



# Explanations of mixed-sex partnered homicide: A review of sociological and psychological theory

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## ABSTRACT

Offending by mixed-sex partnered offenders (i.e., at least one man and one woman), no less than offending solely by men, requires explanation. This article begins with an overview of homicide committed by mixed-sex partnered offenders, followed by a brief discussion of sociological theories and then focuses primarily on psychological theories (including transient criminality and stimulation-seeking behavior, hybristophilia and opponent process, folie à deux, obedience and authority) in order to address gaps in our understanding of mixed-sex partnered homicide offending. These theories may help us better comprehend the dynamics between mixed-sex partnered homicide offenders at a sociological and psychological level.

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Criminological theories have emerged out of the need to explain the acts of dangerous men. Women were either not the subjects of these studies, or their actions and participations in crime were dismissed. Work on serial murder has fallen under this same pedagogy. Initially, acts of extreme violence were identified solely as the responsibility of men.

[Scott (2005, p.163)]

## 1. Introduction

Homicide and serial murder are rare occurrences that typically account for less than 2% of all crimes in many countries, including both England and Wales and the United States of America (Chaplin, Flatley, & Smith, 2011; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). Despite the low number of killings by serial murderers each year (for example, the death toll linked to serial murderers is approximately 1% of all homicides in the U.S.A., or approximately two hundred victims per year), they remain an area of intense study (Fox & Levin, 2006) particularly with respect to *male* serial killers. The recent United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime report on homicide reveals that '[c]rime, especially violent crime, is typically a *male* activity and homicide is no exception...

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men also make up 82% of all victims of homicide, suggesting that the most typical homicide pattern is a case of *men killing men*' (Me et al., 2011, p.63, italics added for emphasis). With men comprising the majority of offenders and victims with respect to homicide, it is understandable that much research has been devoted to understanding homicide through an androcentric lens. Comparatively, the number of partnered (and solo female) perpetrated homicides is lower than solo male perpetrated homicides and less research has been devoted to the subject (for exceptions, see for example Atchison & Heide, 2011; Farrell, Keppel, & Titterton, 2011; Gurian, 2011; Jones, 2008). Two possible reasons for this occurrence are that crimes by violent partnered offenders are under-reported or underestimated. Information on these offenders is scant, of uneven quality, and shown to be from widely disparate sources. Therefore, this current research may serve to further stimulate interest in the subject, thus filling gaps in our knowledge.

A number of theories have been sought to explain acts of criminal homicide and serial murder. However, these theories tend to occur after the fact (Riedel & Welsh, 2008), and either omit to include partnered offenders and women or do so only marginally (Batchelor, Burman, & Brown, 2001; Belknap & Holsinger, 2006). A number of psychological theories identified by Scott (2005) and others also attempt to explain serial homicide offending. For example, the MacDonald triad links cruelty to animals, bedwetting and fire setting with violent and homicidal behavior (MacDonald, 1963). Researchers have found these characteristics primarily in samples of solo male offenders (Felthous & Kellert, 1987; Merz-Perez, Heide, & Silverman, 2001). Research findings on samples of primarily male homicide offenders creates questions regarding the applicability to other types of homicide offenders (i.e., partnered and solo female offenders) and this is particularly so in relation to psychopathy and violent behavior (Elliott, 1992; Fox & Levin, 2006).

This article begins with an overview of homicide committed by two or more 'partners' followed by a review of psychological theories in order to address gaps in our understanding of partnered homicide offending. By convention, theories can be categorized as cultural, sociological, biological, or psychological, with a focus on male offenders. Leonard (1982), for example, contends that criminological theories were constructed by and about men, which explain male behavior instead of human behavior. These theories may have less applicability towards understanding the criminality of women, particularly when they are involved in crimes of homicide with one or more male partners. Therefore, theories less commonly cited in the literature are also included, which particularly relate to women, in order to present a more balanced portrait of human homicidal behavior. It is also important to note that while some of the behaviors discussed in this article could be classified as mental disorders (folie a deux, paraphilia), by convention, they are categorized under psychological theory.

## 2. Definitions of serial murder

Unlike single acts of criminal homicide, which are thought to date as far back as the period of Neanderthals,<sup>1</sup> the term 'serial killer' has arguably only come into practice within the past 30 years (Hazelwood & Douglas, 1980); however, the crime of serial murder is not a new one. Locusta the Poisoner<sup>2</sup> (a woman) is cited as potentially the first documented serial murderer (Leon, 1998), while Jack the Ripper<sup>3</sup> is commonly cited as the first case of serial murder to be reported by the contemporary press. Although serial killing is a rare phenomenon,

cultural, historical, societal, and religious influences continue to contribute to current stereotypes and myths about serial murderers. The lack of ability to accurately predict who, where, when, and often why these individuals will strike, and the methods they employ, generates an atmosphere of fear and fascination surrounding this subject.

Serial murder differs from other forms of homicide based on several key characteristics, including a minimum timeframe (with 'cooling off' period between homicides), body count (at least two or more by the same offender(s)), and general pattern to the killing (e.g., victim selection, method, and motive). In comparison, mass murder occurs when a number of victims are killed at one instance and lacks the 'cooling off' period characteristic of serial murder. Serial murder may less commonly be referred to as 'multiple murder'.

Commonly used definitions of serial murder may also exclude certain groups of offenders or victims; 'For those in law enforcement, serial killing generally means the sexual attack and murder of young women, men, and children by a male who follows a pattern, physical or psychological' (Hickey, 2010, p.26, italics added for emphasis). Many offenders and victims are excluded by definitions such as this; Seagrave (1992, pp.4–5) claims, '[t]here are no female counterparts to a Bundy<sup>4</sup> or a Gacy<sup>5</sup>, to whom sex or sexual violence is part of the murder pattern'; this statement discounts serial murderers such as Karla Homolka, who reportedly participated in the rape and torture of young girls with her husband and partner, Paul Bernardo.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. Understanding partnered serial homicide offenders

Unlike solo homicide offending, homicide by partnered homicide offenders may be both a participation and spectator event. Elements, such as power and gratification, also serve to distinguish the relationships within these partnered homicide groups. For example, power and gratification can be experienced 'not only through the deaths of victims but also through getting others to do their bidding' (Hickey, 2006, p.199). Partners in crime may operate symbiotically, contributing to each other's wish for power. Fox and Levin (2006) contend that a sharing of tasks neutralizes feelings of personal responsibility, while risks with personal safety that once may have been unthinkable become an option when engaged in partnered activity with a like-minded individual. This argument is similar to Darley and Latané's (1968) 'bystander effect'. Individuals may accept promises given the right set of circumstances. That is, abnormal situations make normal people do 'crazy things', especially if they perceive a self-serving purpose in doing so (e.g., profit, power, and protection) (Fox & Levin, 2006; Sutherland, 1947). Some male and female offenders may never have committed their crimes had they not been exposed to group dynamics and the power of persuasion and manipulation (Akers, 1985; Hickey, 1991). Leaders may experience a sense of power and gratification through influencing others to commit crimes, while followers also enjoy being involved, but become murderers under another's enticement (Hickey, 1991). The dynamics within partnered offending groups are varied, and it is likely that any or all of these contentions feature throughout the course of these criminal relationships.

When women commit crimes with a male accomplice, the accomplice is typically a boyfriend or husband (Gurian, 2011). For example, a male gatekeeper to the criminal world may be in a position to provide criminal contacts and opportunities to their female partner. Cooper (2000) contends that the male (dominant partner) generally initiates the crime (that is, the woman is passive and emotionally dependent).

<sup>1</sup> The earliest known murder case is thought to have occurred over 50,000 years ago and involved a Neanderthal man who was stabbed in the chest with a human weapon by a right-handed assailant (Trinkaus & Zimmerman, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Locusta murdered the Emperor Claudius during the first century A.D., in Gaul, another rival to the throne, and a number of other victims as a 'poisoner-for-hire' (Leon, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Jack the Ripper murdered at least five women in the Whitechapel area of London. He achieved notoriety through the letters he sent to the police and local press detailing the murders and because the case remains unsolved.

<sup>4</sup> Ted Bundy confessed to murdering 30 young women across the U.S.

<sup>5</sup> John Wayne Gacy (the "killer clown") murdered 33 young men and boys and buried many in a crawl space underneath his home.

<sup>6</sup> Homolka's partner, Paul Bernardo, began showing interest in her younger sister, Tammy (age 15), during their relationship. On Christmas 1990, the two performed sexual acts on an unconscious Tammy (drugged with animal tranquilizers provided by Karla, who worked in a veterinarian's office), who choked on her own vomit and died during the course of the evening. After Tammy, Karla and Paul kidnapped, raped, tortured and killed two young girls in separate incidents.

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