

Varieties of self-help in intimate partner homicide

Ph.D Dissertation

Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
University of Missouri St. Louis

Elicka S.L. Peterson

Abstract

This dissertation examines the variation in motivations for intimate partner homicide. Black's (1998) theory of self-help, which holds that much crime serves as an illegal form of social control, serves as the framework and impetus for this analysis. According to this perspective, lower status increases the likelihood that a person will resort to self-help homicide. However, the dissertation extends Black's perspective by positing that self-help may take different forms in the context of intimate partner homicide: conflict resolution, justice-seeking, and self-defense. Predatory motivations, which lie beyond the scope of Black's perspective, are also examined. The major hypothesis under investigation is that there are systematic relationships between the types of self-help motivations and the sex, race, and marital status of the perpetrator, which serve as proxies for Black's conception of multi-dimensional social positions. Drug-alcohol involvement is also examined as it may impede nonviolent means of communication and escalate conflicts.

A four-fold typology of intimate-partner homicide was created using data from the St. Louis Homicide Project for the 228 intimate partner homicides brought to the attention of the St. Louis police between 1980 and 1995. Multinomial logistic regression techniques were employed in an analysis of the effects on homicide motivation of the perpetrator's race, gender, marital status, and substance use. Only gender emerged as having a significant effect on self-help motivations, and only in the case of partner homicides as a form of conflict resolution or self-defense, which were more likely to be perpetrated by women. In a qualitative investigation of homicide circumstances, I interpret these results as consistent with the hypothesis that participation in a *culture of honor*, rather than lower social status, accounts for differences in motives for intimate-partner homicide.

This study suggests that theory development in the self-help tradition is better served using the more fully-explicated model presented here and by incorporating influences beyond social status, such as gendered cultural expectations for heterosexual relationships related to honor, in analyses of intimate homicide. Current policy and program initiatives tend to focus on intimate partner homicides perpetrated in self-defense, either through extending protections to women or through rehabilitative efforts geared toward male batterers. This analysis suggests that an orientation based solely on self-defense encompasses only about a fourth of all intimate partner homicide. Prevention policies also must be directed at partner homicides committed as justice-seeking, conflict resolution, or for predatory motivations. Finally, this research suggests that mandatory arrest policies may not be helpful in preventing intimate partner homicides, because they also are designed to respond primarily to instances of domestic violence that are characterized by battering and abuse. Officers need more discretion in responding to the full range of motives for intimate violence described in this study.