concept is the different components of a multiple murder, both serial and mass murders. Various scientists (DeLisi & Scherer, 2006; Holmes & Holmes, 1998; Fox & Levin, 2005) regard it as a concept that encompasses three different kinds of murder:⁴

The first is a mass murder, and it deals with cases in which the action of murder involves a large number of victims in a relatively short period (minutes, hours) during a one-time event.

The second is a serial murder which describes cases in which the action of murder involves one victim at a time, but the total number of murdering actions attributed to the same murderer, or

murderers, amounts to a large number of victims.⁵ These actions can last for days, weeks, months and even years, with a “cooling-off period” between one event and the next.

It is obvious then that the main difference between the two types of murder, mass and serial, is apparently only the duration of time in which the murder takes place, and the existence or non-existence of a cooling-off period between one murder and the next (DeLisi & Scherer, 2006). DeLisi & Scherer (2006) have not emphasized sufficiently, however, the essential difference between the two types of murder: While a mass murder refers to a case in which a number of victims are murdered at the same time and place; in a serial murder, one person is murdered in each event.

Another essential difference stems from the fact that the mass murder may take place among acquaintances. For example, an armed man who murders his co-workers or colleagues when he feels they have hurt him and he feels anger and revenge; while most of the cases of serial murders are characterized by unfamiliarity between the murderer and the victim.

The third type, called a spree murder in the literature, is a journey of murder. In this case, there are two possible situations: One, an armed man on an undistinguished killing spree of strangers and/or innocent acquaintances without a cooling-off period between one murder and the next⁶ ending up with the suicide of the murderer, or else killed by the police. An event of this kind lasts, in most cases, up to a few hours. The second type is the murder of strangers in the location of an armed robbery, killed in order to prevent them from being witnesses of the event.

Fox and Levin (2003, 2005) argue that both kinds of spree murder do not set a distinguished type of multiple murder, but a subcategory of mass murder. Therefore, it should not be presented as a separate category of multiple murder, but included within the subject of mass murder.

In this context, one must refer to a common mistake dealing with the acquaintance of the murderers with the victims. Among the erroneous myths this book deals with, there is a perception

according to which the victims of mass murderers are always strangers. As a matter of fact, one can find cases where the murderer kills relatives at the beginning of the spree murder, and then turned to murder others, strangers and/or acquaintances.

In addition, the spree murders of the second type does not actually denote a mass murder as argued by some scientists. Although the murder is of a number of people in one event, the murder is not a one-time event, and it is probable that the same murderers would murder witnesses of their crime in the future. Therefore, it is a special form of a serial murder, rather than a mass murder. However, defining the serial murder as one in which one person is murdered at a time created a problematic obstacle which makes it difficult to regard the spree murder as a serial murder. A murder of this kind is actually not different from a murder of sect members belonging to a certain social category; from organized killings among gangs and organized crime, or from some acts of terrorism when a bomb is set and the terrorist escapes from the scene.

Two solutions to the problem of definition have been established: One, categorizing these cases as a separate category of multiple-victims murder which is neither a mass murder, nor a serial murder according to the definitions one finds in the literature (or alternately, both mass and serial). Two, including these cases under the term of "serial murder," while changing the definition of a serial murder. The new definition determines that a serial murder is an event in which at least one victim is murdered at each event, and between one event and the next there is a delay, or the cooling-off period. In this situation, one can define, for instance, the elimination of witnesses of a robbery as a serial murder for the sake of material benefit, with a number of victims each time, and a cooling-off period between one murder and the next. This kind of change would alter the essence of the serial murder as a murder of one-on-one, and, therefore, I prefer the first term option.

In any case, scientists came to the conclusion that a third category of a spree murder is unnecessary and confusing, and hence, the multiple-victims murder includes only the two types I

have mentioned, although there are intermediate definitions, like a mass-serial murder. One of the problems in the literature in this context is a mixture of concepts when the same phenomenon is called both a mass murder and a serial murder, with no clear distinctions between them.

As I have indicated, one of the problems of understanding the phenomena of serial and mass murders stems from determinations—that have never been proved—becoming erroneous generalizations made by the mass media. For example, the common myth is that a mass murder is a spontaneous murder committed by a young man who shoots indiscriminately at people who are total strangers to him. As I will show, this is an incorrect and unrealistic generalization.⁷ As a matter of fact, most mass murderers murder people they are familiar with, but due to a wrong distinction between serial murderers and mass murderers, different categories of serial murder have been acknowledged as mass murder, and vice versa. Alternatively, the media tend to emphasize a certain kind of mass murderer or serial murderer, even though they are the minority in these categories.

Sometimes the definition of a multiple murder excludes crimes between states (war crimes and ethnic purification like those which have been executed under the leadership of Hitler and other leaders in history). On the other hand, sometimes there is reference to institutionalized and organized crimes executed by criminal organizations, criminal gangs, and sects. In the case of sects it refers, for instance, to multiple murders as part of racism or hatred based on ethnic background, like the murderous acts executed by Manson and his believers. In this book, we will come to know the attitude toward multiple-victims murder executed by organized crime with a criminal background, and by terrorists with a nationalistic background, but reference to this kind of multiple-victims crime will be made just for definition and distinctions purposes, with no thorough reference to these fields, since, as we have seen, it is problematic to include these categories within mass murder.

Generalization Versus Distinction

Even if I accept the argument that a multiple murder is composed of only two kinds of murder, one can still ask why we should distinguish between mass murder and serial murder. Both cases deal with multiple-victims murder, and only the timing, duration of the act of murder, and the cooling-off period distinguish between them. Fox and Levin (2005) reinforce this claim by saying that the typology of the kinds of multiple murders is more theoretical than practical (Ibid., p. 18). Their attitude is influenced by the attitude of the FBI which aspired to solve cases of multiple murders by way of actually composing the portrait of the criminal, and less interest was placed on the theoretical differences and aspects among the kinds of multiple murders. Moreover, Fox & Levin (2005) claim that, in fact, one can see common motives for mass murder and serial murder even if the *modus operandi* is significantly different. Their conclusion is that one has to put the mass murder and the serial murder under one category. For strengthening their argument, they suggest a typology of five categories of motives which are relevant for both serial and mass murder: Power, vengeance, loyalty, benefit (economic), and terror (Ibid., p. 20). In summarizing their arguments, they say that even with different typologies for mass murder and serial murder, the problem was that these categories do not utilize all the options to the fullest (Ibid., p. 19).

DeLisi and Scherer (2006) present a similar approach that harshly criticizes any attempt of differentiating among the different kinds of multiple murders. According to them, the wider scope may provide more fertile and economical information than unnecessary separate insistence on each and every type. DeLisi and Scherer (2006) examined murderers who committed multiple-victims murder (mass or serial), and found that the common denominator among the different murderers was a combination of the following factors: Criminal record, an older age than that of “regular” murderers, white (in most cases), and commencement of a criminal career at an early age. The problem in this research is

that these scientists sampled 654 convicted murderers, out of which they examined only those who committed at least two acts of murder. This condition contradicts the different definitions of a serial murderer or a mass murderer.

DeLisi and Sherer (2006) refer to multiple murders in general, but unintentionally show the problematic nature of doing so since on the one hand they talk about murderers who committed more than one crime—which is relevant to a serial murder and not to a mass murder. On the other hand they refer to the literature that deals with mass murder. Hence, the lack of agreement on the number of victims can lead to flawed theoretical distinctions, and as long as it is an arbitrary decision of the law and the legal authorities, there will be no uniformity among the theoreticians.

In spite of the claims on the importance of including different kinds of multiple-victims murder, the scientists who supported this inclusion dealt with distinctions, definitions and motives of mass murder versus serial murder (such as Fox & Levin, 1998, 2005; DeLisi & Scherer, 2006). Therefore, they definitely need different terms, although they argued against the fundamental distinction between them.

In view of the attempts at inclusion, the scientists alternately used the terms “mass murder” and “serial murder” to describe the same phenomenon—multiple-victims murder. The scientists used the title of “multiple-victims murder” when dealing with a mass murder or a serial murder, and by doing so, often ignored the essential differences between these two kinds of murder (US Department of Justice, 1996; DeLisi & Scherer, 2006; Messing & Heeren, 2004).

Even if there is justification for including serial murder and mass murder under one entirety with similar characteristics, there are still some essential problems in including these two kinds of murder which must be differentiated:

One problem refers to the motive for the murderous act. Even if the motive is allegedly the same, for example, a material motive, in a serial murder, the characteristics of murder for the sake of a material motive differ to a large extent from a mass murder from

the same motive. An example for a material motive in a serial murder can be seen when a woman is married time and again to rich men and murders them in order to inherit their money (“the Black Widow”), or a woman who establishes a retirement home, and murders an old person in order to receive his social security payments. Nevertheless, a material motive for a mass murder can be a case of eliminating witnesses of an armed robbery so the murderers would not be caught and arrested, even if it does not lead to actual material profit.

A second problem is the *modus operandi*. How can one compare between someone who equips himself with firearms and ammunition and exposes himself to the public, part of which would be killed by him, to someone who is always very strict of not exposing his identity? This is the essential point which distinguishes between the two types of murderers.

Third, a mass murder is a one-time action, but the death toll can be high, up to tens of victims in each event. After the murder act, the murderer tends to commit suicide, to be arrested, or even to be shot by the police, while in a serial murder the murderer is very strict not to arouse suspicion, and in this way he can go on murdering, even for years, one victim at a time until the number of victims can be higher than that of a mass murder.

The fourth problem in this comparison between types of murder is the fear of the public: Although a mass murder arouses public horror, the event ends quickly and the anxiety becomes part of the past, whereas a serial murderer who has not been caught, and every now and then another body is discovered; hundreds of thousands of people are in a state of anxiety and worry for an extended period of time which influences the way of life and the quality of life. In this context, one should emphasize the central point that distinguishes between a mass murder (including a spree of murder) and a serial murder: In a serial murder, there is a cooling-off or latent period between one murder and the next which is not the case in a mass murder.