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978-0-521-54058-2 - Rethinking Homicide: Exploring the Structure and Process
Underlying Deadly Situations

Terance D. Miethe, Wendy C. Regoeczi and Kriss A. Drass

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Studying Homicide Situations

HOMICIDE has been studied from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Biological, psychological, and sociological theories have been widely used to explain the etiology and epidemiology of violence. Methodologically, homicide has been investigated through both qualitative and quantitative approaches, cross-sectional and longitudinal designs, and across individual and aggregate units of analysis.

Despite all of this attention, one aspect of homicide still has not been studied systematically – homicide situations. By this we mean the quintessential convergence of offender, victim, and offense characteristics that define the situational context of homicide and that forms the basis for distinguishing homicides *qualitatively*. Several authors (e.g., LaFree and Birkbeck 1991; Kennedy and Forde 1999; Meier, Kennedy, and Sacco 2001; Miethe and Meier 1994) argue that the situational context of crime has largely been neglected as a topic of empirical research. However, recent developments in both theory (e.g., the emergence of a criminal event perspective) and method (e.g., the development of Qualitative Comparative Analysis) allow us to address this gap by developing an integrated approach to the study of homicide situations. We will use this approach in the current study to describe similarities and differences in the structure and process of homicide situations across groups and over time.

A focus on the situational context of crime, and the application of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) as a means to study it, is particularly well-suited for criminal events involving violence. Specifically, our concern lies in the convergence of victim, offender, and offense elements that structure violent events. As Wilkinson and Fagan (2001) note, violent crimes are distinct from property crimes in the sense that they consist of interactions between at least two parties, which are frequently characterized by dynamic

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exchanges of actions and words. In this respect, violent acts can be viewed as transactions, explainable from a situational approach.

Most empirical research on homicide focuses on differences in *level*, measured either as a homicide rate or as a risk of victimization or offending. This is a reflection of the dominance of offender-based theories as the basic framework for the majority of studies on homicide. Consequently, we know a great deal today about differences in the social and spatial distribution of homicide, changes in homicide rates over time, and the characteristics of typical offenders and victims (see, for reviews, LaFree 1999; Reiss and Roth 1993; Short 1997; Smith and Zahn 1999). What has been neglected in this approach is an examination of why particular homicide *situations* are more common than others, whether these have changed over time, and the extent of subgroup variation in the situational context of homicide. As Birkbeck and LaFree (1993) argue, it is easier to link social phenomena such as subcultures and parenting styles to criminal propensity than to the situational context of crime.

A neglected area within current research on violence involves the lack of a general and thorough description of the conjunction of offenders, victims, and situational elements that result in homicide. The reliance on a separate treatment of these essential aspects that come together to form a lethally violent act has produced a somewhat fractured body of literature that fails to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complete homicide event. Thus, among the key issues that remain unaddressed in the homicide literature is the level of concentration or diversity in the convergence of offender, victim, and situational elements resulting in lethal outcomes.

In discussing the limitations of structural theories of violence, Luckenbill and Doyle (1989:422) note that “these theories focus on why certain people are more disposed to violence than others, but they do not specify the situational conditions that channel such dispositions into concrete lines of action.” Situational approaches and criminal event perspectives broaden this focus to include not only offender motivation but victim and situational characteristics as well. That Blacks are overrepresented as offenders as a result of experiencing higher levels of strain, living in areas characterized by greater social disorganization, or holding values conducive to violence does not inform us about whether and how they come to engage in lethal violence in some situational contexts more than in others or why these assaults are disproportionately committed against certain types of individuals.

As another example, a well-noted finding in the homicide literature is the far greater involvement of men in homicide than women. While numerous biological, psychological, and sociological explanations have been offered for the higher propensity toward violence on the part of males, a situational

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approach is needed to explain why the context of offending varies across gender. In other words, the crux of the problem is not simply explaining why women commit homicide less frequently than men, but whether the situations in which women kill are qualitatively different from males. A thorough understanding of lethal violence cannot be achieved through an exploration of motivation in isolation from the other fundamental aspects of a criminal event. Individuals who harbor a propensity for violence do not act on these tendencies in all times or places, nor are they directed against a random selection of targets.

In contrast to the standard approaches taken to studying homicide, our focus is on differences in type or kind of homicide. We take the perspective that the situational context of homicide can be examined from two separate but interrelated aspects: structure and process. The need to incorporate both of these elements in studies of crime and violence more generally has been asserted by others (see Meier, Kennedy, and Sacco 2001).

The current research examines the issues of structure and process in homicide situations in the following ways. First, a comparative method (Qualitative Comparative Analysis) is used to identify the unique and common structural contexts of U.S. homicides over the last three decades. Second, qualitative analyses of homicide narratives from select U.S. cities (Los Angeles, Miami, St. Louis, Las Vegas) are conducted to explore the underlying processual elements in situations of lethal violence.

By using these diverse methods on different types of homicide data, the current research is able to answer various questions about the situational context of homicide. For example, is female homicide qualitatively different from male homicide, as some claim? Have new forms of homicide emerged over time? Have some forms of homicide become less prevalent, or even disappeared, over time? An examination of case accounts allows us to address the question of whether the processes underlying incidents of lethal violence vary across different types of homicide. This combination of analytic techniques and emphasis on both structure and process locates the current study within the larger context of examining conditions that facilitate the occurrence of violent acts (see also Meier, Kennedy, and Sacco 2001). We believe that the answers generated by this research complement the existing literature and contribute to a more complete understanding of the complexity of homicide as a social phenomenon.

In the remainder of this chapter, we review existing approaches to studying homicide and their limitations, discussing both case studies and statistical analyses. Through the application of the method of QCA, the current research is designed to unite these disparate methodological traditions to better understand qualitative changes in the nature of homicide trends and subgroup variation in homicide risks.

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Histories of Violent People and Dangerous Times

Case studies, both biographical and historical, offer rich descriptions of the personal legacies of violent offenders and their acts. All of the most notorious murderers in American history have been immortalized through these life histories and case studies (see Bugliosi 1974; Frank 1967; Nash 1973; Rule 1980; Schwartz 1981; Sullivan and Maiken 1983). Narrative accounts of homicide cover the historical landscape from Brutus' killing of Caesar, Lizzie Borden's axe murder of her parents, the shoot-outs by notorious Western outlaws (e.g., Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Cole Younger), lynchings by vigilante groups like the KKK in the post-Civil War period, the robbery and murder sprees of early gangsters (e.g., John Dillinger, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, "Pretty Boy" Floyd), the mass genocide during Nazi Germany, and the multiple slayings by Jeffrey Dahmer, David Berkowitz ("Son of Sam"), Ted Bundy, and other serial murderers.

Biographical accounts of individual offenders are useful for understanding homicide because they often provide rich details of the potential motive, precipitating events, and offense elements underlying these crimes. In other words, they underscore the need to view situations holistically, rather than as a simple sum of individual elements.

Although case studies are a mainstay in homicide research, substantive conclusions that derive from them are limited in several respects. First, the findings from case studies are difficult to generalize because they are limited to small samples. Second, these descriptive accounts are often unrepresentative of homicides in a particular historical period because sensational, bizarre, and idiosyncratic killings elicit the most attention. Random acts of excessive brutality by serial killers and strangers are the focus of most case studies simply because of their novelty and severity. Domestic violence is widely regarded as a major situational context for homicide, but the social and legal tolerance of violence against wives and offspring throughout modern Western history ultimately downplays its media attention (see Goetting 1995; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980). Third, case studies and personal narratives usually lack the comparative control data that are necessary for determining the relative importance of particular offender, victim, and situational elements in the general production of homicide.

Definitive statements about the most dangerous eras in Western history are also often problematic due to the limitations of archival data and diverse conceptions of violence. Nonetheless, most scholars contend that the medieval era was an extremely violent time and that homicide and other types of interpersonal violence have declined sharply throughout Western history over the last six centuries (see Cockburn 1977; Gurr 1989; Lane 1997; Short 1997). Archival court records indicate that lethal brawls and violent deaths by robbers were a common occurrence in medieval England. Murder rates

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in rural areas in this period ranged from 10 to 25 per 100,000, far exceeding the rate of roughly 2.0 per 100,000 for England and Wales in the late twentieth century (Barclay, Tavares, and Siddique 2001; Given 1977; Gurr 1979).

In the context of U.S. history, Brown (1979) asserts that, since its early beginnings, violence has been a major fact of American life. His argument is supported by the observation that many of the most influential events in U.S. history (e.g., the American Revolution, the Civil War, the stabilization of the Western frontier, land and labor reform, the struggles for racial equality) involved serious and prolonged acts of violence (Brown 1979:41). Violent crime in the United States is thought to have decreased substantially during the last quarter of the nineteenth and up to the mid-twentieth century, only to have increased dramatically during the last quarter of the twentieth century (Sickmund, Snyder, and Poe-Yamagata 1997). However, the 1990s witnessed a considerable drop in violent crimes known to police, but the number has increased again in the new century (Blumstein and Wallman 2000; FBI 2002).

The level of interpersonal violence in particular historical periods in the United States is subject to alternative views. Narrative descriptions and archival records of the “Wild” Western frontier in the mid to late 1800s, for example, often yield contradictory conclusions about the prevalence of violence (see McKanna 1997). Some authors conclude that “as a place of wild lawlessness the frontier’s reputation is largely without substantiation” (Prassel 1972), while other narrative accounts (e.g., Drago 1970; Rosa 1969) convey a far more severe pattern of violence during this time period. Estimates of homicide rates for particular locations range from 4 per 100,000 in Alameda County, California, in 1893 (Friedman and Percival 1981), 8.9 per 100,000 in Caldwell, Kansas, for the period 1879–85 (McKanna 1997), 116 per 100,000 in the “boom and bust” gold town of Aurora in 1877 to 1882 (McGrath 1984), a rate of 160 per 100,000 in Dodge City in 1878, and an incredible 422 per 100,000 in Ellsworth, Kansas, in 1873 (McKanna 1997). Compared to a national rate of about 9 per 100,000 in the 1990s, these estimates of homicide rates for some towns on the Western frontier are simply staggering.

Most studies of violent times and places, however, suffer from several major methodological problems that limit the reliability and validity of their substantive conclusions. First, the accuracy of data sources is a serious problem, both in terms of the completeness of the enumerations and the meaning attached to them. Even if a complete census of violent acts were possible, the very definition of what is considered a homicide or violent act is historically ambiguous and inconsistent. For example, the counting of acts like infanticide, abortion, capital punishment, dueling and mutual combat, and self-defense slayings as homicides has varied greatly over time and across different types of historical records (see Riedel 1999). Second, a growing

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literature now questions the accuracy of current crime reports and media accounts, claiming that such data are socially constructed for assorted purposes (see Best 1999; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Jackson and Rudman 1993; McCorkle and Miethe 2001; Zatz 1987). By either inflating or deflating the apparent magnitude of violence in their jurisdiction, officials and organizations have been able to demonstrate accountability, enhance resource mobilization, and increase their relative position among competing interest groups.

Macro-Quantitative Approaches

Quantitative studies of homicide patterns and trends have dramatically increased over the last century. Multivariate analytic techniques have been used to examine homicide rates and their correlates across a wide range of aggregate units in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.

Using national vital statistics on deaths and police data on known offenses, temporal changes in homicide rates within particular countries have been well documented. Simple graphic representations and more sophisticated time series techniques have been widely used to model changes in national homicide rates over time and their correlates (see Brantingham and Brantingham 1984; Chen 1996; Cohen and Felson 1979; Gurr 1989; Holinger and Klemen 1982; LaFree and Drass 1996; Silverman and Kennedy 1993; Zahn and McCall 1999). An extensive body of research has also accumulated on change and stability in homicide rates for particular cities over time (see Block and Block 1980; Block and Christakos 1995; Boudouris 1970; Chilton 1987, 1996; Dobrin, Wiersema, Loftin, and McDowall 1996; Lane 1979; Monkkonen 2001; Wilbanks 1984; Zahn and Jamieson 1996).

These types of statistical studies contribute to our approach by helping us to identify variables that describe important structural characteristics of homicides. However, these studies generally focus on the main effects of individual variables across situations rather than on the interactive effects of combinations of variables within situations. Therefore, they tend to ignore the importance of context and do not adequately capture the complexity of homicide situations.

Previous quantitative research on homicide rates has essentially been studies of the level of violence. In other words, these studies are concerned with whether the level or amount of homicide has increased, decreased, or remained stable over time. The absence of comprehensive longitudinal data prior to the twentieth century and the limitations of the available time series (e.g., UCR data, National Mortality Files) have contributed to the ongoing debate about the magnitude of these level differences in homicide over time (see Riedel 1999; Zahn and McCall 1999). An equally problematic

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issue, however, concerns the lack of attention given to changes in the situational context of offending over time. A fundamental question that needs to be addressed is whether lethal violence is more concentrated in particular situations during some time period(s) than others. Furthermore, while rates of male homicide offending may remain stable over a particular period of time, for example, this does not preclude the possibility that the situational context of lethal violence by males has undergone considerable change. Whether the types of situations in which men kill have become more diversified or concentrated cannot be deciphered by simply tracking their homicide rates over time. Moreover, policies suited to addressing one of these patterns may not be appropriate for others. Without an understanding of the full range of patterns of change and stability the most efficient use of funding for prevention initiatives is unlikely to be achieved.

Subgroup Differences in Homicide Risks and Rates

Analyses of level differences also characterize homicide research comparing subgroups in terms of their relative risks of offending and victimization. These subgroups are typically defined on the basis of socio-demographic attributes of the offender or victim (e.g., males vs. females, Whites vs. Blacks, teenagers vs. adults) or the elements of the offense (e.g., instrumental vs. expressive motivations, stranger vs. acquaintance vs. family violence, firearm vs. nongun killings, single vs. multiple offenders).

Previous research reveals wide variability in homicide rates and individuals' risks across different subgroups. According to UCR arrest data in the United States for the 1990s, homicide offenders are disproportionately male, young, and African American. About 90% of homicide offenders known to the police are males. African Americans are clearly overrepresented among known homicide offenders, accounting for more than half of homicide arrestees in the 1990s. More than half of homicide arrestees are under 25 years old (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] 1998). They also tend to be poor and live in economically disadvantaged areas (see Harries 1997; Martinez and Lee 1999; Short 1997; Wolfgang 1958). Homicide victims often share many of the same sociodemographic characteristics as their offenders (see Brearley 1932; Sampson and Lauritsen 1990, 1994; Singer 1981; Wolfgang 1958).

Level differences in offense elements involve making comparisons across categories for variables measuring particular characteristics and activities surrounding the criminal act. Accordingly, offense elements include the motivation for the crime, interpersonal dynamics (e.g., the victim-offender relationship, intraracial vs. interracial crimes), the type of weapon used, the number of offenders, the presence of alcohol and drugs, and the spatial and temporal location of the offense.

Based on our analysis of the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) for the 1990s, homicides involve a higher proportion or level of the following attributes: arguments and other expressive motives (53%), acquaintance slayings (51%), intraracial crimes (88%), firearms (70%), and single offenders (87%). Other data sources suggest that a majority of homicides involve the presence of drugs or alcohol in the victim, offender, or both parties (see Auerhahn and Parker 1999; Parker 1995; Parker and Rebhun 1995; Wolfgang 1958). The disproportionate occurrence of homicides and other violent crimes in evening hours and on weekends has been established in both earlier and contemporary research (see Miethe and McCorkle 2001; National Centers for Health Statistics [NCHS] 1993; Perkins and Klaus 1996; Wolfgang 1958). Higher levels of homicide have also been observed in urban areas than rural areas and in western and southern states (FBI 1998). With the exception of lower rates of gun homicides observed in other countries, the U.S. pattern of offense characteristics is similar to that found in England, Canada, and other Western countries (see Brantingham and Brantingham 1984; Silverman and Kennedy 1993).

Homicide Situations as the Unit of Analysis

Of the range of possible units of analysis for homicide research, the situational context has been relatively neglected. This is not to say that previous research has ignored situational elements of homicide like weapon use, number of victims or offenders, victim precipitation, alcohol and drug use, and the time and location of the crime. Instead, what has been missing is the treatment of the situation itself as the unit of analysis. Such an approach requires that the homicide incident be treated holistically, as a complete composite of offender, victim, offense, temporal, and spatial elements. Previous studies have focused on particular idiosyncratic elements rather than the total combination of elements that define the structure of homicide situations.

The situational context of crime has been defined in several ways in past research. One approach treats the homicide situation as the "microenvironment" for crime, involving offender, victim, and physical and spatial elements of the crime (see Davidson 1989; Miethe and Meier 1994). Another perspective considers the situational context as a criminal event or transaction, consisting of beginning, middle, and end stages (Luckenbill 1977; Meier, Kennedy, and Sacco 2001; Sacco and Kennedy 2002). Other researchers view the situation in terms of specific offense elements and, in some cases, limited combinations of crime elements (see Block and Christakos 1995; Block and Block 1992; LaFree and Birkbeck 1991; Miethe and McCorkle 2001; Reiss and Roth 1993).

The primary unit of analysis in the current study is the *structure of the homicide situation*. This structure is defined by combinations of offender, victim,

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and offense elements that underlie homicides. Fundamental offender and victim characteristics in homicide include their gender, race, and age. Basic offense elements of homicide include the motive or circumstance surrounding the crime, the victim–offender relationship, the number of co-offenders, the type of weapon used, and the physical context of the crime. These characteristics define homicide’s structure because they pattern the nature of interpersonal dynamics that is likely to take place in deadly situations.

The total combination of these offender, victim, and offense attributes considered simultaneously is what defines the diversity in the structure of homicide situations. For example, if the major offender, victim, and offense elements in a study involve 10 dichotomous variables, there are 1,024 unique combinations of attributes that define the diversity of structures in homicide situations. Adding another dichotomous variable would double the number of homicide situations to 2,048. These combinations of attributes are the unit of analysis for the current study. This conceptualization of the homicide situation is similar to the image of a criminal event or microenvironment that locates potential victims and offenders in a particular situational context.

As an illustration of the structures of homicide situations, consider the following narrative descriptions of homicides in Miami in 1980 (Wilbanks 1984):

49-year-old, Latin male victim was killed by his 45-year-old, Latin wife during a domestic argument/fight. The victim was bitten, stabbed, and shot. (case #046)

Two Latin male victims (age 23 and 24) were killed in a robbery by three unknown Latin males. The two victims were in a bar when the offenders entered and ordered patrons against the wall. When one patron resisted, shots were fired and the two victims were killed. Three other patrons were also shot but not killed. (case #113)

40-year-old, Anglo female victim and her 37-year-old, Anglo husband had been legally separated after longstanding marital difficulties. They met on a Friday night in a bar in New York City, got drunk together, and decided to fly to Miami for a weekend trip. Upon arrival in Miami, the couple got in a loud argument in their hotel room. Witnesses heard the victim pleading for her husband not to hit her anymore. The victim was found strangled to death the next morning by the maid. (case #148)

17-year-old, Black male victim and the 18-year-old, Black male offender were acquaintances who became involved in an argument over a stolen bicycle. The offender shot the victim with a revolver. The victim had an alcohol level of .11. (case #141)

The 34-year-old, Black male victim was shot to death at his own home in a dispute over money owed for drugs. The victim was shot several times. The offender was a 30-year-old, Black male. (case #211)

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Although these homicide incidents share some characteristics (e.g., all of them are intraracial killings, some are domestic assaults), they are all qualitatively unique in terms of their particular structures. This is the case because each of these five homicide situations involve distinct combinations of offender, victim, and offense attributes. For example, the four incidents that involve disputes and arguments as the motive differ from each other in terms of the race of the parties, the weapon used, and the location of the crime. As a group, these dispute situations share many of the same features as the incident of robbery-homicide (case #113), but the robbery-homicide situation is qualitatively different in terms of its occurrence in a bar and the involvement of multiple victims and multiple offenders. It is the systematic investigation of these common and unique structures underlying different types of homicide situations that is the basis for our study of homicide.

Compared to other units of analysis in homicide research, an examination of the structure of homicide situations is important for several reasons. First, this situational approach allows us to assess the extent and nature of diversity in types of homicide. For example, we can identify the number of qualitatively distinct structures for any particular time period. Comparing the number and particular nature of these homicide situations over time permits clear inferences about both change and stability in the basic structure of homicide situations. Second, comparisons can be made within and between subgroups (e.g., males vs. females, teenage vs. adult offenders, acquaintance vs. stranger killings) to determine whether some types of homicide have a more complex and diverse structure than others. Analyses of these subgroup configurations over time can also be conducted to identify historically extinct, emergent, and stable patterns of homicides across time. Traditional macro-quantitative analyses and case studies of homicide are not designed to deal with these types of research questions.

Qualitative Comparative Analysis and Homicide Situations

An examination of the structure of homicide situations requires the use of an analytic procedure that allows for the investigation of complex interrelationships among sets of variables. It also requires an analytic approach that is case-driven (i.e., focusing on the totality of attributes) rather than variable-driven (i.e., focusing on the effect across contexts). Standard multivariate statistical procedures that estimate main effects or a limited number of interactive effects are not able to handle the complexity of such an analysis.

Over the past decade, the method of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) has been used increasingly for comparative studies in the social sciences (Amenta and Halfmann 2000; Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan 1992; Amenta and Poulsen 1994; Coverdill, Finlay, and Martin 1994; Drass and Ragin 1989; Miethe and Drass 1999; Ragin 1987, 2000). The QCA method