

THE REASONS FOR MURDER:
WHICH THEORY WORKS BEST?

By

Jennifer L. Blackwell

Senior Thesis

Honors 499

Professor Dennis Stead

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I. INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the crime of murder and the theoretical causes of this behavior. There are nine general theories that will be focused upon, along with a critique of each and as a whole.

Murder (Homicide) is defined as the killing of one human being by another human being (a person that is born and living). There are four forms of homicide. First degree murder, felony murder, second degree murder, and manslaughter. For all practical purposes, this paper will focus on first degree murder and its causes. This form of homicide must include the intent to kill through one of the following: premeditation, atrocious murder, deliberation, lying in wait, bombing or poisoning, or torture.

II. POSITIVISTS SCHOOL

The first theory to be focused on is that of the Positivists School. This theory proposes that we should take the methods of science (observation, experimentation, and comparison) and use those methods rather than philosophy in questions regarding the nature of crime.

Positivism is geared toward explaining crime on the personal level. It was the first to switch the focus of interest from the objective severity of the offense to the offender and his personality (Shoham 1966: 130). The reasons people commit crime are affected by many factors such as social class, education, experiences, religion, biology, and psychology. Within the Positivists School are the Control Theories in which the Biological Control Theory exists.

Cesare Lombroso was a major contributor to the Biological Control Theory and was also the “father of criminology.” He challenged the Classical School in their belief of criminal acts being caused by free will. Lombroso believed that the biological makeup of the individuals determined their criminal or non-criminal behavior.

Lombroso’s Biological Control Theory can be applied to our topic of murder. After many examinations, he was convinced that convicts often had distinctive physical features and that there was a “criminal man” physically distinct from ordinary human beings (Herrnstein 1985: 72). Therefore, according to this theory, the offender would commit the homicidal act due to his inborn physical characteristics. Lombroso felt that these people were evolutionary throwbacks and that their savage violence would come through in the form of crime, such as killing another human being. This leads to the belief that the act of murder isn’t an intentional savage act of the offender, but an act of his/her biological makeup. This “inborn criminal” has a reduced

ability to hold back his/her violent actions because of this savage instinct. These individuals are less civilized than the average human being.

David C. Rowe conducted a study on teenage twins in 1980. Each twin filled out questionnaires about how often they had engaged in several categories of delinquent behavior, about the activities of their twin and their friends, and about their own physical characteristics. There were 168 sets of identical twins and 97 sets of fraternal twins tested. The results of the test showed that the identical twins were more commonly concurrent in their delinquency level (Herrnstein 1985: 94). This shows some correlation of biological makeup and tendency to become a criminal since the identical twins possess the same biological makeup.

An example of this "biological throwback" of the human could be that of savage murderers. They kill due to their inborn savage instinct. The minds of these offenders aren't as developed as that of their average counterpart. Lombroso's theory of the killer has been compared to Mr. Hyde, of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, by Stevenson. Respectable Dr. Jekyll drank a potion to transform himself into conscienceless Mr. Hyde, who seemed "pale and dwarfish; . . . the man seems hardly human! Something troglodytic, should we say?" (Herrnstein 1985: 73). Mr. Hyde not only acted like a beast, he appeared as one. This might have been fictionalizing Lombroso's

“born criminal.”

AUTHOR'S VIEW

Lombroso's theory carried quite a bit of weight for a period of time. But I believe that it takes something more than a “born criminal instinct” to actually commit the crimes. This biological factor might have a part in determining the criminality of the individual, but I don't believe it is one of the strongest influences.

Lombroso also said that there are certain stigmata (characteristics of past evolutionary developments) that the criminal possesses. He said if an individual possesses five or more of these stigmata they can not exert control over themselves and are therefore predisposed to crime. This view is very sexist and racial due to the fact that many of the characteristics that Lombroso listed are possessed in a large part by women and blacks. And since women weren't even really considered as criminals, it pointed all fingers to the black men of society.

Being that is theory was one of the first developed, it has some good ideas and points of origin. But as for viewing crime through the eyes of today, it has become somewhat obsolete.

III. CHICAGO SCHOOL

The Chicago School Theory was first developed in 1892 at the University of Chicago. This theory consists of the belief that human behavior is created and altered by the environmental and human surroundings of the individual and not simply by genetic means (McShane 1988: 34).

Many neighborhoods, including a majority in Chicago, are extremely criminally oriented and produce a great number of juvenile delinquents, including murderers. When children are brought up around death and the worthlessness of life, killing doesn't seem so bad. It's not as "deviant" to many of the neighborhood gangs and underworld families as it is to the rest of society.

There is also a high drug use rate in many of these areas. This effects the homicide rate in more than one way. Firstly, there is a high rate of homicide in relation to drug dealing and pushing. After being around this violence every day, killing would become a way of survival, both for drug addicts and for those protecting themselves from the dealings. Secondly, the drug can make people more violent and aggressive in conflict situations. According to Rose and McCain (1990: 196), the role of drugs in homicide deaths has become more common and more complex.

In these rundown neighborhoods, there is also much racial and

ethnic segregation and immigration. This causes great tension within the community environment. Violence between opposing groups is quite frequent and many times has tragic endings. These people haven't been taught diplomatic ways of resolving problems, so they always turn to violent, and often deadly solutions.

Many gangs are also formed in the majority of these "Chicago School" neighborhoods. This is due to the lack of male parental guidance in the single parent homes. Many of the fathers are either gone or constantly working. The children, especially the boys, then turn to gangs and their violence for a male "father figure." Along with numerous other crimes being committed, some of the "children" in these gangs are killed for senseless or foolish dares or fights. But this is their life and its all they know. They don't have any desires to reform because they don't see any ways out. Its their way of life and their way of surviving the bitterness around them.

This theory is well represented in the book The Jack-Roller, by Clifford Shaw (1966). The main character, Stanley, met some men in prison who had killed in cold blood. Stanley wasn't shocked by this fact and almost looked up to these savage criminals. Children in these environments don't have much of a chance of having a normal, non-violent life.

Another way these neighborhoods cause homicide is through survival of its members. Many people get so desperate for food,

alcohol, or especially drugs, that they will kill to get what they need. This survival is a majority of these people's goal in life, and they'll do anything to survive.

An example of the Chicago School Theory of murder is seen in the movie Streetwise (seen in class). One of the teenagers spoke of a man that was beat to death by three black men because he defended himself with a butter knife. This just goes to show that people living in these areas get over-violent and cause many sad endings that could have easily been avoided.

AUTHOR'S VIEW

The Chicago School Theory is extremely good at explaining the reasons and origins of crime in the urban environment. It is easily seen how growing up and living amidst the poverty stricken and under-monitored lifestyle could corrupt and devastate a strong sole. Even if a person has the best of intentions, being molded into these devastating communities will alter any pleasant expectations for the future. Your surroundings make you what you are. And if you grow up with "street trash," you become "street trash." It has little to do with the individual or the efforts they make to change. They just don't get any breaks.

The Chicago School Theory fits well with the murder issue in that life comes to be so worthless and petty to many of the "bad neighborhood" occupants. They see people being killed almost daily

and think that that is how life goes and there's no changing it. People see it as "It's either him or me." This is the sad reality in these ruins of communities.

IV. DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION

The Differential Association Theory was first developed in 1939. Edwin H. Sutherland and Donald Cressey have developed it over the years into one of the most popular of the theories of criminal behavior (McShane 1988: 54). This theory explains criminology as a learned way of life. Criminality is learned from the most intimate groups, which have the most influence. These groups don't always agree with each other, therefore forcing the individual to decide which viewpoint to accept and live by. The theory also explains criminality as a result of an "excess of definitions favorable to violation of the law over definitions unfavorable to violations of the law." (Cortes 1972: 167)

Both human behavior and social order are constantly changing. All of the viewpoints and attitudes of society contribute to these continuous alterations. The motive for conforming or criminal behavior resides in the rationales and techniques supplied to the individual from their intimate groups. The theory almost exclusively deals with sociological, cultural, and external factors (Cortes 1972:

167).

An example of this Differential Association Theory is that of the young boy faced with many decisions about the direction of his life. He has his parents telling him to be good, go to college, get a job, and marry a nice girl. His school friends are telling him to stay out late, have sex, and drink beer. And his street friends are telling him to leave home, rob stores, rape women, and kill if he needs to.

With all of these different values being thrown in his direction, the youth has a big decision to make--which way to lead his life. Due to extra pressure and perhaps even threats from the gang, the boy may choose this deviant life and commit the many offenses of gang involvement, possibly including murder.

AUTHOR'S VIEW

The Differential Association Theory is true in all of its accounts. But I don't think it explains much at all about crime. Of course we have pressures from different groups all around us, that's a given. And of course they have all different levels of influence. But what makes the offender choose to be deviant? Just because that group may put strong pressures on him, he must have the desire within himself to become deviant. Even if the gang's influence was stronger, what about the remainder of good influences that would still strongly effect the juvenile's thinking? If he cared at all about his parents or other respectable adults and peers, he would think twice about

leading a life of deviance.

On another note, Sutherland himself even rejected the Differential Association Theory in his manuscript, "The Swan Song of Differential Association." Sutherland stated that "In the methodology which is used, with the explanation postulated as universal, the only thing needed to disprove an hypothesis is a single exception" (Cohen 1956: 31). Later in his writing he points out that there are many exceptions which cannot be explained by Differential Association alone.

This theory also gives us no ability to predict criminal behavior. Since nearly all of us have deviant pressures on us, how do we determine which of us will become criminals?

U. ANOMIE

The Anomie Theory, as interpreted by Merton, focuses on individuals' socioeconomic standing, suggesting that poor people commit more crimes because they are blocked in their aspiration for financial or social success. Deviants, as a result of their racial, ethnic, or subcultural standing, are blocked in various ways from achieving the "American Dream" through legitimate means (Hickey 1991: 56). Merton first came out with his studies in 1938. He developed five types of people in society. The conformists, who achieve their goals

through legitimate means. Innovators reach a block of some sort between their means and their goals causing them to develop deviant, and many times illegal, means to achieve their goals. Ritualists give up their goals somewhere along the line, but hold on to their means and relive those means day in and day out, achieving no large goal. Retreatists lose their goals and their means causing them to retreat from society almost completely. Rebels start in a situation of conformity but eventually no longer want this "American Dream" and change their goals completely. Our main focus will be on the innovators of society due to their criminal tendencies.

A good example of Merton's Anomie Theory is that of Belle Grunness from Indiana. This is a woman who would advertise in newspapers for a mate, then promptly kill them once she gained access to their money. Women like this will kill their husbands, fiances, or lovers in order to improve or maintain their lifestyles. In another occurrence, over a fourteen year period, one woman was believed to have murdered seven of her eight children for insurance purposes. Every time she was in need of money, another one of her children would suddenly pass away (Hickey 1991: 66).

AUTHOR'S VIEW

In my opinion, this theory works well for a lot of crimes. Many white collar and theft crimes could be well explained by Merton's views. But as for murder, this theory is a little extreme. I can't

imagine that too many people would go to the extreme of killing another person in cold blood merely to receive some monetary improvement. Unless it involved the mob or a huge conspiracy of the assassination of a millionaire, the majority of the people wouldn't view murder as an "alternative means" of making their weekly salary. Most of the murders that are committed are acts of passion, not lottery cash-ins.

There are also some problems with Merton's actual theory. He doesn't offer any solutions to the problems. He merely states what happens and why it happens. There is also no way to test this theory. Even though each of the types is present in our society, we can't know for sure that these "models" are where these types came from. Finally, there is no room for variation or mediocracy. There is no "in between" category for any of Merton's models. Not everyone fits into one of the five categories. What would this lead us to believe? That they are abnormally different from the remainder of society? Merton leaves too many questions unanswered in his version of the Anomie Theory.

VI. LABELING

Erving Goffman's research in 1961 noted the stigma attached to those who have spent time in an institution such as a prison or a

mental hospital. The stigma is caused by the attraction of attention of society through abnormal or unaccepted behavior. Some examples of negative labels may be "ex-con," "dumby," "nut," and "slut." These labels can cause psychological damage to those on the receiving end (Hickey 1991: 63).

There exists both primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance is the original deviant act. The offender is then labeled deviant and receives negative social sanctions which creates hostility and resentment within the individual. Secondary deviance is then carried out by the offender due to his negative reactions to society. Therefore, the attached label of "criminal" is affirmed. By society focusing on the label rather than the behavior, it reduces the importance of the behavior (Hickey 1991: 63).

An excellent example of this theory is the story of Wayne Williams. Mr. Williams is believed to have been involved in the murders of 22-28 black men and boys in the Atlanta, Georgia area. He hated his race and preferred white people so much that he would kill blacks because they reminded him of his own standing in society. Since he was labeled as a "black" by society, he carried out society's expectations and committed murder upon his own people (Hickey 1991: 64).

AUTHOR'S VIEW

Labeling is a theory that indirectly explains the criminal and his reasoning. The offender must first receive the label then thrash out toward society. If that initial label is not attached, then this theory doesn't hold up. Juvenile delinquency could better represent the labeling theory than murder. Children who are truants or who shoplift are labeled at a young age as "troublemakers" and "delinquents." They begin believing these titles they have attained and start living by them.

Murder, on the other hand, is a far more serious crime. In order for a person to be labeled, they will most likely be caught and arrested. Hopefully, if our legal system works correctly, the offender won't have a chance to commit the secondary deviance (but we all know this is wishful thinking!). Mr. Williams, on the other hand, felt labeled in one way and thrashed out in another. Instead of being labeled as a "murderer," he was merely labeled as a "black," and thrashed back at society in a strange and extreme manner.

There are also some serious flaws in the Labeling Theory itself. How many people must consider an act deviant before a label is placed on the offender? Is one enough or does it require more than the majority of our society? How strong does the reaction to the behavior need to be before it is labeled deviant? If there is just a mild disbelief in the act, does that constitute deviance? A final flaw

is that we only study the lower class deviancy in relation to labeling. We rarely label the white collar criminal or the tax cheating rich. There needs to be a consistent base to determine how and what to label deviant acts in society.

VII. SUBCULTURE

Richard A Cloward and Lloyd E Ohlin hold a firm belief that delinquent subcultures are predominately male and are found in lower classes. Along with this is the belief that virtue promotes vice. Desire to get ahead in the lower class promotes delinquent behavior. Cloward and Ohlin's Strain Theory possesses five main points.

- 1. The success ethic is an American desire.**
- 2. Opportunities for success are not equally contributed through social classes.**
- 3. These blocked opportunities produce strain.**
- 4. This strain produces a delinquent subculture (criminal, conflict, or retreatists).**
- 5. Delinquent subcultures cause delinquent behavior.**

One example of this was a subculture community in which murder wasn't all that far from the norm. In an area on the state line between Kentucky and Tennessee, a four county region saw numerous (more than 50) murders in slightly more than 50 years (a time span from 1888 to 1940). There were only 50 murders recorded, but there were many more based on strongly reliable rumors. "The homicides

were all based on interpersonal disagreement and altercations”
(Montell 1986: xiv).

The local residents did not feel a presents of violence or fear. It was merely their subculture which they accepted as being normal. There were only 1,225 people in the discussed area, which make the 50 murders seem a bit more out of the ordinary. This means that more than 4% of the society was murdered. This community had an obvious “subculture of violence” in which violence and aggression were natural responses to threats, insults, and weapons (Montell 1986: xiv).

AUTHOR'S VIEW

The Subculture Theory of Cloward and Ohlin is a somewhat stable theory. It can explain much of the delinquency rates, especially in lower socioeconomic regions. The “American desire to succeed” is found not only in the middle classes, but also, and many times more strongly, in the lower classes. This strong desire of the lower classes could explain why more lower class kids are involved in delinquency. They have a stronger drive to succeed, yet they are pushed back by the schools and society as a whole. This is extremely frustrating and the kids at this age just can't handle the strain. This correlates well with the high gang and juvenile crime rates. If they can't make it in society's culture, they'll develop their own subculture and succeed according to it's norms and views.

Much of the destructive and non-utilitarian juvenile crime can be explained by this theory. But again, murder is an extremity of this theory. Most delinquent kids can prove themselves by stealing a car or robbing a store. Only in the most violent subcultures would murder be a way of proving a member's ability to succeed at something. Even with the many criminal minds that are associated with numerous subcultures, killing another person is generally not at the top of their list for things to achieve.

The subculture from Kentucky that I mentioned existed in the late 1800's, early 1900's. This was a long time ago, and Kentucky is known for its "violent ways." But even with this unusual finding, I don't view the Subculture Strain Theory as very explanatory when discussing the crime of murder.

Cloward and Ohlin were also criticized on a couple of angles. Firstly, they said the kids weren't having fun. But when other studies were done, the delinquents admitted that a big reason for committing crimes was that it was fun and exciting. Another criticism is that in order to be a delinquent, the individual had to complete four steps (American dream, fail in school, strain, and discover delinquency as a solution to the strain). It seems that it would be a rarity to complete all four of these categories. This Strain Theory isn't flexible enough for crime and society as a whole.

VII. SOCIAL CONTROL

The next theory to be focused on is that of Social Control. This theory represents the belief that everyone is born naturally evil. We need not explain crime, we need to explain conformity and why people don't commit crime.

According to Travis Hirschi's Social Control Theory, people don't commit crime due to their bond to society and the strength of group relation (Hickey 1991: 62). Hirschi introduced four elements of the social bond, which apply to all classes of society. These four elements include attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. These are bonds that individuals strengthen or weaken in relationships to the society they live in. Attachment to peers, schools, and especially family is vital if the individual is to develop a sense of concern for others and an acceptance of the norms of society (Hickey 1991: 63) .

Hirschi found that youths who appear to be close to their parents were less likely to commit crimes. In comparison, the majority of serial killers do not appear to have close relationships with their parents. Many experienced traumatic or gradual breaks with one or both of their parents. Serial killers, in general, also have a lack of commitment to social values in that many resort to drugs, excessive alcohol, and other sorts of deviant behavior. These individuals also do not submit to close relationships with peers

(Hickey 1991: 62).

For many reasons, including those discussed above, the serial killer is a prime example of the Social Control Theory. Since we are all supposedly born evil, these offenders remain evil because they have few or no “bonds” to hold them back from criminal activities.

Without social bonds, the offenders know they won't disappoint anyone by doing wrong. There's no one in their life to impress. They don't have anyone's standards to live up to but their own, which are probably barely existent.

AUTHOR'S VIEW

The Social Control Theory makes a huge assumption about the human race in general; that we are all born evil and willing to commit crime. In my view, this is way off. Many people are good at heart and wouldn't even have the thought of hurting another person.

What about the people who have very strong social bonds but still commit crime? These individuals can't be explained by this theory because its not flexible enough. This theory would work for certain circumstances, but not for the population as a whole.

How do we define “strong social bond?” Is there a lower limit to how close you need to be to someone in order to have a “strong social bond” with them? This term may not be as obvious as it seems. The offenders may have relationships with people to whom they feel close, although these relationships may not appear to be “strong.”

There is no clear answer to this question. It's all relative to the observer's point of view.

IX. SOCIAL LEARNING

The Social Learning Theory emphasizes the point that "behavior may be reinforced not only through actual rewards and punishments, but also through expectations that are learned by watching other people" (Bernard and Dold 1986: 207). In other words, basically all learning results from direct experiences of watching others' behavior and the consequences of the behavior. Special attention is given to childhood experiences for personal victimization or the witnessing of violent behaviors. Bandura and Walters concluded that extremely aggressive boys were also hostile and antagonistic and they felt rejected from their fathers (Hickey 1991: 58).

Emotional neglect and abuse have been correlated with all forms of reported delinquency. Children who witness family violence are likely to demonstrate reduced social competence and behavioral problems. Therefore, the social learning of violence need not be the result of one's having been a victim, but simply a result of viewing the violence. It is suspected by some researchers that children from violent families may not express signs of maladjustment in childhood, yet they may have higher rates of mental health and family problems

in adulthood than many children from non-violent homes (Wolf 1985: 663).

Webster-Stratton (1985: 67) found that “family history of parent abuse as a child was highly correlated with more negative and controlling interactions with children which was correlated with the abusive family.” This finding supports the Social Learning Theory in that parents learn abusive parenting from their childhood experiences with their own parents and pass it down through the generations.

A good example of this Social Learning Theory is present within gang life. Young boys who join violent gangs see the other gang members robbing, raping, and murdering innocent people. As they watch these acts repeatedly, they begin to learn these deviant ways and start to commit the same acts. They see the acts as productive because the other gang members look up to and include them in the gang. Therefore, these murders are committed for money or other benefits and the act is learned through viewing the same behavior and its consequences.

AUTHOR'S VIEW

I see the Social Learning Theory as very explanatory of many seemingly non-understood violent acts of murder. The offenders learn this extent of violence from watching their parents or others around them. They then exert their violent tempers as they have seen done in the past. The offenders learn that this is the way to deal

with an unfavorable situation and simply commit the act of murder to resolve the problem.

Although I agree with this theory, I also feel that there are other factors involved. Simply observing this behavior time after time shouldn't create an "animal" out of a good person. There would have to be that violent urge inside the offender to create the violent way of life. But if that violent urge is present in the offender, this theory is, in my view, a good explanation of the offender's acts of violence and murder.

H. CONFLICT

The Conflict Theory views society as an ever changing set of relationships characterized by inherent conflicts of interest. These theorists focus on the political structure of society, especially law enforcement, and see society as conflict-oriented. The Conflict Theory's main focus is that of the political nature of crime and to examine the creation and application of laws (McShane 1988: 102).

The Radical Conflict Perspective views crime as a product of class struggle which creates competition and individualism. The importance of wealth and property ownership produces conflict both between and within social classes (McShane 1988: 102). The most brutal social conditions can even cause very violent crime, such as

murder (Quinney 1977: 53).

The Conflict Theory also looks at the use and distribution of power and how this power changes hands. There are many different groups competing for the "goods" and power which causes the many shifts of this social power. According to this theory, the rich make the laws to protect and benefit themselves and to work against the lower classes. This causes great conflict and aggression in the lower classes, eventually leading to violent retaliations.

The Conflict Theory explains many crimes, including murder. An example of murder being represented by this theory could be found easily in the brutal conditions of slum neighborhoods. The conditions of these places are so unbelievably disgusting and unfair that people feel extremely cheated. They might then retaliate against the better-off members of society. All of the aggression and anger that has built up explodes in the form of an extremely violent act, such as murder.

AUTHOR'S VIEW

The Conflict Theory is a good explanatory tool for non-utilitarian destructive acts, such as vandalism and destruction of personal property. But this theory only represents murder in extreme cases. The conflict would have to be almost as great as a full fledged war to cause substantial murder statistics.

There are also some problems with the theory itself. It tends to overplay the role of capitalism in our society. There are other ways

of being happy than having lots of money. All of our activities don't readily lend themselves to consumerism, as we are lead to believe by the Conflict Theory views. We have many other interests in life than just money and power. Although these two things are the majority of society's ultimate goal, there are other ways to achieve happiness, and society knows these ways. There is love, friendship, recreation, nature, and many other fulfilling activities that satisfy a great number of society members.

This theory is based on assumptions that are simply not always true. There are many cases when this view wouldn't explain the offensive actions, therefore, the theory is not one of the best, especially when considering the crime of murder.

XI. AUTHOR'S OVERALL VIEW

There are two theories that fit the best with the crime of murder. These are the Chicago School Theory and the Social Learning Theory. The remainder of the theories lack the ability to include extremely violent and conclusive crimes such as murder.

The Chicago School Theory explains crime as being caused by our surroundings and the condition of our community and it's people. We turn to crime because its a way of surviving and a way of life. Murder tends to be highest in the most densely populated cities

across the country, such as New York, Detroit, Chicago and Miami (Hickey 1991: 56). Urban homicide rates tend to be related to social disorder, drugs, disassociation, fear, alienation, broken homes, and poverty (Messner and Tardiff 1986: 48).

The Social Learning Theory explains murder as an act learned from watching others. In the densely populated areas of this country, children are brought up in a world of crime and death. After watching this way of life for many years, they learn it and live by it. Since the majority of murders occur in densely populated areas, this theory explains well the relationship of learning and crime.

No one theory can completely explain the violent crime of murder. It is an unbelievably complicated issue with many extenuating circumstances. The best we can do is to discover some factors involved in the act and try to help those offenders who can't help themselves to save the lives of the many innocent people who die this horrible death each year.

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