



Why do people kill? A critical review of the literature on factors associated with homicide



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ABSTRACT

Homicide is a crime that is currently decreasing in Europe (UNODC, 2013). However, it is serious enough to justify the empirical efforts that have been developed, in order to better understand it and to seek its decrease and prevention. The following article aims to conduct a literature review on the factors that have been associated with this crime, thus gaining a comprehensive view and critical reflection from a social constructivist perspective. The acquisition and development of aggressive and violent conducts that can potentiate a crime such as homicide have multifactorial origins and imply multiple interconnections. This study discusses research results as well as official national and international statistics. Together, these data provide vital insight when defining healthcare, education and social policies and also during the judicial decision making process. Research themes are also presented in this work, since they are clearly incipient in Portugal.

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1. Introduction

In modern societies, homicide is considered the most serious crime, a relentless attack on the collective conscience, inheritor of the indignation incited by sacrilege and crimes of lèse-majesté (Durkheim, 1969). It is perceived as crime against humanity. As Durkheim (1969), killing an individual is, in a certain way, to break with humanity and stay out of it, therefore becoming associated with the main line of thought of the 19th century, which perceives the criminal, namely the killer, as belonging to

the pre-human plan. However, this behavior took on a normative characteristic when, in ancient Greece, for example, homicide was only punishable if it occurred within the same family. Despite being forbidden, infanticide was tolerated in Europe until the 17th century, without any type of punitive consequences (Hughes-Sheper, 1987). Nowadays, it is the only crime that is condemnable by societies in general and with more severe sentences (Cassel & Bernstein, 2007), including death. The constructs by which societies are administered authorize killing those who kill others and perceive casualties of war as collateral damage, thus threatening civil values such as freedom, equality and the right to life.

Roberts, Zgoba, and Shahidullah (2007) define homicide as the intentional, unintentional or accidental death of a person. This is supported by Liem (2013), who perceives it as the most violent manifestation of

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a criminal behavior. But why do people kill? What factors facilitate and determine this behavior? The literature is very broad and many times contradictory. The process of reading this type of crime and criminal has followed the paradigms of science and criminology, with direct consequences in social and judicial terms. By assuming a social constructivist perspective, this article presents a critical review of the literature focused on the factors associated with homicide. It does so by highlighting the risk of overvaluing certain variables over others without admitting that intra and inter-subject variations are significant or considering the dynamism of factors and, above all, the fact that it is not always obvious whether a certain condition was a cause or consequence of homicidal behavior. However, it is impossible to examine this crime without considering the historical context, since, on the one hand, we cannot ignore its effect on the subject and, on the other hand, the determination of what is culpable or illegal relies on the penal code/laws currently in force.

2. Method used in reviewing, summarizing and organizing existing research

This literature review is a comprehensive but concise summary of the research that has been done about factors, which can be associated with homicide. The emphasis is on integration, interpretation and critical analysis of primary research articles. This article intends to embrace different epistemological perspectives from more positivists to the constructivist postmodern, and attempts to organize the research data into major categories. The goal was to summarize and evaluate current findings, and also include older articles because it helps to understand the history of this research area. Relevant publications were obtained with computer database search in Science Direct, PsycInfo, PubMed, SCOPUS, Medline and Google Scholar, using the following keywords: “homicide psychobiological”, “homicide genetic”, “homicide abuse”, “homicide dysfunctional families”, “homicide substance abuse”, “homicide alcohol abuse”, “homicide mental illness”, “homicide economic deprivation”, and “homicide racial”. Studies published between 1979 and 2014 were selected to fulfill the inclusion criteria for this review. Articles' titles and abstracts were reviewed and all articles that appeared relevant were retrieved in full-text format and evaluated for inclusion in the review, if they: a) were peer-reviewed; b) the full text was accessible; c) exploring factors which can be associated with homicide d) quantitative studies; and e) articles written in English and Portuguese. Grey literature was researched, including the websites for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Home Office, UNODC and World Health Organization. After reading and analyzing the articles and the information from the websites it was possible to identify and organize the data into four major categories of factors associated with homicide: physiological, developmental, psychopathological and social factors. Then it was made an objective description of the data, and simultaneously critical thinking and judgment were applied. At the end grounded alternatives are provided, founded on the given flaws and critiques of the related issue.

2.1. Factors associated with homicide

2.1.1. Physiological factors

The scientific study of crime begins by considering biological rationality and by looking for explanations and causes in the organic structure of the delinquent. This is achieved by way of physical and biomorphological observation, factors over which individuals have no control, thus putting them at the mercy of this determinism. It is in keeping with this rationality that, in the 19th century, we witness the development of bio-anthropological theories, highly influenced by Darwin, who was mentored by Cesare Lombroso (Bruinsma & Weisburd, 2014; Canter, 2010; Cusson, 1998). The criminal was not only someone who had broken the law, he/she was an atavistic being, characterized by precise physical stigmas (Canter, 2010) and associated with certain

types of crimes and psychological traits (Cusson, 1998), such as vanity, selfishness and lack of remorse, etc. The task of judging and sentencing the criminal was becoming apparently simple, since it was based on positivist principles that seemed to leave little room for mistakes.

The data gathered and compiled by Lombroso, and later published in his widely recognized work – *L'Uomo Delinquente* (1876) – were quickly refuted, despite being seemingly thorough. The subsequent research takes on a bio-psychological characteristic, focused on the determination of the dangerousness of the delinquent individual and oriented towards a double axis of social protection/prevention and treatment/recovery. This research also considers that criminal behavior is not only a result of biological factors, but of the interaction of these factors with the environment in which the individual is born and raised.

Researchers have long tried to establish a correlation between violent crime and genetic anomalies by resorting to studies with twins and adopted individuals (Cusson, 1998). Recently, studies on similar populations have found evidence that links genetic factors with the development of aggressive, antisocial and violent behavior (Boardman et al., 2014; Fergusson & Beaver, 2009; Fergusson & Dyck, 2012; Guo, Roettger, & Shih, 2007; Jones et al., 2001; Rowe et al., 2001; Widom & Brzustowicz, 2006).

There appears to be consensus among the scientific community regarding the influence of changes in the functioning of certain areas of the brain, namely the limbic system and the temporal and frontal lobes, responsible for the mediation of aggression and violence. Through neuroimaging, neuropsychological and neurochemical assessment techniques, researchers developed studies with subjects who presented cerebral injuries and deficits. They were able to verify an increased predisposition towards violent and antisocial behaviors (Blair, 2010; Blair & Cipolotti, 2000; Filley, Price, Nell, Antoinette, & Morgan, 2001; Giancola & Zeichner, 1994; Pontius & Yudowitz, 1980; Raine, 2013; Yang et al., 2008). The neuropsychopathology theory (Jones, 1984) establishes a relation between injuries to the prefrontal areas, the connections with subcortical and temporal brain areas associated with limbic structures, and aggressive behavior. The latter is associated with deficits to executive function (attention, focus, memory and higher mental processes), which generates an erroneous interpretation of stimuli and the inability to regulate impulses (Moffitt, 1993). Subjects with frontal brain injuries show lower emotional control and an inability to assess the impact of their behaviors. They also have difficulties in establishing empathy and in the critical assessment of their dysfunctional behaviors, which they tend to repeat (Damásio, 2000; Jones, 1984).

Contrary to the atavistic classification of the criminal, biological factors can be one of the elements that are relevant to understanding the crime, since on their own they do not help to understand and explain why a certain individual has adopted a certain behavior. On the other hand, genetic and neurologic anomalies are not present in all individuals who commit violent crimes, namely homicide. We can see that positivist ideologies still remain and are particularly present in the criminal policies of several countries. As such, it is possible to make a legal decision to eliminate the dangerous individual (death penalty), order his/her admission to a psychiatric hospital for treatment or select between the deprivation of freedom or other security measures in accordance with the level of danger posed by the individual. On the other hand, the stereotypes associated with the crime and those who commit it continue to be positivist elements, demonstrative panaceas of the violent behavior, exonerating human flaws. According to this line of thought, people kill because there is a permanent/non-permanent abnormality/non-compliance that may or may not be treatable, thus bestowing the subject with dangerousness. The punishment appears to derive from this logic of certainty. However, we must reflect upon this line of thought. To adopt this perspective would be to assume the insignificance of family, labor and social ties, developmental and educational pathways and even life contexts. It would nullify individuals' personal interrelations with all their inherent historical and cultural particularities.

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