

# Investigating psychologically motivated crimes

## The work of the SAPS Investigative Psychology Unit

BILKIS OMAR

bomar@issafrica.org

*The investigation of crimes like serial murder and serial rape requires both experience and proficient detective work. It also requires specialist knowledge to identify the psychological and criminological elements of a serial offence. Within the SAPS, there is a specialist unit that deals with psychologically motivated crimes – the Investigative Psychology Unit (IPU). This article draws attention to the contribution the unit makes to the investigation and prosecution of serial crimes in South Africa.*

High crime rates and in particular high rates of violent crime have plagued South Africa, at least since 2001. Despite the latest crime statistics indicating a decrease of 6,4 per cent in contact crimes for the financial year April 2007 to March 2008 (SAPS 2008a), the high rate of violent crime is still a concern to many. Violent crimes like murder, rape, and robbery traumatise victims and have a long lasting effect on their lives.

It is these types of crime that detectives from the South African Police Service (SAPS) are tasked to investigate. However, when a pattern of offences emerges that suggests the involvement of a serial offender, the complexity of the investigation necessitates the involvement of another component of the SAPS, the Investigative Psychology Unit (IPU).

### WHAT IS THE INVESTIGATIVE PSYCHOLOGY UNIT?

The IPU was first established in 1996 as a division of the Serious and Violent Crimes Unit. It was later moved to the Detective Service, but since June 2008 the IPU has been situated in the division Criminal Record and Forensic Science Service (CRFSS). The unit is made up of only three members at national head office level led by Professor Gerard Labuschagne.

According to Labuschagne, the unit '... assists in the investigation of psychologically motivated crimes...crimes that have no external (usually financial) motive' (2008b). Crimes like serial murder, serial rape, muti murders, paedophilia, intimate partner murders, child abductions and kidnappings, mass murder, spree murder,

equivocal death scenarios (i.e. helping to determine if a death is as a result of an accident, murder or suicide) and extortion cases' (Labuschagne 2008a). When called to assist detectives to investigate a case, the IPU may assist in the analysis of crime scenes, in interviewing witnesses and suspects, and in giving evidence in court. In addition the IPU also profiles offenders, performs risk assessments, provides investigative guidance and compiles pre-sentence reports.

## Provincial coordinators

The IPU works closely with provincial coordinators. These coordinators, who are detectives, are tasked to identify psychologically motivated cases within their provinces and notify the IPU. In some instances the IPU will independently receive information about a psychologically motivated crime. In that case they request the provincial coordinators to verify the report, and notify them accordingly.

Before the restructuring process of the SAPS provincial coordinators were based at the provincial policing level – some at the Serious and Violent Crimes (SVC) units, and others at the provincial office. After the 2006 reorganisation process, five of the nine provincial coordinators (Northern Cape, Western Cape, Free State, Mpumalanga and Eastern Cape) were redeployed to station level and ceased to function as provincial coordinators for the IPU. Of the remaining four, one was redeployed to the SAPS Organised Crime Unit, while three remained at the provincial police office. These four continued to act as provincial coordinators for the IPU. In an apparent turnaround, in July 2008, new provincial coordinators were appointed in the Northern Cape, Western Cape, Free State, Mpumalanga and Eastern Cape (Labuschagne 2008c), to fill the posts that had been vacant since 2006.

The provincial co-ordinators perform a number of functions aside from identifying psychologically motivated crimes. They play a coordination and communication role between detectives, the IPU, and any other relevant unit or

division and follow up with the CRFSS with respect to DNA results on particular cases (SAPS 2008b). Provincial coordinators assist in organising and setting up task teams of trained detectives when there is a need to investigate psychologically motivated cases. Their job also entails monitoring and inspecting case dockets and informing relevant organisational structures of the progress of investigations (SAPS 2008b). They are additionally responsible for communicating and liaising with the media on the progress and outcomes of investigations.

## Training

One of the functions of the IPU is to provide training for detectives in identifying and investigating psychologically motivated crimes. Training is given to detectives from the Organised Crime Units, the Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences (FCS) units, General Investigations, as well as to crime scene photographers and uniformed members. Training is also provided on request to SAPS members in the provinces and to prosecutors and forensic pathologists. Training courses include a three-week course in Psychologically Motivated Crimes (PMC), a Local Criminal Record Centre refresher course, a Serious and Violent Crimes course, and a Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences course, all of which are presented by the three members of the IPU.

The PMC course, originally developed by the previous commander of the IPU, Dr Miki Pistorius, and regularly updated by the current commander, Professor Labuschagne, has been presented to police from Belgium, Scotland Yard in Britain and Botswana. The unit boasts having trained both an offender profiler from France and the Belgian Behavioural Analysis Unit (Labuschagne 2008a).

The course includes components on human sexuality and the development of offenders; serial rape investigation; serial murder investigation; and the investigation and identification of other psychologically motivated crimes like sexual

burglary, autoerotic fatality, stalking, intimate partner murders and muti murders.

To date about 350 SAPS detectives have undergone the PMC course (Labuschagne 2008b). Director Piet Byleveld (2008b), head of the Serial Offender Investigation Unit and provincial coordinator of Gauteng has said that 'the PMC course is an excellent course and every detective should attend it'.

The success of IPU training for detectives can be measured by the successful investigation and prosecution of various cases. These include the Quarry serial murder case in Olievenhoutbosch, the Highwayman serial murder case in Pretoria, the Phillipi serial murder case in Cape Town, the Knysna serial murder case and the Umzinto serial murder case.

## Research

In addition to supporting investigations and conducting training the IPU undertakes research on local cases. This serves to advance the unit's understanding of psychologically motivated crimes, assists in refining training, and informs future investigations.

One aspect of research undertaken by the unit has been the development of a database of solved and unsolved serial murders that is used for research purposes and for offender profiling. All records and information from case dockets collated over the years are stored on the database. The database includes demographic features of offenders, the offenders' *modus operandi*; and details of the crimes as deemed necessary by the profiler. The information is coded, validated and tested.

According to Labuschagne, what sets the IPU apart from other profiling units internationally is its direct involvement in serial murder and serial rape investigations (Labuschagne 2008c).

The IPU is also involved in collaborative research with the Universities of South Africa, Pretoria and the Free State, as well as with Liverpool University in the United Kingdom and John Jay College of

Criminal Justice in the United States of America (Labuschagne 2008c).

The research with John Jay College relates to serial murder and was the largest, most in-depth study ever undertaken on serial murder internationally. It included a study of victimology, suspects and the *modus operandi* of a crime (Labuschagne 2008c). The study was initiated by Labuschagne in order to develop 'a scientific basis for understanding serial homicide in South Africa ... to aid future investigations by providing both valid and reliable support for assertions made regarding linking [of serial murders]' (Salfati 2008). The study has also resulted in the largest dataset on serial homicide offenders in South Africa, which is in the process of being analysed for trends (Salfati 2008).

## INVOLVING THE IPU IN CASES

Once a crime is reported, a uniformed member responds to the call. If further investigation is required the uniformed member notifies a detective who takes over the case. If the detective identifies that the case has the makings of a psychologically motivated case (serial murder or serial rape), the provincial coordinator should ideally be notified, although this does not happen in all cases. If alerted, the provincial coordinator would request the assistance of the IPU. This does not always happen, since many SAPS members do not know about the unit, or the services it offers (Labuschagne 2008c). In an attempt to address this, the IPU has taken to alerting SAPS members about training courses that are available via the detective service division (Labuschagne 2008c). In addition, information on the IPU is also provided in the monthly SAPS journal, *Servamus*. However, it would be impossible for members of the IPU to get to all crime scenes, even if more investigators were aware of the IPU and its services (Labuschagne 2008c).

Once the IPU has been called in, a task team of detectives – either SVC or FCS detectives – from the affected areas is mobilised by the provincial co-ordinator and an operations room is set up

from where the investigation is conducted. During the investigation the task team works hand in hand with the members of the IPU. If the services of the IPU are requested in another area or province at the same time, the task team will go ahead with the investigation while remaining in constant contact with the members of the IPU.

If an arrest is made and a suspected perpetrator charged, preparation for the trial begins. The IPU members will be involved in this process until the end – including testifying in court against the suspect. The IPU commander may be required to prepare a pre-sentence report to inform sentencing.

## CASELOAD OF THE IPU

The following figures illustrate the total number of files opened by the IPU since 1998. The files include requests for assistance as well as cases that the IPU has been involved in solving. These figures are not indicative of the number of victims per case, as this varies.

**Table 1:** Number of enquiry files opened

Year	No. of files opened
1998	23
1999	20
2000	56
2001	67
2002	100
2003	144
2004	150
2005	174
2006	169
2007	139

*Source: Commander, SAPS Investigative Psychology Unit*

Serial cases form a large portion of the enquiries that the IPU attends to, but the proportion of these cases varies annually. For examples, of the 174 enquiries that the IPU opened in 2005, nine

were serial cases that resulted in six arrests. A year later 169 enquiries were opened, of which only two were serial cases that resulted in a single arrest (Labuschagne 2008a). The variance is both a reflection of variance in absolute case numbers, but is also influenced by the capacity of local detectives to identify serial cases and inform the IPU. As such, these numbers are unlikely to represent all serial cases that occurred, but rather those that were identified as such by the police.

## PROFILING AND INVESTIGATION

### Case study Sipho Dube: the Johannesburg Mine Dump serial killer

During the period mid September 2002 to late October 2002 four incidences of child rape were reported to the police in the Booysens and Jeppe areas in Johannesburg. The ages of the children ranged between nine years and 12 years, and the victims were three females and one male child, three black and one coloured.

In each case the suspect began his crime by abducting the children from public places, using a story to get them to co-operate. He asked for their help, pretended to be a policeman, or an electrician. He then took the victims to isolated places, not far from each other. Once there he controlled the victims using threats of violence or by assaulting them. Ultimately he raped (vaginal and/or anal) the children and then set them free, or they escaped after a period of time.

As the cases started coming in to the police, members of the investigating team became concerned that these could be serial cases, based on the story that the rapist told the children and the close proximity of the four crimes. The IPU commander was called in and compiled a criminal profile.

The profile was developed on the basis of numerous factors including the environment where the crimes took place; how the perpetrator chose the victims; the extent of the use of violence; steps taken by the perpetrator to avoid identification; the sexual nature of the crimes; and

pre- and post-crime behaviour of the perpetrator. Consideration of these factors enabled the IPU to develop a demographic profile of the offender. More importantly, the profile allowed the investigators to predict that the suspect was likely to escalate his crimes to murder – which indeed took place.

An accurate profile and good detective work can result in the quick apprehension of a suspect, but this is not always the case. In this case, six months after the police began the investigation the suspect raped and killed six other children in the same area (Serial Killers 2006). When he was eventually arrested by the uncle of the last victim, he refused to cooperate with investigators (Byleveld 2008a). He eventually confessed his crimes to the Gauteng provincial coordinator and even phoned from prison to point out other crimes he was involved in (Byleveld 2008a).

Although this case suggests the value of collaboration between the IPU and detectives, it also points to the fact that profiling alone cannot solve a case. As stated by the commander of the unit:

It is difficult to say that a report or a profile led directly to the apprehension of a suspect. It is one of many things in the investigation. A profile may be 100 per cent accurate but it not lead them to the offender - that would be done through normal investigation procedures. The biggest input would be in training detectives on how to deal with such cases and then the advice we give to them, which isn't necessarily in a profile or report (Labuschagne 2008c).

Byleveld (2008a) concurs, stating that 'profiling does not solve the case... the opinion of the IPU is important... and... the evidence provided in court on the psychological status of the offender is important to the case'.

## IMPACT ON THE IPU OF THE SAPS REORGANISATION PROCESS

In 1996 the SAPS underwent a major reorganisation process that affected the IPU and

the investigation of psychologically motivated crimes; particularly their ability to rapidly mobilise task teams of trained, specialised detectives from the SVC units or the FCS units.

Prior to the reorganisation there were 32 SVC units with 909 members and 67 FCS units with 1 261 members nationally, each with training in psychologically motivated crimes. The staff complement of an FCS unit in a province like Gauteng was an average of 29 members per unit, while in Limpopo Province there were nine staff members per unit. Gauteng also averaged approximately 65 members per SVC unit, while Limpopo averaged 14 members per unit.

During the reorganisation process these units were decentralised and members from the respective units were redeployed to some, but not all police stations to strengthen capacity and improve service delivery at local level. The area level of policing was also closed down, being regarded as redundant. Thus, a total of 1 261 operational FCS members were redeployed to 120 accounting police stations, and 909 operational SVC members were redeployed to 171 contact crime stations and 26 organised crime units. Each accounting station, therefore, has benefited by the addition of approximately 10 FCS members; and contact crime stations and organised crime units have benefited by the addition of four SVC members each, as shown in the table below.

**Table 2:** Migration of SAPS members after 2006 reorganisation process

	Units prior to reorganisation	Members prior to reorganisation	No of stations members deployed to	No of members per accounting/priority station
SVC unit	32	909	171+26	4
FCS unit	67	1261	120	10

Source: SAPS Head Office

The effect of the decentralisation of SVC and FCS members, and the closure of the area level policing offices, is that members have been

scattered. This increases the scope of the IPU's work considerably – it now has to be available to assist 1 115 police stations. It also means that the approval and mobilisation of a task team at short notice is more difficult, especially if there are only a handful of specialised detectives in a particular area. A task team should ideally be made up of six members from either unit, along with a station member from the area in which the crime occurred. Now mobilisation entails negotiating with at least three station commissioners from three police stations who may release only two members each from their staff (Labuschagne 2008a). The process is time consuming and riddled with red tape.

The reorganisation has also served to damage the spirit of teamwork of the specialist members who were used to working as a cohesive unit. Gathering and coordinating information and knowledge is difficult for these members, and there is an inattention to feedback with regard to cases that were previously being investigated.

As mentioned previously in this article, the reorganisation process also led to five provincial coordinators being redeployed to stations. This created a gap in the identification and investigation of psychologically motivated crimes in these provinces. This was partially corrected in July 2008 when five new members were appointed to the posts. However, the new co-ordinators lack the experience and skill of the previous co-ordinators. In addition, according to Labuschagne (2008c), 'at the moment no-one seems to have serial murder in their mandate like it used to be at the SVC units'.

The Gauteng provincial coordinator, based at the Serial Offender Investigation Unit, was one of the four provincial coordinators not affected by the reorganisation process. While still falling under the ambit of the provincial police office, the provincial coordinator, together with the task team dealing with serial murders, remained at local police station level, all housed under one roof. This effectively served to retain the specialist skills of the team and members could continue to work together as a cohesive unit. The provincial coordinator is of the opinion that 'success lies in specialisation' (Byleveld 2008a).

## CONCLUSION

The experience and skill of the IPU remains important to the investigation of psychologically motivated crimes in South Africa. The sheer number of cases reported to the IPU suspected to be serial cases suggests that developing and resourcing the unit would be in the interests of solving – and ultimately reducing – these crimes.

## REFERENCES

- Byleveld, P 2008a. Director and Provincial Coordinator of Gauteng. Serial Offender Investigation Unit. Brixton Police Station. Personal interview. 05 August. Johannesburg.
- Byleveld, P 2008b. Director and Provincial Coordinator of Gauteng. Serial Offender Investigation Unit. Brixton Police Station. Telephonic interview. 10 August. Johannesburg.
- Hazelwood, R 2008. Senior Vice-President. Retired Federal Bureau of Investigation profiler. Academy Group Inc. A Forensic Behavioural Science Company. Reference letter. 13 February.
- Labuschagne, GN 2008a. *Information Brochure*. SAPS Investigative Psychology Unit. Detective Service. Head Office. 05 May. Pretoria.
- Labuschagne, GN 2008b. Professor/ Senior Superintendent. SAPS Investigative Psychology Unit. Detective Service. Head Office. Personal interview. 30 May. Pretoria.
- Labuschagne, GN (gnl@mweb.co.za) 2008c. Professor/ Senior Superintendent. SAPS Investigative Psychology Unit. Detective Service. Head Office. Message to Omar, B (Bomar@issafrica.org). 02 July to 18 August. Pretoria.
- Salfati, CG 2008. Associate Professor. John Jay College of Criminal justice. The City University of New York. Reference letter. March 08. New York.
- SAPS 2008a. Crime Situation in South Africa. Trends, spatial distribution and interpretation. Crime Information Management. April 2007 to 31 March 2008. Pretoria.
- SAPS 2008b. Duties and responsibilities of Provincial Coordinators for Psychologically Motivated Crimes. SAPS Detective Service. Head Office. 15 May. Pretoria.
- Serial Killers 2006. Siphon Dube Johannesburg Mine Dump Killer Biography. Available from <http://www.serialkillers.nl/siphon-dube/siphon-dube.htm> [accessed 10 July 2008].