

Serial Killers Have Unique Behavioral Fingerprints, UNH Expert Believes

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Profile

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UNH professor and national expert



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In the netherworld of serial killers it might be expected that somewhere along the line there would be some similarities between, say, Jack the Ripper and the Son of Sam, or Ted Bundy and Gary Ridgway, the Green River Killer.

But Robert Keppel, University of New Haven (UNH) professor, author, retired police detective, and world-renowned expert on serial killers, says just the opposite is true. In fact, the myriad idiosyncrasies that rumble through a serial killer's head are so individualized that they leave what can be termed a "behavioral fingerprint" that is psychologically as unique as an individual's thumbprint.

For instance, George Russell, known as the "Eastside Killer," a small-time burglar and con artist who pretended to be a policeman, raped and killed women he met in bars, many in Seattle. But his signature was necrophilia and sexually assaulting the victims with foreign objects after they died. He then manipulated the bodies, leaving them in poses that were intended to shock the person who discovered them, as well as the police.

Although serial killers usually kill by strangulation or other hands-on physical means, one, Robert Yates, was unique in that he killed with a handgun. Yates was convicted of killing at least 15 young women, most in the Spokane, Washington, area, with a signature gunshot. Many, but not all, of his victims were prostitutes, and Keppel notes that Yates showed a sense of possessiveness and dominance over them. In fact, one victim was buried in his yard, right underneath a window of his house. Unlike Russell, Yates did not further abuse the victims' bodies once the crime had been committed.

Keppel has investigated, reviewed, or consulted in more than 2,000 murder cases and has lectured extensively to police officers at national seminars on homicide investigation. He has testified in court as an expert on serial killers' methods of operation and the "signature aspects" of murder investigations.

Serial killers can be especially difficult to track, but they do leave their own brand of calling cards.

"They have their own fantasies, their own anger, their own power needs," Keppel says. The motivating factors behind each serial killer's rampages and methodology are unique to the individual personality, he notes.

To identify the work of a serial killer, investigators must "examine the rarity of that characteristic in the signature," Keppel said. The signature will surface "in what the killer does over and beyond" the death of the victim.

But finding them or even tracking down all of one individual's victims can be extraordinarily difficult. "They don't share anything," Keppel said.

Although investigators have not identified a personality characteristic that is common to serial killers, there is one overriding motivation behind their crimes. "They like it," Keppel said. "It's a pleasure principle to them," regardless of how horrendous the crimes are to a normal person.

Even when apprehended, serial killers are loathe to reveal the numbers of victims, their identities, or the whereabouts of the bodies, unless by doing so they can leverage a better sentence.

"They have to maintain their significance, by secreting away all the information on their victims," Keppel added.

Keppel was hired this year as an associate professor at the Henry C. Lee College of Criminal Justice and Forensic Science at the University of New Haven in West Haven. He teaches "Principles of

Criminal Investigation" and "Advanced Investigations" at the undergraduate level, in addition to "Advanced Investigations II" and "Serial Murders" to graduate students working toward their master's degrees.

Graduate students and undergrads alike who want to apply their knowledge of basic science to the world of criminal investigations are taking advantage of the encyclopedic knowledge that Keppel has amassed over a more than three-decade criminal investigation career. Keppel earned his PhD in criminal justice at the University of Washington in Seattle and has taught and lectured extensively. He was the primary investigator for the King County, WA, sheriff's department in the Ted Bundy serial killings in the Pacific Northwest and was present for Bundy's final confessions before his Florida execution.

In keeping with advances in the use of science to resolve criminal investigations, many of his students are seeking careers in forensic science and medical legal investigations.

Keppel also is working on a book entitled *Serial Killers: The Practical Analysis of Signature and Modus Operandi*. The book should be published next year.

Students of criminal investigation techniques as well as amateur sleuths will find a wide range of cases to peruse in *Serial Killers*, some well known, others more obscure but nonetheless just as shocking. Keppel said the book will review cases from across the nation, including Virginia, New York, Delaware, Louisiana, California, and Washington.

Although he spent much of his career on the west coast, Keppel also is a visiting professor at (CIRPO) Centre International de Recherche en Profilage Operationnel (International Research Center on Operational Profiling), and was associate professor at the Criminal Justice Center at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. He has worked on high-profile cases in Texas and Louisiana as well.

Moving to Connecticut was more a matter of fate than design. Keppel was attending a seminar at Foxwoods Casino taught by none other than Henry C. Lee, when he was approached by the dean of the College of Criminal Justice and Forensic Science, who inquired whether Keppel would be interested in teaching at UNH.

He was told the university needed a retired detective who also has a PhD. Keppel fit the requirements perfectly. Now he is spreading the word on signatures and MOs to students who soon will be entering the world of criminal investigations armed with a wide range of tools to help track and apprehend criminal suspects.

Although the scientific side of criminal investigations has grown exponentially in recent decades, the next generation of criminal investigators still won't have a cakewalk. Finding one individual in a constantly growing world and national population will take all the skill and knowledge available.

In addition to sharing his personal knowledge of the field, Keppel also is working to provide students at UNH with a massive database of information on homicides that can be used in researching master's degree theses, and eventually doctoral dissertations. Sam Houston State University, where Keppel taught previously, already is using his database.

In the meantime, he is focusing on finishing his book and helping a new generation of crime fighters get off to a good start. In a nutshell, Keppel says his goal is "to pass on to others the experiences gleaned from my investigations."

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